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**TRANSCENDENTAL REALISM IN
DOCUMENTARY**

Dr Erik Knudsen

Prologue: An Introduction

What defines the documentary genre is also at the root of its limitations; an epistemology which ties it to the factual or empirical experience of life. The very term, documentary, itself has a strong association to the industrial age from which the moving image medium emerged: empirical proof, factual evidence, scientific methodology and psychological justification all serve to reinforce the role which the documentary genre is expected to play. The emergence of anthropology and sociology as pseudo scientific disciplines has helped cement the notion of factual representation of reality.

Here, I shall call for a different perspective on the documentary form; not with a view to discussing what documentary is, but to make some suggestions of what it could be. I hope to speak as a filmmaker and not an academic; for the motive is to try and understand how, in practice, one may evolve the documentary form – indeed, the cinematic form, generally – in such a way as to deal with experiences not sufficiently touched by the form as it is currently generally practiced.

At the heart of such an exploration lie a number of questions. How can one employ a practical approach to cinematic documentary narrative which goes beyond the dominant paradigm exemplified by elements such as cause and effect, conflict and resolution, and psychologically explicable situations, character motivations and narrative motivations, to reveal qualities of spirituality and transcendence without reducing these elements to fit a

rationale that ultimately contradicts the very nature of these transcendental and spiritual qualities? Within this context, how can one practically create a cinematic documentary narrative that is essentially driven by the experiential rather than by meaning, representation or the illustrative? While certain genres within fiction may bring together some of these elements in an agreed fictional paradigm, how can one bring such elements together within forms of fact?

Why should this be necessary? There are three broad reasons I feel that make such an exploration necessary. First, there is a long term danger in reducing our reflections on life and our lives to dimensions which only exists in planes of materialistic cause and effect. A society and culture will be starved, wither and eventually die if it cannot also breathe in paradigms of the infinite, eternal, mystical and unconscious movements of existence. Knowledge is something we all seek, yet there are many layers of knowledge which should not be limited by particular kinds of methodology.

T S Elliot suggests that:

‘We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time’ (Eliot 1944: 48)

If knowledge and awareness is a key motivation in creating documentary work, then it is not merely a question of showing the outside world, and its immediate layer beneath, but about getting into the very heart and soul of who we are and what we are.

Second, and in a sense emerging out of the first point, there are many issues and problems that we face that cannot be adequately solved or moved forward exclusively by looking at them in terms of material, sociological or psychological interactions. We need to look at such problems in a deeper, more holistic light, bringing into the fray the spiritual and transcendentalⁱ.

Third, if the language of documentary does not evolve and change, there is a real danger that the form will become a hollow expression, built on clichés and that it will cease to be an effective tool of understanding and knowledge.

While in early British documentary, there were some attempts to discover the poetry of documentaryⁱⁱ, much of contemporary documentary is confined to a perspective on life in which the factual is primarily what can empirically be observed, then supported by the psychologically explicable. Social realism, observational documentary and interview-based documentary are examples of variations of a genre which broadly lives within the same classical paradigm of cause and effect, conflict and resolution.

There are a number of, usually, non-UK examples of documentary which have attempted to break away from this paradigm: the late Jean Rouch, for example, whose work in

Africa shows how the documentary has the potential to go beyond the material surface of the world to reveal a spiritual dimension; or Dvortsevov, whose workⁱⁱⁱ sees him move away from any notion of cause and effect, conflict and resolution in order to reveal a dimension of life which social realism cannot adequately reveal or portray.

While most of the world rushes headlong into embracing a largely materialistic engagement and perspective on life, some parts of the world still have remnants of cultures in which the spiritual, the mental and the physical occupy equal status in epistemology. In African and Latin American literature, for example, we often hear commentators from the developed world using terminology such as ‘magical realism’ to describe a seamless blending of realism, mysticism, magic, fact, history, politics and morality in the creation of cultural product. For the traditional African, though, the label is irrelevant; for it is all fact, all true. While African literature grew out of existing oral traditions and has never required the up-front investment that film has required it has been able, to a large degree, to reflect more accurately the spiritual and transcendental qualities of African life, there is little or no evidence of African documentaries having done so.

Nor is there much evidence of British documentary consistently attempting to reflect the spiritual and transcendental aspects of the British. Arguably, British documentary has generally been in decline during the later two decades of the 20th century, in terms of the breadth and depth of what is produced. The commercial climate of contemporary television, the traditional funder of much important documentary work of the past, has

seen an increased dependence on formulas which reinforce the need for drama, conflict and explicable cause and effect.

The problem, and the solution, to the different kind of documentary I am suggesting in this piece starts with the question of reality and the question of why we are making documentaries in the first place.

The Beginning: Reality as Experience

To me, filmmaking, including documentary-making, is an art. And art has an important function in society. As Hamlet put it:

‘For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure’. (Shakespeare 1970: III, ii)

Add to that a sense of duty, in which the artist must ‘...send light into the darkness of men’s souls...’ (Kandinsky 2006: 10) in order to help the viewer understand more and become more aware of themselves and the world in which they live.

The assumption often is that the physical world creates the emotions and feelings that psychology then frames into a context of explicable cause and effect built on a scientific

paradigm. But what if it was the other way round? What if one had the world view that the physical world is a product of feelings, some of which are so deep, mysterious, inexplicable and beyond the individual, that encourages a different kind of interaction with reality?

It is not my intention here to go into a complex discussion of the nature of reality, but simply to posit some questions and raise some issues that might make us look differently at how one might approach the documentary form. Nevertheless, since the documentary form is steeped in debates and discussions about fact, fiction, proof, imagination and reality, it is important to at least question what we mean by reality. Where, for example, does the reality lie in a process that involves manipulating form?

Many documentary makers get very hooked up on issues of authenticity in order to justify the genre: that the process adheres to certain conventions in order to justify the finished form as being some kind of fact. This is a dogma with which our Western mode of thought is particularly obsessed. As Jung puts it:

‘It is a rational preposition of ours that everything has a natural and perceptible cause. We are convinced of this. Causality, so understood, is one of our most sacred dogmas. There is no legitimate place in our world for invisible, arbitrary and so called supernatural forces... We distinctly resent the idea of individual and arbitrary forces, for it is not so long ago that we made our escape from that frightening world of dreams and superstitions, and

constructed for ourselves a picture of the cosmos worthy of rational consciousness... We are now surrounded by a world that is obedient to rational law'. (Jung 1961: 149)

If we, in documentary, restrict ourselves to a dogma of reality which only exists within the rationale of cause and effect, then, of course, it makes sense that a methodology has been built up around process and consequent outcome; a methodology that legitimises this outcome within the confines of rational cause and effect. This is the reality of science^{iv} and does not necessarily reflect the full range of experiences people have of life, for which we have somewhat inadequate terminologies such as the spiritual, transcendental, the soul, the heart and so on.

Such pursuit of justification leads to dogmatic notions of reality being present in the process and the form^v. But if one were to think of reality as including elements of experience that lie outside the construct of what Jung calls 'rational law' to include the many experiences and feelings people have that cannot be adequately identified or explained within this rational law, then the documentary filmmaker is faced with a number of problems relating to process and form. If one looks at traditional African cultures, for example, and look at their way of dealing with the reality around them, there is little separation of fact and fiction, or reality and imagination, in the stories they use to reflect this reality^{vi}. If we, as human beings, are made up of mind, body and spirit working seamlessly together with such faculties as logical thinking, imagination, feelings,

emotions and a propensity for mystical reflection and superstition, why should all of this, in its totality, not be considered as part of the reality of the real world?^{vii}

The reality, then, perhaps lies somewhere else, when we talk about documentary, or indeed any artistic expression. Perhaps the reality lies not in the form and the process – the very things that define documentary – but either side of that. In other words, perhaps the reality that we want to reflect ultimately lies in the feelings that prompt and necessitate the expression and then in the feelings and experiences that result from this expression. If this is the case, then the legitimacy of the form and process become irrelevant.

In most cases, I would imagine that the documentary filmmaker is driven by a need to express something they feel, even if that feeling can find a connection with the world around them. It is hard to determine if that feeling is caused by events, or whether that feeling finds an affinity with events. Why try and separate the two? What is relevant is that the filmmaker is prompted by something and feels it necessary to express that something and that they see the means to do so in events and imagery going on around them. We may rationalise why we want to do something, but perhaps the rational cannot get the full picture. In this sense, is the documentary filmmaker any different to any other kind of artist? ‘The idea simply comes’, says T S Eliot (Burnshaw 1970: 153); ‘My ideas come as they will, I don’t know how’, says Mozart (Ibid); ‘When your daemon is in charge, do not try to think consciously. Drift, wait, obey’, says Kipling (Ibid).

The codes of film forms evolve over time. While two distinct broad genres – fact and fiction – evolved to reflect the dichotomous thinking of our Western culture, reflecting our strong tendency to compartmentalise, there is no doubt that much cross-fertilisation between these two genre has taken place. Such films^{viii} tend to use this blending of genres predominantly as stylistic devices and remain firmly within the paradigm of classic narrative.

Dreams, imagination and intuition can and should be as much a part of documentary, as factual observations can and should be a part of fiction. Rather than thinking of simply merging or blending the two – through stylistic accentuation – perhaps one should be thinking of transcending these genre distinctions in a more fundamental way.

The reality – and the truth – ultimately rests within feelings and experiences of the viewer. Documentary needs to find ways in which it can move the viewer in such a way as to also address their spiritual and transcendental reality. Within fiction, there are clearer examples of filmmakers whose oeuvre specifically addresses transcendental form^{ix}. Documentary, on the other hand, has too often been bound by boundaries of fact and authenticity^x.

The Middle: Emotions, Feelings and Cinematic Narrative

I would like to explore a little further what is meant by ‘move’ the viewer transcendently, to contrast this with how they are moved psychologically in the classical documentary or fiction film and then to look, briefly, at some broad elements which might affect how the filmmaker would proceed to making a documentary that reaches other sides to our experience of reality.

Stanley Burnshaw, when talking about how poetry works, pointed out the following:

‘Poetry begins with the body and ends with the body... So immense are the possible combinations of external forces alone that it seems ludicrous to discuss them in terms of what we now know or in time hope to know. The more promising course has been to learn our bodies and then from within to look outward. And we have come across one finding with which all that may be discovered will have to accord: the entire human organism always participates in any reaction’. (Burnshaw 1970: 1/10)

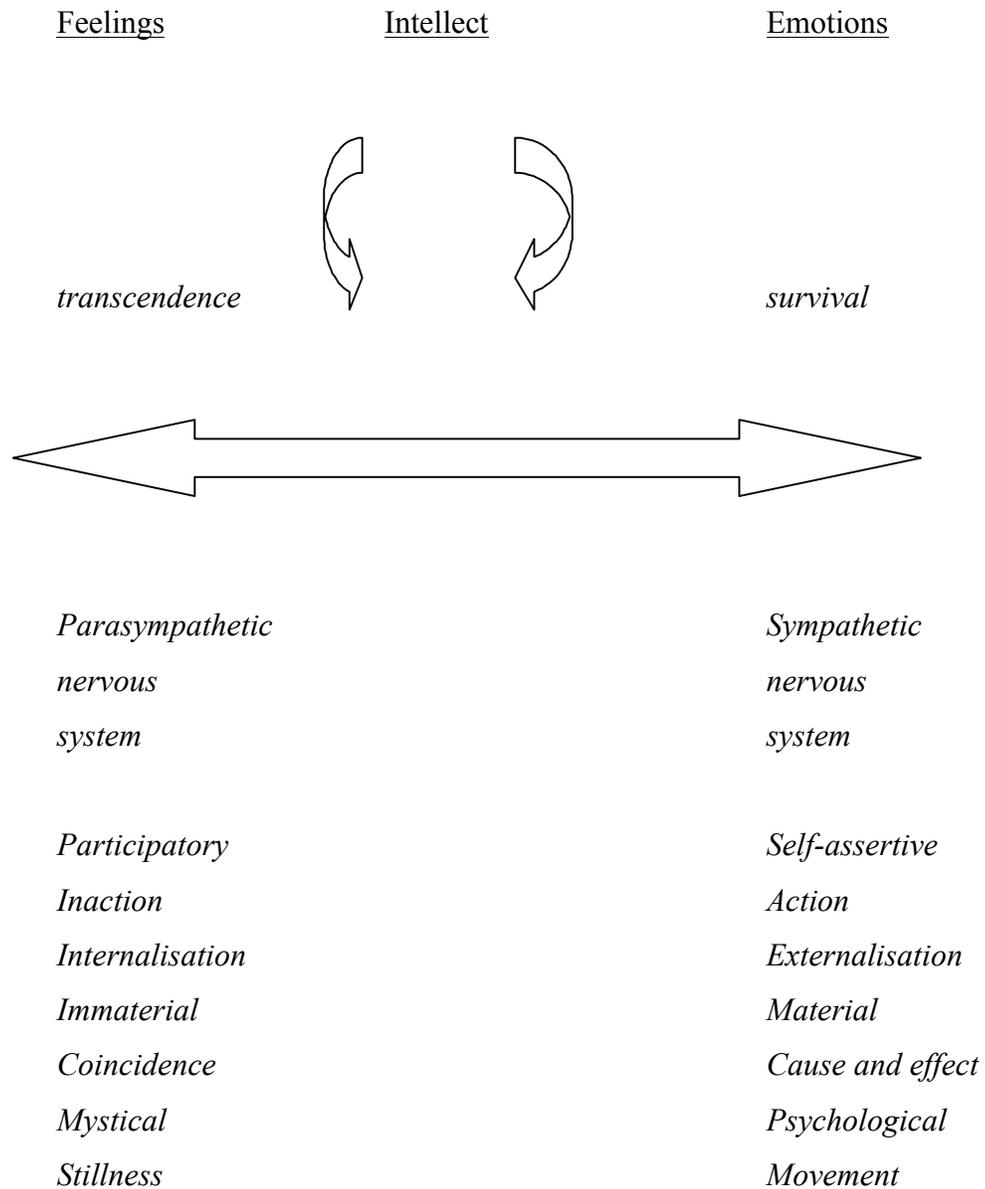
Arthur Koestler talks extensively about this notion in his book on creativity, ‘The Act of Creation’ (Koestler 1969). We are overwhelmingly dominated by our emotions and feelings, much more so than by our intellect^{xi}. When we respond emotionally or feelingly to stimuli, our whole physiological body is involved in the process. Wherever one believes the source of these stimuli to be – psychological, spiritual, physical, tangible or

intangible – they manifest themselves in powerful actual form in the individual’s mind and body, simultaneously.

In physiology, there are two contrasting and opposite manifestations; one associated with emotions, the other with feelings^{xii}. Emotions are associated with an adrenergic^{xiii} response in our bodies. In the extreme, such a response often relates to survival, or ‘fight or flight’ situations and the emotions associated with this Koestler calls self-assertive^{xiv}. Such emotions include, by way of some simple examples, fear, rage, anger, sexual attraction, anxiety, excitement, jealousy. They are self-assertive in nature because they re-assert our individuality, separate us out from our surroundings, put the body in a ready state to deal with problems, enable us to laugh at other’s misfortunes or take sides, as necessary to ‘defend oneself’, or to re-assert one’s own superiority. Feelings, on the other hand, are associated with a cholinergic^{xv} response in our bodies. Such feelings relate to the participatory in us, the tendency to dissolve one’s ego into a greater whole. Some such feelings might include awe, grief, love, joy, longing, and sorrow. They are participatory feelings because they help us dissolve into a greater whole by, in contrast to emotions, opening up to participating in something greater than ourselves.

Where the self-assertive emotions drive us towards individual action and reaction, the participatory feelings drive us towards stillness and inaction; where the self-assertive emotions demand we are alert, the participatory feelings encourage us to relax^{xvi}; where the self-assertive emotions engage us, essentially, in issues of survival, the participatory feelings encourage us to engage with the transcendental. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1



Forgive my digression into this brief and simple description of the physiology of feelings and emotions, but for me they confirm impressions I already have as an artist; namely, that there are different sides of me that respond differently to stimuli – and in this discussion we are, of course, talking about the stimuli of a cinematic narrative. My

contention is that these emotions and feelings are the primary way in which the filmmaker engages the viewer and in that sense moves them. The intellect primarily reflects on these emotions and feelings and tries to make sense of them. However, even if the intellect is unsuccessful at making much sense of the emotions and feelings, this does not mean one has not been moved. Music – for me the most powerful of all the arts – is a good example of a form, considerably abstracted, which can move without one’s intellect necessarily being able to understand why or how^{xvii}.

The materialistic cultures of the developed world lean heavily towards a preoccupation with survival and the self-assertive; the survival instinct drives us, anxiously, to assert our individuality and its base needs by accumulating more material wealth and superiority over nature and this instinct has strong roots in the emotions of fear. The measure of our achievements are quantified in external actions, in material manifestations and is framed within a paradigm of psychological cause and effect. We look back in time, or across at more ‘primitive’ cultures, and define cultures which prioritise, or prioritised, their relationship to life differently as under-developed.

But perhaps the more, so called, ‘primitive’ culture has, or had, different priorities. In sociology and anthropology there was a tendency to use the paradigm of psychological realism – the cause and effect of rational law – to explain under-development. It was always assumed that so called ‘primitive’ cultures were pre-occupied with survival. However, this assumption says more about our own culture than it does about cultures in which a different emphasis is at work. The differing priorities of such cultures were not

understood. Such priorities may have included a more transcendental relationship to nature; one in which the priority was not about asserting individuality, but about placing that individuality within a larger spiritual and mystical context, for example, of the dead and the yet to be born. With an emphasis on the participatory, the collective interaction with nature is, or was, not one of ruling over it, but assimilating with it, where what we call coincidences and mysticism form part of a pattern outside the scope of the rational mind, where stillness and inaction are revered, and where the priority is not to gain materially, but to transcend attachment to the physical world.

The relative balance between these two tendencies within the individual and his culture has a profound effect on how stories are told. Stories are fundamental to our engagement with life^{xviii} and the structure and mode of story-telling is a reflection of our direct experience of, and attitude to, the world within and around us. The classical narratives of the Anglo-Saxon^{xix} influenced cinema – both fiction and documentary – is heavily steeped in the psychological realism of self-assertive emotions. The vast majority of work is designed to engage our emotions – as opposed to our feelings – and perhaps it is no coincidence that at the extreme end of fiction, for example, there is little difference between the experience of a movie and that of going on a rollercoaster in a theme park. The purpose is clear in such cases: to have you, the viewer, sitting at the edge of your seat, adrenaline pumping around your system, engaged with issues of survival, alert, ready for ‘fight or flight’ action, consumed by fear.

Thankfully, few documentaries reach these extremes. Nevertheless, most Anglo-Saxon documentaries do, in more subtle and sophisticated ways, predominantly solicit the self-assertive emotions. In fact, it is the dominant mode of engaging the viewer. The establishment of a protagonist, or protagonists, with a problem or an aim, the psychological justification of this with a premise of some sort, showing the obstacles that provide a challenge for the protagonist(s), then taking this challenge to a decisive situation or moment and then finally wrapping up the journey in some sort of resolution provides the basic narrative skeleton of most documentary films. Ultimately, they lean towards issues of the survival of something palpable, something psychologically explicable, or even something physical, such as a human life. It could also be about the survival of an idea, a culture, certain values, even the survival of someone's sanity. The protagonist's aims are usually always psychologically explicable, as is the premise. The challenges, likewise, need not merely be physical, but could be mental. The emphasis is on action, externalising the issues into palpable form, usually through the creation of conflicts, establishing clear causes and effects and a tendency to exaggerate movement (be this physical movement of or within the frame, or the movement of the narrative arc). No matter how subtly or creatively presented, these elements provide the bedrock of the dominant classical mode of documentary story-telling; one with which most are very familiar and one with which most can readily engage, because it so closely mirrors our culture's pre-occupations.

A good, and very effective, example of such a documentary would be Phil Agland's 'Serial Killer'^{xx}. Part of the series 'Shanghai Vice', which revolves around the work of

the Shanghai police in a rapidly developing and expanding metropolis, this film is concerned with the police's effort to catch a serial killer. The subject itself, of course, immediately helps to engage our self-assertive emotions. Ostensibly a strictly observational documentary, Agland, nevertheless, heavily incorporates the codes of the classic fiction thriller: the darkly moody lighting of many of the key scenes; the suggestive night time cityscape interludes linking the key sequences; the action editing of dialogue scenes; the use of informational devices, such as the telex machine in an empty police office announcing the next victim; and, importantly, the juxtaposition of the police efforts with a subplot of two innocent women – potential victims? - concerned with improving their sex lives – to name but a few examples – all contribute to generating an engagement with our self-assertive emotions, such as fear and anxiety. Add to these codes the classic narrative elements of: the protagonists - predominantly the police, who have the aim of apprehending the serial killer before potentially innocent women, such as the ones in the sub-plot, get sexually abused and killed; the premise – Shanghai's economic boom and the social problems this brings with it; the obstacles – the various challenges of the investigation, complicated by the burgeoning city with its consequent social problems; the climax – the apprehension and interrogation of the serial killer (have they got the right man and will he confess?); and the resolution, which ties together some loose ends, reflects on the outcome and suggests new challenges. Not only are we engaged with the literal survival of potential victims of the serial killer, but at stake is also the survival of social cohesion and social values in a rapidly changing metropolitan environment. Our self-assertive emotions are engaged with the narrative form, reflecting

and shaping the reality we experience, re-affirming the paradigm of psychological realism.

But what about those of us – viewers and filmmakers – who want to engage with transcendental reality? How can the documentary form help us reveal and mirror this reality – either in addition to psychological realism, or leaning more specifically towards the transcendental? In fiction, as mentioned earlier, there are examples of filmmakers specifically working to this end. In other art forms, the idea of transcendental realism is well established^{xxi}. Somehow, the documentary form lags behind, hampered by pseudo scientific notions of realism, authenticity and fact^{xxii}.

If the aim of the construction of the classic narrative forms is to primarily engage our self-assertive emotions, then the aim of the transcendental narrative forms is to engage our participatory feelings. Awe, sorrow, joy longing are feelings that require a different approach. Perhaps even the process of creation itself, with less reliance on rational laws and rules about narrative structure, comes into play:

‘Things are beautiful where they are inevitable, that is, when they are free exhibitions of a spirit. There is no violence here, no murdering, no twisting-about, no copying-after, but a free, unrestrained, yet self-governing display of movement - which constitutes the principle of beauty. The muscles are conscious of drawing a line, making a dot, but behind them there is an unconsciousness. By this unconsciousness nature writes out her destiny: by

this unconsciousness the artist creates his work of art. A baby smiles and the whole crowd is transported, because it is genuinely inevitable, coming out of the Unconscious'. (Suzuki 1996: 281)

This very notion carries itself into the way one might deal with events in a narrative; a notion that the narrative events are not tied by some explicable series of causes and events, but by some other forces that one can only call mystical or coincidental. While in the classic narrative, events generally follow some sort of line governed by palpable causes and effects, in the transcendental narrative such events may be governed by motivational forces which lie outside of what is psychologically explicable. In the extreme, they might even appear random, a term we attribute to events to which we are incapable of attributing causes. Such coincidences may be tied to other elements of the narrative in a loose binding web in which the viewer would be asked not to make cognitive sense, but to transcend the need for causes and to experience these connections in a state of, for example, wonder or awe. The scenes may not follow, one from the other, along classic narrative's lines, but the viewer may be asked to submerge themselves in scenes and sequences, to linger on things that seem, to the logical or psychological mind, irrelevant, or to suspend their need for consequential organising of events and scenes. Detail becomes an important feature; for it is often through the immersion in detail that new links and connections are made that lie outside the paradigm of cause and effect.

The notion of having a protagonist, with aims, premise, obstacles and resolution, becomes less and less important. Indeed, the possibility of having no protagonist at all

becomes perfectly viable; for, perhaps, the observation of so called coincidental or random events in themselves can provide the catalyst for an engagement rooted in participatory feelings. Stillness, both in terms of the movement of, or within the frame, and the movement of the narrative arc, provides more opportunities for the viewer to fill an empty bowl with their own feelings, as opposed to being presented with a full bowl for digestion and reaction. When the rational mind is suspended, engaged with scenes that link by way of coincidence and detail, the relationship with the narrative starts to become one of meditation; a state in which one could, perhaps, start to see things that one would not otherwise see, feel things that one would not otherwise feel^{xxiii}.

Internalisation – for lack of a better expression – and reducing the role of external actions, is another important feature of the transcendental narrative. Reducing conflict and dramatic events as an expressive tool helps to create internal spaces within which the transcendental narrative can achieve its aims of engaging with the viewer's parasympathetic feelings.

By its very nature, this irrational and mystical part of our experience of life is very difficult to qualify. The notion of constructing rules, fixed patterns and solutions go against the very grain of how it works. I hope to have suggested elements, rather than specify them, as I believe what D T Suzuki says above about the unconscious movements of the creative process to be correct.

A good example of a documentary leaning towards the transcendental would be Sergei Dvortsevov's 'Bread Day'. Set in a remote Siberian settlement depleted of the young and leaving a population of older people, the film is uncompromisingly observational. But there are few elements that one could say would fit in with classic narrative forms. First, there seem to be no protagonists and consequently no aims. There might be a hint of a premise, in that the film is structured around the delivery of a train carriage with bread for the settlement. This is clearly a weekly event, and therefore nothing unusual, but Dvortsevov uses this delivery to provide a basic structure: the bread is collected by some of the residents, brought to the settlement; observation of the settlement; the empty carriage is prepared to be returned, suggesting that the cycle is about to start all over again. This tri-partite structure is reminiscent of the Zen narrative structure one might see in much of Ozu's later work^{xxiv}: normality – disparity - normality/transcendence^{xxv}. In such a narrative, nothing need superficially change; the change occurs in the viewer as a consequence of going through the experience and where the situation remains exactly the same at the end, as it was in the beginning, there is, nevertheless, a different transcendental relationship with that situation.

The imagery and events, in the context of psychological realism, seem random in 'Bread Day': we are not following any particular character; we are not following any line of events, one following on from the other; we are as interested in the activities of the animals as the people; we are as likely to be observing a collapsed shed, or space that a person or animal has vacated, as we are to be observing what happens to the bread in the shop; long panning shots move from one thing to another, without apparent motivation;

tit-bits of conversations are picked up on the wind. There are, of course, connections, but they are tied together in a transcendental web through our participatory feelings; coincidental links allow us to engage with the imagery and the narrative in a completely different way than if more classical elements had been employed.

Add to this Dvortsevov's approach to detail and pace. Stillness – in the frame, of the movement of the frame and in the arc of the narrative – lies at the heart of his cinematic approach. We are being encouraged to meditate on what we are seeing, rather than to seek causal links. The opening shot, for example, must be about 10 minutes long: uncompromisingly, we follow half a dozen elderly people pushing the decoupled rail carriage along the train track to their settlement. Not much is said, for it is hard work. In the classical approach, once the causal significance of this action had been established, the temptation would be to cut to the next scene. Dvortsevov, on the other hand, lingers and we start to become immersed in the detail of what is happening; not in search of its material or psychological significance, but almost as a meditative experience. We come to feel the scene, as opposed to responding to it emotionally.

This approach gives us a very different view of reality; it is not a sociological reality, nor a factual reality in the traditional sense (there is very little factual information from which I can build a psychological picture); there is no exposition, no explanations, no back story, no obvious conflicts, no climax. Nevertheless, there is a strong reality; but it is another side of reality than we are used to seeing. It is more mystical, transcendental, as it fills us with feelings of awe and sorrow.

The End: A Call

The heart of the process of making films, for me, is intuitive^{xxvi}. An inner necessity, which I cannot explain, drives me to make them. I would even go as far as to say – as Rodin said about his relationship to stone and sculpture – that the stories I tell already exist. My job, as an artist, is to see these stories and then to bring them into a tangible form. Intellectual reflection is just that: intellectual reflection. For me, the act of creation is not an intellectual act, but an act of inner necessity, faith, feeling and craft.

Intellectual reflection is, of course, in its proper place, very useful. Reflecting on my work in the context of research has helped me become aware of unconscious and intuitive tendencies, impulses and directions. It is not for my intellect to rule these impulses and tendencies, but to try to understand them, while allowing them free rein to take me where they want to take me, in order to, as Schumann says, ‘...send light into the darkness of men’s hearts’. (Kandinsky 2006: 10)

In my own work^{xxvii}, I try to achieve this by exploring this notion of transcendental reality. For me, the spiritual poverty that pervades in the rich Western world is a serious problem.

‘Never before has ignorance reached such monstrous proportions. This repudiation of the spiritual can only engender monsters. Now, as never

before, we have to make a stand for everything that has the slightest relevance to the spiritual'. (Tarkovsky 1994: 22)

And the documentary genre should, and can, play its part.

Author's Biography

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His films include, **Heart of Gold** (40 min., documentary, 2006), **Sea of Madness** (86 min., fiction, 2006), **Brannigan's March** (99 min., fiction, 2004), **Bed of Flowers** (50 min., documentary, 2001), **Signs of Life** (70 min., fiction, 1999), **Reunion** (50 min., documentary, 1995), **One Day Tafo** (70 min., documentary, 1991). He has directed for the stage in Toronto and London, written for the screen and for the BBC World Service radio.

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ⁱ In the liberal, consumer led societies of the developed world, we have a tendency to link our material success with progress. However, one need only look at the immense interest of many people from these so called successful societies in so called ‘primitive’ cultures’ relationships to nature and the spiritual as indications that many people feel a sense of alienation from key aspects of their lives.

ⁱⁱ Humphrey Jennings, for example.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bread Day (Sergei Dvortsevov , 2001, Russia) or In The Dark (Sergei Dvortsevov, 2005, Russia) are good examples. Additionally, ‘Tische’ (Victor Kossakovsky, 2002, Russia) serves as another example. Neither filmmaker may use such a term as ‘transcendental realism’ to describe their own work, but there are hints and similarities in intention. See Kossakovsky’s discussion with Maxine Baker. (Baker 2006: 177).

^{iv} I include in science, the ‘sciences’ of sociology, anthropology and psychology.

^v Notions of how a documentary can be shot, interactions with participants, notions of proof and evidence and a range of conventions that tell the viewer that ‘this is real’ and, by inference, therefore also ‘true’.

^{vi} I recently made a documentary, Heart of Gold, in Ghana about this subject, part of a research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council entitled An Exploration of African Story-telling Techniques’ Possible Uses in Documentary Form. See www.onedayfilms.com/films/heartofgold for further details.

^{vii} In fact, why do we think of documentary and fiction as fundamentally different?

^{viii} Examples might include, ‘Tina Goes Shopping’ (Penny Woolcock, 1999, UK) and ‘Medium Cool’ (Haskel Wexler, 1969, US).

^{ix} Bresson, Ozu and Dreyer are three examples that Paul Schrader talks about in his book, ‘Transcendental Style in Film’ (Schrader 1972). Add to this Andrey Tarkovsky and Victor Erice, whose film, ‘Quince Tree Sun’ (Victor Erice, 1992, Spain), is a good example of a film transcending both documentary and fiction.

^x Krzysztof Kieslowski is another filmmaker whose work one could call ‘transcendental’. He has been rather circumspect about why exactly he gave up documentary making after 20 years to concentrate on fiction. However, his fiction films clearly have a strong symbiotic relationship with his earlier documentary approaches.

^{xi} In fact, Koestler’s ‘The Ghost in the Machine’ (Koestler 1967) is all about how the lack of understanding of how powerful our self-assertive emotions are is a serious problem for mankind.

^{xii} The distinction between emotions and feelings is one that I am making for the sake of this exposition and not one generally made within physiology, where all these responses tend to be referred to as emotions.

^{xiii} The release of adrenaline, which is connected to the sympathetic nervous system.

^{xiv} See ‘The Act of Creation’, (Koestler 1969: 10-14).

^{xv} The release of acetylcholine, which is connected to the parasympathetic nervous system.

^{xvi} This may, for example, include meditation. Also, sleep, the ultimate relaxation physiologically, is the antithesis of self-protective alertness, as it is a state in which the individual is at his most vulnerable.

^{xvii} There is, perhaps, another discussion to be had about semiotics and its relationship to the process of engaging the viewer, but this must be left for another time and place.

^{xviii} ‘The universe is made of stories, not atoms’. (Rukeyser, M. quoted in Feldman and Kornfield 1991: i)

^{xix} I include in the Anglo-Saxon cinema that of the US and other cultures adopting the story-telling modes of these English speaking cultures.

^{xx} Part of his ‘Shanghai Vice’ series. (Phil Agland, Channel Four, 1999, UK).

^{xxi} See the work and writings of Cezanne, Kandinsky, Mozart, Karl Jenkins, Bill Viola to name but a few.

^{xxii} Perhaps it is important to point out at this stage that I am not suggesting that psychological realism and transcendental realism are separate entities that do not work and interact with each other. On the contrary, a number of films will have elements of both. I am discussing these elements in terms of relative balance, emphasis and tendencies.

^{xxiii} For more extreme examples, the reader may want to see *Empire* (Andy Warhol, 1967, US) or, more recently, Bill Viola’s work, which often has its roots in factual research. An example of his work, and his discussion of some of his themes, can be seen at www.billviola.com or www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/webcasts/bill_viola/default.jsp.

^{xxiv} ‘Tokyo Story’ (Yasujiro Ozu, 1953, Japan) being a supreme example.

^{xxv} See Paul Schrader’s discussion of this in ‘Transcendental Style in Film’ (Schrader 1972).

^{xxvi} Was it not Andre Gide who said, ‘art is a collaboration between God and the artist and the more God has to do with it, the better’?

^{xxvii} Such as the fiction films, ‘Brannigan’s March’ (Erik Knudsen, 2004, UK) and ‘Sea of Madness’ (Erik Knudsen, 2006, UK), or the documentaries, ‘Bed of Flowers’ (Erik Knudsen, 2001, UK) and ‘Heart of Gold’ (Erik Knudsen, 2006, UK).