Soul of the Documentary
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Fabulation: Documentary visions
Fabulation is an act that involves invention. It involves composing and telling stories, such as fables. As a compositional modality, fabulation has been linked to such genres as magical realism and fantasy, but as an act of telling, fabulation belongs equally to the world of the documentary. It occupies the space in between people who tell stories and the documentary camera that observes these fabulous acts. The relationship between the two creates documentary visions that undo the antagonistic dichotomy between the true and the false.

In a rare tip of the hat to documentary cinema, Gilles Deleuze defines fabulation as the “becoming of the real character when he himself starts to ‘make fiction,’ when he enters into ‘the flagrant offence of making up legends’ and so contributes to the invention of his people.” Speaking in the context of direct cinema and cinema vérité of the 1960s, Deleuze foregrounds the creative act of telling and its affirmative implications for the teller. What is lost in the translation, however, is the dependence of “making up legends” on being caught in the act. Indeed, what has been rendered “the flagrant offence of making up legends” in the English version reads as “en flagrant délit de légende” in the French original. The expression “en flagrant délit de” has a direct legal connotation to “being caught in the act.”

Being caught in the act of making fiction aligns fabulation with documentaries that capture their characters in the act of telling stories. Capturing, however, is not just a passive deed of recording but an active gesture inseparable from creative storytelling. Documentary observation participates in and co-composes fabulous telling as it unfolds in the generative relationality between the filmmaker, the camera, and the real characters. Documentary fabulation, then, proposes that investigations of the observational begin from the shared moment of filming.

Stella Bruzzi points to a similar emphasis in her outline of the performative documentary. Aiming to reorient the stakes of the observational, she suggests that the performative dialogue between the filmmaker, crew, and the shooting situation draws positive attention to the impossibilities of
authentic documentary representation. For her, the performative introduces a new honesty to documentary representation, one that acknowledges that non-fiction is always an enactment for the cameras.\(^5\)

Bruzzi’s postulation reworks Bill Nichols’s earlier conceptualization of the performative, and particularly the epistemological uncertainties it brings to the documentary. Nichols offers the performative as the fifth documentary mode – following the expository, observational, interactive, and the reflexive – and argues that the performative brackets realist representation in favor of the experiential and the subjective: “By restoring a sense of the local, specific, and embodied as a vital locus for social subjectivity, performative documentary gives figuration to and evokes dimensions of the political unconscious that remain suspended between an immediate here and now and a utopian alternative.”\(^6\) Although Nichols admits to the potential advantages of the performative, its suspended politics remain problematic.

Bruzzi reprimands Nichols for being too wary of the epistemological uncertainties, but her own conceptualization of the performative remains rather too caught up in the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic for the present purposes. For Bruzzi, performative documentary makes the viewer aware of the constructed and contingent nature of truth and authenticity, but the suspension of the authentic never becomes an affirmative force that could enable the filmed subjects to self-differentiate.\(^7\)

In the immediacy of creative storytelling to documentary observation, on the other hand, the transpositions of the true and the false power the subjects’ becomings. For example, in Raymond Depardon’s Délits flagrants (France 1994), the fiction a young defendant tells her legal assistant becomes the truth she is to tell the judge deciding on her verdict. In the documentary, Depardon observes fourteen judicial interrogations in which the accused on remand give their accounts of the deeds they are accused of. With a fixed frame typical to Depardon’s films more generally, the documentary captures the accounts in which the accused “make up legends” for the interrogators. They tell stories that are not exactly lies because, for the accused, they are the truth whereby they live. Muriel, a young woman of twenty-two, is accused of stealing a car but she claims that she cannot even drive. The legal assistant goes through the police report of her arrest and tries to clarify the details of the event in order to prepare her defense. As a result of their exchange, Muriel’s fiction becomes the truth of what happened and forms the basis of what she is to say to the judge on her own behalf. Depardon’s fascination with Muriel’s storytelling continues in the 1999 documentary Muriel Leferle. This time, she is accused of stealing and drug
abuse, and interrogated by three different officials. A prosecutor, a lawyer, and a psychologist try different tactics to make her tell “the truth,” but as she speaks it becomes increasingly evident that her truth is not compatible with the coda of the officials. Although there is no interaction between the film crew behind the static camera and the individuals in front, one is left wondering to what extent being framed by Depardon’s camera animates Muriel’s elaborate monologues.

Deleuze’s brief account of fabulation in documentary cinema coincides with the juxtaposition of modern and classical cinema. In this division, modern cinema affiliates with the story (récit) and classical cinema sides with narration. The main difference between narration and story is in their postulations of the true and the false. Narration in classical cinema enforces a difference between the true and the false: it works in a way that makes sure dreams, hallucinations and contradictory visions are distinguished from the framework of ordinary reality, the true. The story, on the other hand, undermines the division. It belongs to the kind of direct time-image that works with “the powers of the false.”

When documentaries work with fabulous storytelling – including the false and multiple convoluted truths – their impetus changes from differentiating between the true and the false to capturing the passages in between, such as Muriel’s transformation from the accused to an innocent woman in the scene from Depardon’s film. In the process, according to Deleuze, the real character “becomes another, when he begins to tell stories without ever being fictional.” Here, the power of storytelling – no matter how fabulous the stories may be – is actualized in the self-differentiation of the character captured by the documentary camera. Through the powers of the false involved in the process of becoming, the storyteller may potentially create new ways of being in and attuning themselves to this world.

Documentary fabulation, then, draws attention to acts of telling and the ways in which these acts are framed and observed in the documentary. The gravitation between fact and fiction in the acts of telling does not make the storytellers “fictional,” because the acts of telling are inseparable from their actual conditions and time of enunciation, such as Muriel’s preparation for her trial. Indeed, Deleuze speaks of fabulation in contexts where the actual conditions of the filmed individuals are particularly difficult, for example because of colonization, racism, and homophobia. It is precisely in these contexts that documentary fabulation may enable inventing new techniques of being in the world, techniques that may facilitate life in difficult circumstances. Hence, according to Daniel W. Smith, fabulation is “the obverse side of the dominant myths and fictions, an act of resistance
whose political impact is immediate and inescapable, and that creates a line of flight on which a minority discourse and a people can be constituted.”

Although Muriel’s convoluted speeches do not promise her a brighter future – their effect is most likely the opposite – they are nevertheless her manner of dealing with the setting she finds herself in, her only line of flight in the judicial system. By observing her storytelling acts, Depardon’s documentary in a way offers a platform for that line to develop – without judging its appropriateness. This, indeed, is the challenge fabulation poses to documentary observation: How to observe without predetermined ideas of the true and the false, right and wrong? How to observe in a way that enables the filmed subjects to live more fully, to resist their actual conditions?

These questions come loaded with aesthetic choices and ethical responsibilities that will be unpacked in chapters 3 and 4 with two observational documentaries: Albert and David Maysles’ Grey Gardens (1975) and Pirjo Honkasalo’s Tanyusha and the 7 Devils (1993). Documentary fabulation in Grey Gardens draws from the intensive dialogue and flamboyant performances of a quirky mother-daughter duo, whereas Honkasalo’s documentary observes a silent schizophrenic girl allegedly possessed by devils. In both films, official establishments – the city council and the Orthodox Church, respectively – have deemed the modes of existence of the filmed subjects unacceptable and imposed redeeming regulations on them. The documentaries were made when Edith and Edie Beale were struggling to keep their house, and when Tanyusha was undergoing treatment in a monastery in Northeastern Estonia.