

How the Relation of the Camera to the Real is Problematized in “The Thin  
Blue Line” and “Yuki Yukite Shingun”

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Documentary films can include every type of discourse about the real world. The accomplishments of nonfiction film are derived from more than the stereotypical edited interview segment, and recently have been a totality that is useful as much for showing reality as it is for expressing the creative visions of its director. It is possible for the most extrinsic implications to be presented in a way that reflects individual systemics and personal expression. The innovation of a nonfiction work can legitimize many techniques that were previously unused and will ultimately provide countless new ways of exploring social and historical issues. The examination of these issues using different visual styles leads to the methodical questioning of the degree of truth that surrounds each individual style. For nonfiction cinema, the epistemological virtue exists within the relation of what is filmed and what truly is real. In an inspection of *The Thin Blue Line* and *Yuki Yukite Shingun*, the relation between the camera and the real is problematized by both films' intentional reversal of presentational truths, the awareness of the camera, the staging or reenacting of real events with actors, and the addition of graphical or aural stylistic elements.

The *Thin Blue Line* was directed by Errol Morris in 1988. It is the retelling of a story of two men that meet by chance in Dallas, one of whom later kills a police officer. The facts are chronicled through a series of interview segments and supplemented by various reenactments, striking visual images, and a repetitive, captivating musical accompaniment. The images presented during these segments further problematize the relation of the film to reality by

expressing and illustrating in a non-informative manner what the viewer has already been made aware of. This contributes to the rhetorical (sometimes even allegorical) intensity and the style of Morris. As he has said, "There's no reason why documentaries can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything." (Bruzzi, 1-10)

Yuki Yukite Shingun, or God's Naked Army Marches On, was directed by Kazuo Hara in 1988. The story revolves around Okuzaki Kenzo, a Japanese veteran of the Pacific War (particularly in New Guinea) who seeks past officers to take responsibility for atrocities committed 40 years ago and acknowledge the truth of war. When the living relatives of the victims of these atrocities no longer accompany Okuzaki, he takes the ultimate step to confuse the camera's world with reality by having actor's play those roles during his sometimes-violent interviews. Furthermore, the relation of the camera to the real is problematized by the awareness of the camera that is inherent in this type of interviewing.

The theories of Roland Barthes, a leading 20<sup>th</sup> century social and literary critic, are the basis for the dilemma posed by the possible conflicts of the camera and what is real. He explains the photograph as something that "always carries its referent with itself." He goes on to say that because of this relationship, the image is a constant reminder of that which it represents. Even on a purely denotative level, the photograph is an analog of all that its existence

suggests or implies. For Barthes, the photographic referent is the only one that is necessarily real (due to the inherent reality of the recording), similarly with nonfiction film as a form that also necessitates its own existence. (Renov, 135-142)

It becomes a consideration when analyzing the relation between the camera and the real in documentary film that the camera is unable to reflect empirical truth. If this were true, then the universal denial of films as being able to reflect definitive truth could be considered. The two films in question seemingly only reflect opposing ideas; they gain no decisive reality. This is not the case, however, because this scrutiny only challenges film that contains ideas that are based in memory. These films knowingly lack proof of the events under inspection. It is this exact circumstance that allows them to create a string of subjective realities and systematically question them. This allowance causes a further breakdown in the relation of the camera to the real. (Bruzzi, 11-39)

Considering this theory first with *The Thin Blue Line*, even the most mundane and routine of documentary techniques can be tinged with symbolism. For instance, the color of attire or background light can both contribute connotation to the aesthetic meaning. With every image of the film carrying some degree of analog, the relation between camera, as the objective eye, and reality grows more distant. Several times in the film, the reversal of expectation is propagated by the 'photographic paradox' that Barthes describes. Many

times the viewer is led to believe one thing from a direct interview, and it is seemingly opposed minutes later by a remarkably similar image. Morris plays with these techniques, with knowledge of their effects, in order to deliberately confuse what is being seen with what is real. (Plantinga, 60-64)

In *Yuki Yukite Shingun*, the precarious relation of the camera to the real is first recognized in the style of interview that is taking place. We do not simply see Okuzaki engaged in dialogue with these veterans, or the aftereffects of his antagonism. Instead, the film intentionally includes the confrontation, from the preplanning and the surprise entrance to the physical violence and the final admissions. In a traditional documentary we would have seen just the memories derived from the interview, but here it is the struggle that is important. This conflict, deliberately removed from similar nonfiction works such as *Salesman*, is what adds another layer of dissonance to the typical interview and further problematizes the camera's involvement. Hara, discussing his objectives in cinema, said "As a filmmaker, I try to understand what I want to do, not so much by confronting my subject, but by trying to become empty inside myself and letting my subject enter me. The subject becomes my opponent and I become the receiver of the opponent's action and development." He succeeds in this film, because of the way Okuzaki allows himself to be captured by the camera. It is not that he submits to being filmed outside of his reality; it is precisely that he allows the camera into his own reality. (MacDonald, 125-129)

Hara has his own interpretation of the relation of the camera to the real. He believes that a problematization of this sort directly improves the analysis and provides further discourses about the world. He comments:

*“There is a tendency in recent American documentary filmmaking to rely too heavily on interviews, and to feel that you can edit bits and pieces together to make a documentary. Many recent works use interviews in a very superficial way, and they put too much trust in the words spoken by the subjects. In Japanese there is a phrase, ‘peeling pickled garlic.’ You peel pickled garlic one layer at a time and you peel another layer and there is still another layer beneath it- there is no core in a pickled garlic. When we have a relationship with reality and explore it, we peel one layer of reality, and we think we can see another world. But the trouble with that level of reality is that if we peel it, we see still another layer. The third or fourth layer is not exactly the real truth either. What is interesting about making documentary films is peeling those layers, and it is difficult to do that simply by relying on the words you record, on the interviewing process, where you only face the first level of reality. There is a difference between what a person is saying and what a person is feeling. So I try to peel the expression on a person’s face, and go to other levels of the truth.” (MacDonald, 130)*

In this analogy Hara maintains that it is through the process of removing tendencies towards normal, comfortable interaction (standard interview) that deeper layers of ‘real truth’ are discovered. There are few films that exemplify this theory more than God’s Naked Army Marches On. (MacDonald, 130-142)

Another element of Hara's film that obscures the relationship between the camera and reality is the inherent awareness of the camera. There is no pretense in this movie, as exists in the normal presentational form, that the camera isn't there. Throughout the film, many characters both address the camera directly and allude to its presence, going so far as to place their hands in front of the camera and order Hara to stop filming, or bowing to the cameraman. One of the most obvious examples of this phenomenon is during the Toshio interview. When policemen arrive to question Okuzaki, they sit in the camera's line of sight and are asked to move. Toshio himself later says to the soldier's living relatives "If people knew they were executed for desertion, you'd have to bear the shame as their families. The camera is rolling. People will see the film and look down on you." The fact that he recognizes that not only is the camera recording, but comprehends it enough to address the film's future audience has an incredible effect on the probable distortion of the truth and what is real. The true intent of his words is called into question because of this consciousness of being filmed, thus negating any assurance of what is real.

(Ruoff, 119-123)

The element of *God's Naked Army Marches On* that produces the most problems for the relation of the camera and reality is the substitution of actors for the actual relatives of the deceased soldiers. In order to achieve the desired pressure on the ex-officers, Okuzaki uses the help of other antiestablishment friends to play the parts of the relatives that decline to participate further. This

complicates the plight of the film. Okuzaki is a stickler for discovering the whole truth and getting the men to admit their injustices, however he has no qualms about staging certain aspects to achieve the desired ends in his pursuit of what happened in New Guinea. This confuses the way that the camera relates to reality not only from the standpoint of the men being interviewed under somewhat false pretenses, but from the view of the audience. The viewer's knowledge that these are characters that are being performed, as opposed to people engaged in genuine human interaction, casts a shadow over the distinction between the film's search for truth and its fictitious elements. (Ruoff, 115-126)

The unique aspect of *The Thin Blue Line* that enters into the relation of the camera to the real is the style, which is inserted between the actual informative interviews. These segments span the entirety of the movie and, accompanied with the music, cast the reality of the statements into doubt. The connotation of the constant reenactments and graphical cues are the impetus of the majority of the film's candid uncertainty. They provide a reminder of the flawed memory of man, which problematizes the relation further. The production could have easily been done with the interviews in order of importance, and still included the restaging scenes chronologically. What makes it different, what gives it the epistemological ambiguity is the way that it toys with the viewer and the relation of the camera to reality. Morris has said of his film:



*“The Thin Blue Line has been called Rashomon-like. I take exception to that... For me there is a fact of the matter, a fact of what happened on the roadway that night... Someone shot Robert Wood, and it was either Randall Adams or David Harris. That’s the fundamental issue at the center of all this. Is it knowable? Yes, it is. We have access to the world out there. We aren’t just prisoners of our fantasies and dreams. I wanted to make a movie about how truth is difficult to know, not how it is impossible to know.” (Plantinga, 221)*

His apparent recognition of the way the mind works is what motivates him to structure the film in this way. Morris took into account the Hegelian concept of the profound knowledge of truth as one of humankind’s greatest desires. The film plays with this concept by the repetition of images, suggestive of the desire to see something new each time. Such a technique additionally complicates the relation of the camera to the real. (Plantinga, 64-76)

A striking parallel between the two films is the presentation of the final message of the main character. In both movies, the final interview of the film exists only as recorded audio. In The Thin Blue Line, it is a conversation with David Harris that contains his final admission of guilt and closes the curtain on the film’s story. Similarly, Yuki Yukite Shingun ends with an audio recording of Okuzaki after his attempted murder of a man he deems guilty, and how it is justifiable as divine punishment. This similarity, though possibly unintentional, suggests a decisive equivalence in their conclusions. Going back to Barthes’ idea that the image is an inseparable analog of connotative implication, the use of audio may just be a conscious avoidance of that. Whether it is intentional or

not, it is one similarity that the two films share that sheds light on how the relation of the camera to the real is problematized, and what can be done to avoid this.

In summation, it is inherent that nonfiction film obscures the relation of the camera to the real. This is apparent according to the ideas of Roland Barthes, and is necessitated in different circumstances by the awareness of the camera, the staging or reenacting of real events with actors, and the addition of graphical or aural stylistic elements. As presented in *The Thin Blue Line* and *Yuki Yukite Shingun*, these elements are important to the originality of their overall films and have the effect of problematizing the relation between the camera and what is real.

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