DOCUMENTALITY OF FILM

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The goal of this paper is to analyse the activity of the archive inside the movies, more precisely to understand how important it is to have a consciousness of the archive in making movies as well as in watching them. Considering the movie as a trace, or as the product of an institution means localising an experience; working on a movie as a trace, or as a product of an institution means questioning an experience and eventually transforming it.

We usually talk about the archive as the place where documents are kept, where our history takes the shape of texts, and the trace of the events is the text. In other words, in the archive the facts have become texts. So a scholar goes to the archive to find texts useful to narrate a story, connecting those texts to different cultural contexts: he or she wants to enlarge the document, to make it speak. The document keeps the trace of a sociality that could be re-enacted by working on a text, and this sociality is the very reason why the document was created. Because of the centrality of the social element, I would like to substitute the term "document" with the term "social object," taking it from the works by Maurizio Ferraris about "documentality."[1]

Briefly, according to Ferraris, a social object is an object existing in space and time depending on human beings, unlike natural objects (that exist in space and time without depending on human beings) and ideal objects (that exist outside space and time without depending on human beings). The social objects imply a sociality based on recordings, needing an inscription (a stamp, a signature, a seal) that certifies their value as a document. Ferraris is convinced that we live in a society of recording and this is the condition of a society of communication and information. He says all the transformations that have characterised our time have mainly happened in the realm of recording.

The recording fixes something needing an inscription as a guarantee of sociality for a document that will materialise at the end of this process and that will be kept in an archive. In my opinion, this concept of inscription is strictly linked to the concept of institution that needs documents to exist. Working on the inscriptions directly implies working on institutions, and institutions imply an archive, as the etymology shows us very well. The latin verb *instituĕre* means "to trigger," "to put in order," the same meaning Derrida refers to the archive in his *Mal d'archive*.[2] As Jacques Le Goff wrote, historical facts become documents only after they are made so by chance or by institutions.

Actually, movies are recordings, but as well as the documents we talked about they can be considered as social objects and part of an institution only when they have an inscription. Firstly, we could say that the inscription is something like the structure of the movie, given by the editing. The footage has a really low social value on its own, it needs a form, a structure: everyone has felt, at a cognitive level, the weird sensation of being excluded from many hours of footage without a structure.

Secondly – and this paper hinges primarily on this aspect – we could say that the inscription is the director's signature, the names and logos of producers and distributors, and the date. In this case the inscription would be outside the filmic text, like a written mention, requiring the spectator – as Ruggero Eugeni pointed out some years ago[3] – to support the diegetic knowledge with a more general social knowledge – and let me emphasise again the relevance of the term "social." It is not by chance that when we analyse a movie we immediately wonder about the director, the date, and the production context: we aim at defining exactly the "documentality" of film.

Take, for instance, the case of *Grizzly Man* (2005). In the credits we read "a film by Werner Herzog." Is it correct? We know the most amazing images of this movie were filmed by Timothy Treadwell, but Treadwell left us one hundred hours of footage without a structure, with few opportunities of distribution, although he talks of some contacts with TV networks. Herzog took this footage out from Treadwell's private archive, gave it a structure, and most of all gave it a signature, a producer and a distributor. In other words, Herzog made part of those materials a social object, allowing Treadwell's message to get across and be officially archived. A sort of complementary example could be the very disputed "Abu Ghraib Archive," but I have just the space to refer to W.J.T. Mitchell's bright essay, which was part of the Clark Conference of 2007, focusing on "Obsession, Archive, Encounter" in Visual Art Studies.[4]

Family movies, or more generally amateur movies, show this operation very well. Although these films *document* something – my baby's birthday or JFK's murder – they can hardly be considered as social objects, because of the absence of inscriptions that beyond the structure, imply the name of a distributor, a producer, and obviously a director – in other words imply an institution. When we want to archive an amateur movie – see the case of Home Movies in Bologna – we have to reconstruct a complex social context strictly linked to this basic concept of inscription, interviewing authors, or their heirs and relatives.

As Patricia Zimmermann and Roger Odin have demonstrated,[5] the amateur movies have a very defined and close communicative circle that is a very defined and close sociality. So, when we watch a movie as *Un'ora sola ti vorrei* (2002) by Alina Marazzi or a movie seemingly totally different as *Grizzly Man*, we could wonder who the real author of the footage was. Are Marazzi and Herzog two impostors? Certainly not. Simply they have enlarged the communicative circle of those images, firstly involving a producer, secondly imposing a new structure, and finally signing the final movie, where the signature is the seal of the inscription.

We have to remember that Ferraris indicates four characteristics for social objects: 1) persistence; 2) having a beginning and an end; 3) being structured; 4) being structured through an inscription. Marazzi and Herzog, as many others, did exactly that, something like a bureaucratic work, with a high sense of institution (obviously I use the term "bureaucratic" just to stress the subject's terms: works like these are a huge example of the creativity the archive entails).

Changing the famous refrain of Derrida according to which there is nothing outside the text, Ferraris said that there is nothing social outside the text. So the text is first of all a social object, that has been registered, that owns an inscription and is kept in an archive because of that. Today we are overwhelmed with archives – the PC has been contributing very much – and we are surrounded by social objects. Also the movies on YouTube – that is a very particular and mobile kind of archive – are recordings with inscriptions as a guarantee of their sociality. Nonetheless we often do not have the awareness of this process.

See how Brian De Palma structures his masterpiece *Redacted* (2007).This movie is a meta-film focused on different genres of films used according to their own sociality, to the form of their different images, and to the inscriptions these films own and that will be decisive in keeping them. It has to be emphasised that De Palma did not use any image from archives, he just pretended to

edit images taken from different archives, but he created each frame of his movie. Nonetheless he expects us to believe in his images as archival images, coming from different sources. In other words, De Palma worked on a fake recording and on a fake inscription, as well as on a fake archive, while aiming to reflect on the sociality of film.

When we watch *Redacted* we behave as a scholar in an archive, we look for the signs that certify the originality of the texts we see. The postmodern debate was a crucial passage for these topics, and it was a crucial passage for De Palma's cinema too: all is text, that is all is writing and document, or social object and so on. Despite the mistakes and the misunderstandings this kind of interpretation could have generated, it is relevant that the attention both of scholars and artists focused on the concept of archive. As Linda Hutcheon pointed out very well in her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, "the archive has always been the site of a lot of activity, but rarely of such self-consciously totalizing activity as it is today."[6]

In the so-called modern cinema we easily notice the relevant role played by the archive. Finally, the filmmakers have been going to the archive, exactly like the scholars, but with a different aim. Here we are interested in deepening the filmmakers' activity regarding the archive and the concept of "documentality," an activity that implies a different kind of awareness in comparison with the work of a scholar or even of an archivist. In the majority of cases we mention – as in those we do not – the matters we can generically define "of signature" are capital.

The filmmaker does not go to the archive in order to teach us something about the history of movies. I think he or she goes to the archive in order to highlight the political and social aspects hidden in the aesthetic form of the moving images. In our culture, the archive implies historical research rather than theoretical research: whoever has read Foucault's or Derrida's studies on the archive immediately gets the misunderstanding. But when an artist, in our case a filmmaker, goes to the archive, he or she makes a theoretical act. We could think to Debord, Grifi and Baruchello, Godard, Forgács, and more recently Marazzi, Kluge, but also to Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, although they filter their images with the so-called "analytical camera," without being excluded from the operation we are talking about. Their works, as well as those of many video-artists like Gordon Douglas, Emily Jacir, Pierre Bismuth, Pierre Huyghe, entail a theoretical effort that overruns the historical remarks.

The names I have just recalled have worked or are working on images of archive, most of all on filmic images kept in an archive. When they decide to use a sequence or a frame from an older movie, they break the sociality this object keeps and they put it in another object that will take on another sociality. These socialites will not differ in the filmic quality of the images, but in what concerns the "documentality" of film. While an image is the same from a movie to another – as it is typical of the compilation films – the director, the producer and the date (i.e. the inscriptions and the historical context) change. The social nature of the movie is at the heart of these reflexions, and it emphasises the "documentality" on which the sociality of film is based. As Chrissie Iles so aptly pointed out, the attention contemporary artists pay to cinema is due to the social nature of the filmic experience and, of course, of the filmic image;[7] they work on it both by deconstructing or relocating the image and giving it a new codification as from its "documentality."

When a filmmaker goes to the archive, he or she intends to find and use "real" images, considering them real because they are written and they are kept inside the archive - more or less as Antoine Compagnon wrote about quotation: it is real because "c'est écrit" and kept in a book.[8] We cannot underestimate this attitude towards images of archive and it is important to understand the high grade of "truth" authors like Guy Debord in *La Société du spectacle*, or Grifi and Baruchello in their *Verifica incerta* – look at the title! –, or even Godard in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* attribute to such images. Each frame elicits an aesthetic and cultural reaction based on our

knowledge and awareness, and questions us about the quality and the potentiality of the filmic quotation.

In all the cases I have mentioned, we have movies that are structured with segments of other movies. The directors did some research – or more simply made a request – in a filmic archive and use images having, as documents, a particular meaning related to the sociality that had permitted their preservation. The critical position these filmmakers took with regard to older movies does not simply concern the texts themselves, but clearly the film institution involving directors, producers and even spectators. On the one hand we have the history of cinema, on the other we have a textual deconstruction paradoxically suggested by the archive itself. This second option is very detectable in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, as Godard moves between the Malraux's "musée imaginaire" and a messianic conception of the archive that we also find in the book of Derrida – see the enigmatic phrase in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, that is already present in the second chapter: "l'image viendra au temps de la resurrection."[9]

Maybe Godard's project is the closest to a sort of "film-archive" in which movies blend one into the other. Godard is interested in breaking the texts to allow their real social form to emerge via comparison. From the Shoah to Stalin, from John Ford to Italian neorealism, Godard exhibits movies as social objects, part of an institution and kept because of that. "Documentality" of film is at the heart of a work like this: the elder movies are not re-used, or re-written, more precisely they get a new inscription. The new filmmakers discuss them as social objects, emphasising on the one hand the history and the memory they elicit, on the other the role they could play at present, in a completely changed communicative universe, or we could also say in a completely changed recording universe.

We wonder if the images of archive could be considered real because they are written, and kept in an archive. The fulcrum of this question, in my opinion, lays in the "documentality" of film as the right way in questioning movies about their sociality, even if sometimes we have to get out from the text to do this. If it is true, according to Susan Sontag[10] that the film is primarily an object (and archives needs objects), I think theories of "documentality" could represent and explain this very particular process of objectification. The movies I have mentioned are perfectly in line with Sontag's opinions, proving that the object aspect of film is a means of getting the experience of the film itself.

Let me put the story in this way: the archive has become a creative place. Many archivists will observe that the archive has always been a creative place, but we see that many directors use the archive as an opportunity to destroy its order, and at the same time, to deconstruct the potent illusion of coherence and continuity in the cinematic medium.[11] It is remarkable that working on the "documentality" of film triggers a new definition of the narrative processes and a critique to the power and authority of institutions.

From another point of view – more tied to new narrative processes than to the concrete "documentality" of film – many directors (I think of Quentin Tarantino, Joel and Ethan Coen, Todd Haynes) do not work on images of archive but on something we could define "images-archive." When we are in front of "images-archive," the relationship between the image and the archive is less close than with "images of archive." Between images of archive and images-archive there is the same difference existing between "knowing that" and "knowing how" in the cognitive study. The role of the spectator is very important in understanding the whole image-archive: first of all he or she has to detect the traces of other movies, then has to recognise those movies and eventually reconstruct their context, finally he or she has to grasp the shift and the role of the "new" director. This kind of operation implies a cognitive effort involving memory and filmic knowledge, as I said "knowing that" and "knowing how."

Many neuroscientists, aiming at explaining these operations, compare the mind to a warehouse, but it is easy to understand that they are talking of an archive, maybe not so well organised, but with a lot of items. It is not by chance that Jerome Bruner defined these two kinds of memory "memory with record" and "memory without record"[12] – in a movie very indebted to matters of memory and archive like *Memento* (2000), Guy Pearce's character says "memory is just an interpretation, not a record."

I would like to recall what Roberto De Gaetano said in his article on the issue of *Fata Morgana* focused on the archive: "il documento non è nient'altro che la traccia trattata e ʿistituzionalizzata', in primo luogo dalle pratiche e dalle forme discorsive."[13] This concept of the document – exactly a social object, with a virtual inscription in those practices – implies a Foucauldian idea of the archive as the law of what could be said. In other words, we have to know we are living in the archive to really get at these kind of movies. Although we operate in the archive, are we aware that the archive is defining ourselves?

The aesthetic of fragment, intertextuality, and other recent communicative practices, like those concerning remediation, relocation or other attitudes of our "convergence culture," are the exteriorization of archival acts applied to the movies as documents having very precise artistic and social traces.

As Ferraris pointed out talking about traces, there could not be a work of art without a trace outside in the world. Certainly, film art could corroborate this theory, even when the archive obsession takes us in a dimension of artificial traces, of textual traces having a real value on the side of their "documentality," to say on the side of the "writing's explosion" reveals to us that we live in a society made mostly of recordings and inscriptions.

We have seen how the archive basically implies at least two narrative models in using movies as documents, to simplify we can say a textual one and a cognitive one. These models reveal the power of the archive and compel us to wonder who is the subject of the archive: the archivist? The scholar? The artist? The addressee of archivistic works? The answer is nearly impossible, but I think documentality of film could at least help us to reflect on what Youssef Ishaghpour called "cet interstice de la fiction et du document," in a book written with Jean-Luc Godard and with a very telling title: *Archéologie du cinéma et mémoire du siècle*.[14]

1   Maurizio Ferraris, *Documentalità. Perché è necessario lasciare tracce*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2009.
2   Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive*, Galilée, Paris 1995.
3   Ruggero Eugeni, *Film, sapere, società. Per un'analisi sociosemiotica del testo cinematografico*, Vita & Pensiero, Milano 1999.
4   W.J.T. Mitchell, *The Abu Ghraib Archive*, in Michael Ann Holly, Marquard Smith (eds.), *What Is Research in the Visual Art? Obsession, Archive, Encounter*, Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown 2008, pp. 168-182.
5   Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Reel Families. A Social History of Amateur Film*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1995; Roger Odin (sous la direction de), *Le Film de famille. Usage privé, usage public*, Klincksieck, Paris 1995.
6   Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London-New York 2002, p. 77.
7   Chrissie Iles, "Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art," in *October*, n. 104, Spring 2003, pp. 71-72.
8   Antoine Compagnon, *La Seconde Main. Ou le travail de la citation*, Seuil, Paris 1979, pp. 88-89.
9   Michele Guerra, "Le contrôle de l'univers: la dialettica del potere nelle *Histoire(s) du cinéma* di Jean-Luc Godard", in *Ricerche di S/Confine. Oggetti e pratiche artistico/culturali*, vol. 1, n. 1, 2010, pp. 164-179.

10 Susan Sontag, "Film and Theatre," in *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 11, n. 1, Autumn 1966, p. 31.

11 Linda Hutcheon, *Prefazione*, in Cristina Casero, Michele Guerra (a cura di), *Le immagini tradotte. Usi Passaggi Trasformazioni*, Diabasis, Reggio Emilia 2011, p. 8.

12 I would like to stress that many Italian translations transform the term "record" in "archivio" (archive).

13 Roberto De Gaetano, "L'inarchiviabile," in *Fata Morgana*, vol. 1, n. 2, maggio-agosto 2007, p. 109.

14 Jean-Luc Godard, Youssef Ishaghpour, *Archéologie du cinéma et mémoire du siècle*, Farrago, Tours 2000, p. 112.