

Docufiction in the Digital Age

Tay Huizhen

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SIGNED STATEMENT

This Honours Thesis represents my own work and due acknowledgement is given whenever information is derived from other sources. No part of this Honours Thesis has been or is being concurrently submitted for any other qualification at any other university.

Signed

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ABSTRACT

One of digital technology's key innovations for film is a capacity to heighten realism onscreen. At stake is an increasing destabilisation of the properties of what qualifies the "real" and the "unreal" on film that rages at the heart of documentary studies. Yet, studies in docufiction and docudrama conventionally emphasise an analysis of narrative tropes in classifying films which straddle the inscribed modes of fiction and non-fiction film. The marginal attention paid to cinematography in these genres is further inadequate in addressing the aesthetic complexities of cinematography unique to the digital age. This thesis explores how experimentation with digital filmmaking in Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002) and Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002) introduces an ambiguous cinematographic realism in the films. In particular, the directors' experimentation with "real-time" filming and the long take in specific, formal set-ups develop a cinematographic ambiguity which in the docufiction of *Ten*, generates uncertainty over the ontological status of the profilmic, while in *Russian Ark*, ambivalently immerses the spectator in the unfolding re-enactments of the docudrama. Both films present a case for how the employment of digital cinematography is intrinsic to the collapsing boundaries between fiction and non-fiction film, interrogating the persistence of these conventional demarcations in classical film theory, which necessitates refinement in the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

The Ontological Contention of Documentary Films

“The hopeless dream of being. Not seeming, but being.”
“The Doctor” in Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966)

In *The World Viewed*, philosopher Stanley Cavell reflects on the nature of filmic illusion, likening the experience of the moving image to “*a succession of automatic world projections*” (72). For Cavell, the allure of the medium lies in the uncanny representation of reality as a film seamlessly unfolds before the spectator’s eyes. He terms the appearance of reality on film, the “*trompe l’appareil*,” asserting that the medium’s capacity for verisimilitude is what defines it as art, as much as “*trompe l’oeil* is essential to realistic painting” (198-99). It is this characteristic of film to project compellingly real images that has long inspired—and frustrated—the search for what qualifies the tenuous divide between “fiction” and “non-fiction” in film.

Realist films and the documentary genre are often positioned at the forefront of this debate. By making reality a central subject of its diegesis,¹ both genres exemplify the ontological contention of film—that the spectator mistakes the image on the side of the screen for reality itself. However, realism on film is always aesthetically duplicitous, whereby authenticity is as much a technique of storytelling

¹ The diegesis refers to “the world of the film’s story” (Bordwell and Thompson 478).

as it is a mirror of the real.² While the reality projected on realist films is perceived at a putative remove, documentary films intensify the ontological contention of film, as they are conventionally assumed to portray a direct image of the real. Indeed, it is a common belief that the documentary film rests its authority on minimal mediation, while actively invoking spectatorial belief that its diegesis *stands for* reality.

Yet, not all documentaries fit such a mould. The genre is composed of myriad and diverse styles which can be seen in Nichols' six "modes" of documentary films. American documentary theorist Bill Nichols has attempted to afford documentary studies a working vocabulary of spectatorial cues to distinguish fiction from non-fiction film. Assessing documentary films according to the amount and type of cinematographic and narrative tropes employed, he proposes the expository, observational, interactive, reflexive, performative and poetic modes (Nichols, *Introduction* 100). The variety of these modes and the frequent overlaps among the categories reveal "the stubborn refusal of documentary to be properly disciplined" (Juhasz and Lerner 226). More importantly, techniques commonly employed in fiction films recur in Nichols' modes, demonstrating that there have only been conventional codes of filmmaking which have long demarcated fiction and non-fiction film, and which documentary and fiction filmmakers alike consistently defy.

² Throughout this thesis, I refer to "the real" simply as an everyday, metaphysical reality.

In recent decades, there has been an increasing collapse of the boundaries separating fiction and non-fiction film, and “docufiction” has been gaining traction as a genre which encompasses hybrid forms. As an emerging branch of film studies, docufiction’s definitions remain generic. Rhodes and Springer call it “the creative merging and synthesis of documentary and fictional narrative cinema,” ranging the gamut from mockumentaries to docudrama³ (4). It is no coincidence that the genre’s momentum has developed alongside an expanding cinematographic vocabulary, brought about by technological innovations and the expansion of new media in the late twentieth century (Rhodes and Springer 3). Indeed, the advent of digital filmmaking carries with it the potential for codes dividing fiction and non-fiction film to be increasingly defied through cinematography. Yet, docufiction theorists persist in emphasising narrative in analyses of the genre’s hybrid forms; marginally and superficially attributing the “documentary” quality of a docufiction to the mode of digital “real-time” filming and the use of the hand-held digital camera as facilitating a heightened sense of realism.

In this thesis, I will further explore the impact of digital cinematography on the docufiction genre. In particular, I shall demonstrate how Kiarostami and Sokurov respectively experiments with digital “real-time” filming and the long take in *Ten* (2002) and *Russian Ark* (2002) to develop an ambiguous, double-edged

³ A docudrama may be defined as a “dramatised film...which is based on a semi-fictional interpretation of real events” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

cinematographic realism, which heightens a sense of transparency and immersion in the profilmic⁴ but which also returns a sense of mediation. In the next section of the introduction, I provide an overview of both films while articulating how they defy the simple classifications of docufiction or docudrama, referring to Nichols' proposed documentary modes to elaborate on the non-fiction aspects of the films, and a genealogy of films or film movements relevant to the categories discussed.

⁴ The profilmic is a term coined by French philosopher Étienne Souriau as the event which unfolds in front of the camera.

Overview of the Films

“We don’t characteristically go to films about which we must guess whether they are fiction or non-fiction.” (Carroll 237)

The difficulties of classifying Abbas Kiarostami’s *Ten* and Alexander Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* are rife. *Ten* is composed of both fiction and non-fiction elements, ostensibly a “docufiction,” but under the façade of an observational documentary. *Russian Ark* on the other hand, contains a mix of historical material and fictive re-enactments as part of a docudrama which *appears* to unfold “live.” Both films straddle fiction and non-fiction genres, yet their experimentation with digital cinematography particularly frustrates a definition of the films as solely “docufiction” or “docudrama.”

The entirety of the film *Ten* takes place within the interior of a car, where two dashboard-mounted digital cameras statically capture a fixed-angled, medium close-up shot of the driver, an Iranian woman (played by Mania Akbari), and separately, the various passengers she picks up. The “diegesis” of *Ten* features, simply, the conversations which Akbari shares with her passengers, including her son Amin. These conversations are divided into ten vignettes, where a single number of a Countdown Leader graphically marks the transition between each vignette, such that

the first vignette is preceded by a countdown to “10,” the second vignette by a countdown to “9” and so forth.⁵

In Kiarostami’s film, there is little semblance of a clearly constructed narrative. The opening scene alone involving an extended argument between Akbari and Amin, which has little or no relation to the next scene involving Akbari’s conversation with her sister, exemplifies the director’s arbitrary “non-narrative” (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 21) that subverts the artificial linear causality intrinsic to Classical Hollywood Cinema. In fact, “so persuasive is the illusion of reality [in *Ten*] that often viewers erroneously assume...that they are watching a documentary” (Armstrong et al. 277).

If one were to read *Ten* as a documentary, the film most resembles what Nichols calls an “observational documentary.” The film movement which best exemplifies Nichols’ category is Direct Cinema of the 1960s. Embracing a strictly-observational aesthetic, Direct Cinema is often characterised as a movement that aspired towards objective filmmaking (Saunders 255). Kiarostami’s aesthetic in *Ten* is closely aligned to that of Direct Cinema’s. By not intruding into the profilmic and refraining from the use of voice-over commentaries, the director’s approach recalls the non-interventionism of Direct Cinema artists “who shun self-reflexivity and

⁵ For the purposes of discussion, I will refer to the vignettes by the countdown number which precedes it. For example, the first vignette will be referred to as vignette “10.”

obvious pro-activity in their own films, preferring instead to remain off camera” (Bruzzi 193). Yet, Kiarostami goes beyond Direct Cinema by emphasising that the events in *Ten* are undoctored. He does so by embracing a thoroughly minimalist aesthetic, freeing the film of “cinematographic narrative tropes” (Warren 273) or prefilmic elements such as montage, shifts in range and type of camera focus, dissolves, et cetera—all of which hint that the profilmic has been overtly “re-presented” (Bazin 1: 14).

While the film appears to be the result of a mechanical and empirical recording, this is complicated by Kiarostami’s use of both actors and non-actors who feature in a mix of rehearsed and unrehearsed scenes. The result is a film that is part fiction, veiled as an observational documentary, “half-masquerading as truth” (Kiarostami, 10 on *Ten*). By creating both curiosity and uncertainty in audiences about what is happening on screen (Mulvey 24), Kiarostami’s aesthetic renders ambiguous the ontological status of the profilmic.

On the surface, the elaborate *mise-en-scène* in Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* strikes it as being stylistically at odds with the bare interior of Akbari’s car in *Ten*. As a historical docudrama set within The State Hermitage Museum, the ornate period costumes, props and sets visually pronounce the film’s fictive nature. In the film, a continuous, travelling shot “follows” a disembodied voice-over narrator and a French

Marquis as they wander through the museum and comment on its history and artworks. Within the space of the museum, they encounter the ghosts of Russian royalty, including the Tsar and Catherine the Great.

The Marquis himself is presented as a ghost in the film, as he is based on a real, historical character, the Marquis de Custine, who penned the famous travelogue, *Letters from Russia* during his first visit to Russia in 1839 (Kujundzic). Therefore, the film is partly based on the Marquis's memoirs as a foreigner. As a stranger to Russian culture, he addresses the voice-over narrator as his "Russian cicerone," expecting the latter to guide him through the space of the museum, as much as he visually "guides" the spectator on the tour with his profilmic presence. Yet it is also the anachronistic voice-over narrator's first "visit" to the museum, as Sokurov presents him as a twenty-first century figure, equally dazzled by the re-enactments.

In Sokurov's film, the re-created past appears to unfold "live" through an extreme long take which spans the entire length of the film. Such a method is seemingly incongruent with the retrospective nature of historical docudramas like Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) or Steven Spielberg's *Schindlers' List* (1993).⁶ Shot with a High-Definition camera mounted on a Steadicam rig,

⁶ Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) recalls a 1905 uprising against Russia's Tsar Nicholas II, while Steven Spielberg's *Schindlers' List* (1993) traces the memoirs of a real-life character, Oskar Schindler as he attempts to rescue Polish-Jewish refugees from persecution during the Holocaust.

Sokurov's single long take-film is made possible by digital technology, which allows the entire ninety-six minute take to be captured on a separate hard disk and later converted to and projected as 35mm film. Save for a digitally-constructed insert of an artificial Baltic sea at the film's coda, the entire film is composed of "live-action"⁷ footage of events within the space of the museum. In place of cinematographic cuts, Sokurov condenses three hundred years of Russian history within the ninety-six minute tour of the museum by relying on the *mise-en-scène* of the museum's interior architecture; its various doors, columns and walls to mark a change of scene and symbolise a transition to a different historical period in the narrative. The result is a dream-like composition of hybrid time-spaces where "live" re-enactments of varying duration from different time periods unfold within the singular time-space of the long take. Indeed, Sokurov is often cited as a part of a group of "[s]urreal documentarists (or documentary [s]urrealists)" (Harper and Stone 101) for his characteristically oneiric documentaries and we shall explore how the digital long take particularly shapes and extends his surrealist vision in *Russian Ark*.

While the fictive re-enactments of *Russian Ark* appear real, its non-fictive aspects are presented as unreal through a defamiliarising narrative. The only guides who are the omniscient narrator and the Marquis provide token, subjective and conflicting commentaries on the artworks and Russian history. As a result, the

⁷ The term "live-action" characterises films which are shot with real actors and which do not involve the use of animation.

narrative bifurcates, conceals as much as reveals of the State Hermitage, offering anything but the lucidity of the “expositional documentary” which Nichols calls a “discourse of sobriety” (*Representing* 4). The narrative in *Russian Ark* is more characteristic of the “reflexive documentary” which “calls the very act of representation into question” (Nichols, *Introduction* 60). The cumulative result of a defamiliarising narrative and the “live” long take is a distinctively surreal atmosphere, rendering the film part poetic docudrama and part reflexive documentary.

In both *Ten* and *Russian Ark*, an ambiguous cinematographic realism is not only intrinsic in shaping how the films may be perceived as hybrid fiction and non-fiction forms, but characterises the films as something other than a generic “docufiction” or “docudrama.” In Chapters One and Two, I elaborate on this ambiguous cinematographic realism in Kiarostami’s and Sokurov’s films, focusing on how the directors create an experience of time and space that ostensibly heightens a sense of realism in the films. Chapter One begins this analysis with a focus on Kiarostami’s mode of “real-time” filming and Sokurov’s use of the long take. I will refer to Henri Bergson’s theory of time, which he terms “Duration” or *Durée*, to illustrate an appearance of temporal continuity in each of the films. This proceeds with a discussion of space in the films in Chapter Two, where I analyse how Kiarostami frames the digital camera in the car and how Sokurov manipulates the

Steadicam and the digital long take to afford the spectator ostensibly privileged “witness positions” in the respective films. In Chapter Three, I demonstrate how the ambiguous cinematographic realism interweaves and intersects with a narrative ambiguity in both films, appositely compounding the disorientation intrinsic to Sokurov’s surrealist aesthetic in *Russian Ark*, but insidiously developing ethical complications in *Ten*. Finally, I conclude with the potential lessons both films afford the spectator in reading docufiction in the digital age.

CHAPTER ONE: THE ILLUSION OF REAL TIME

1.1 Bergsonian *Durée* and the “Real-Time” Film

It is often said that what distinguishes film from other forms of art is its unique temporal dimension. As it channels a sensation of an event’s unfolding, time is the element which most characterises filmic illusion and is inextricable to discussions of cinematographic realism. In his seminal text, *What is Cinema?*, film theorist André Bazin proposes that film possesses a “Mummy Complex”—an unprecedented technological capacity to preserve the profilmic event and defend it from being lost to the ravages of time (1: 9). For Bazin, film has the effect of presenting “the image of things [as]...the image of their duration, change mummified as it were” (1: 9). As an advocate of realism, Bazin valorises the retentive, archival properties of film for preserving an event’s indexical trace of the real. Sobchak, on the other hand, emphasises a difference between the stillness of the subject in a photographic record and the protention of “unfolding reality” as a film is projected:

Although dependent upon the photographic, the cinematic has something more to do with life, with the accumulation—not the loss—of experience...Cinematic technology *animates* the photographic and reconstitutes its visibility and verisimilitude in a difference not of degree but of kind. The *moving picture* is a visible representation not of activity finished or past, but of activity coming-into-being. (146)

Sobchak's idea of an image or images *becoming*, in particular, gestures at the ongoing movement of "real time." This idea of unfolding time has been defined by Henri Bergson as *Durée*, or "lived time"—an irreversible, continuous flow of "consciousness." For Bergson, the fluid heterogeneity of *Durée* is antithetical to the semiotically-sequentialised "cinematographical mechanism of thought" (157), where time is perceived as a succession of homogenous units.

With improved "real-time capabilities" (Rombes 23), digital filmmaking, which allows for increasingly long takes, approaches the frontier where the continuous flow of *Durée* awaits capture. In a "real-time" film, the length of the event is seemingly isochronal to the length of the film, where the unfolding of the film is also an illusion of the event's unfolding. Indeed, "real-time" is technically an illusion because the representation of any event irrevocably involves mediation. In *Echographies of Television*, Derrida and Stiegler expose the phenomenological and epistemological fallacy of "real-time," describing how there can only ever be a "real-time effect" (130). Both critics argue that even in degrees so small as to become undetectable, prefilmic elements will always be registered as *part of* the event, because "[w]hatever the apparent immediacy of the transmission or broadcast, it negotiates with choices, with framing, with selectivity" (Derrida and Stiegler 40). Thus, the very act of recording is impure because prefilmic choices indelibly add to or subtract from the event.

With the admission that there can only be a “real-time effect,” “real-time” filming nonetheless shifts the tense of the referent (Elsaesser 208-09) as it heightens the immediacy with which the projected events unfold onscreen. As “[r]eality seen and heard as it happens is always in the present tense” (Pasolini 3), the “real-time” film channels an immediacy of experience as it stages the sensation of time passing (Wahlberg 33). In the “real-time” film, the aura of the medium as “change mummified” or a record of things *past* is diminished. Instead, the impression of temporal immediacy alone presents the onscreen event as an instantaneous trace of the real. So compelling is the digital “real-time effect” that it has, in recent decades, found its way into several mainstream horror films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *REC* (2007). In these films, the directors suppress the artifice of the diegesis by foregrounding the archival fidelity of raw footage on digital video and its indexical ties to the real. They also tap into the immediacy provided by the digital “real-time effect” to heighten the reality of the diegesis. The result is, discounting for the presentation of an overtly artificial profilmic, a closing gap between representation and reality.

1.2 The “Pure Record” in *Ten*

In *Ten*, Kiarostami harnesses the “real-time effect” of shooting with a digital camera to present the film as a “pure record,” or an automatic and mechanical recording of an event. He does so by eschewing montage within each of the film’s ten vignettes and the “real-time effect” is pronounced in moments of “dead time” (*temps mort*). Nichols describes how “dead time” is characteristic of observational documentaries and unfolds when “nothing of narrative significance occurs but where the rhythms of everyday life settle in and establish themselves” (*Representing* 40). When Akbari pulls over to run brief errands in vignette “6,” there is no cut for a temporal ellipsis. Rather, the shot remains on her female passenger whom the spectator is made to wait with. During this time, the spectator is led to observe the passenger’s gaze which follows, presumably, the figure of Akbari off-camera. What remains of the sequence is an extended moment of *inaction*, where there is little movement in the frame save for the small heavings of the passenger’s chest as she breathes and looks out the car window. Without the intrusions of montage, the passing of time itself becomes a subject of the profilmic. Thus, these moments of “dead time” project an illusion of an unbroken flow of time where real time has not been compressed to privilege the narrative, pronouncing the empirical fidelity of the “pure record” and “the impression of documentary authenticity” (Andrews 48). Shooting extensive footage inexpensively on the digital camera (Willis 23),

Kiarostami allows for an excess of “dead time” within each vignette, downplaying notions of *Ten* as an overtly constructed—and doctored—profilmic.

However, the episodic nature of the vignettes alone reminds the spectator of the director’s mediation. On the surface, the countdown leader which precedes each vignette appears to function as mere “chapter divides.” This is because the graphical “cuts” the leader enacts are discreet and unobtrusive, as it only counts down to a single number each time. Yet, no matter how brief they are, the cuts are a reminder that the event’s time has transpired and post-production edits have been made. The cuts even alert the spectator to the possibility that the vignettes have been re-arranged or re-ordered. Indeed, without a video timestamp that denotes the time of the event’s filming, nor context provided by a voice-over narrator, time does not seem to factor in the space of the car, where Akbari’s encounter with one passenger in a vignette could have been shot *after* the following vignette depicting her encounter with another. As “manipulations at the level of sequential reconstruction break any possibility of durational veracity” (Le Grice 35), then the leader’s intrusion frustrates the illusion of temporal continuity which is provided by moments of “dead time” within each vignette. Thus, the leader alerts the spectator to the fact that the profilmic events of each vignette have been cut short or altered for viewing. The result is that *Ten* comes across as an ambiguous “pure record,” for the most part heightening a sense of realism through a “real-time effect,” which gestures that the

events are projected precisely as they have happened. However, the ten cuts of the countdown leader point otherwise, generating doubt over the authenticity of the events which unfold onscreen.

1.3 The Long Take in *Russian Ark*

In *Russian Ark*, Sokurov experiments with the long take to similarly afford his film a “real-time effect,” but of a different degree and kind from the ostensibly automatic, “pure recording” function of the digital camera used in *Ten*. In the pre-digital era, the long take, or a shot of greater duration than average, was the most common method of achieving an illusion of temporal continuity onscreen (Bordwell and Thompson 208). Sokurov’s mentor, filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, favoured the technique as a tool of cinematographic realism for capturing real time within the shot (Johnson and Petrie 194). However, pre-digital long takes were a novel, lasting no more than a few minutes and employed only briefly as part of a scene. Witnessing how the limitations of technology restricted the potentials afforded by the long take, Bazin called for a “cinema of ‘duration’” (2: 76) or a film completely free from editing that would mimic the “lived time” of Bergsonian *Durée*. He opposed the intrusive, rapid and rhythmical jump-cuts of Eisensteinian montage, which transgress the rules of onscreen spatio-temporal continuity. Even Classical Hollywood Cinema’s seemingly non-intrusive “invisible editing” or “continuity editing”

necessitates a manipulation and interruption of real time (Bordwell and Thompson 231). Deleuze elaborates how real time is fragmented in continuity editing, characterising the use of jump-cuts and ellipses in the technique as forming a “movement-image” (2). Within this movement-image, real time is severed and condensed, such that the spectator experiences “an indirect representation or image of time, time in its empirical form” (Frampton 61). Thus, while continuity editing heightens cinematic illusion by privileging the temporal continuity of the narrative, the seamless diegeses created are but “fake realities” (Elsaesser 191). Essentially, montage was deemed inherently inimical to a faithful representation of reality onscreen.

Despite how Sokurov’s extreme long take in *Russian Ark* completely eschews cinematographic montage, one does not question the ontological status of the profilmic *as referent* in the docudrama context of *Russian Ark*, to the same degree as we do in *Ten*. On the surface, Sokurov’s single long take of ninety-six minutes which spans the entire length of the film seemingly lives up to Bazin’s “cinema of duration.” However, where Tarkovsky championed the long take for its powers of realism, Bazin went further in believing that the long take can capture “objectivity in time” (1: 14). Yet this is not the effect in *Russian Ark*, where the nature of the docudrama’s “fiction form” (Rhodes and Springer 4) is from the outset explicit in the film’s highly-stylised *mise-en-scène*, composed of period costumed

actors and elaborate stage sets within the museum. While the many re-enactments in the docudrama develop from the “documentary content” of history, the intent of dramatic reconstruction alone negates the Bazinian ideal of “objectivity in time.”

1.4 Realistic Fantasies and Fantastical Realities

While the long take in *Russian Ark* does not promise objectivity, the technique nonetheless affords the diegetic, reconstructed past a sense of continuity, extending the “mimetic realism” (Margulies 219) of the fantastical, dramatic re-enactments. In 1967, Italian filmmaker Pier-Paolo Pasolini described how the cinematographic cut stands for transpired time, effectively presenting the unfolding profilmic event as a mediated *past* or “historic present” (5). Thus, the omission of montage in *Russian Ark* affords the historical re-enactments a *present continuous* effect. Pasolini’s sentiments are echoed in the present age by experimental filmmaker Malcolm Le Grice, who goes further in describing how the extended, digital long creates a simulation effect by developing a “strict continuity...[that] allows the real TIME/SPACE [*sic*] of projection to become a ‘concrete’ experience in its own right” (157). In *Russian Ark*, what the extreme long take simulates is the temporality of the historic. While “[r]eenactments produce an iterability for that which belongs to the singularity of historical occurrence” (Nichols, “Documentary” 80), the continuity of the long take, which mimics the irreversibility of Bergsonian

Durée, affords the re-enactment a one-off, non-iterable quality, if only over the duration of the film. The result is a seemingly momentous, “live” re-enactment of historical moments—a time-travel film which unfolds in “real-time,” approximating the simulated experience of theatre.

As the re-enactments are in turn framed within the diegesis of an “otherworldly” reality, the simulation of the long take renders not the profilmic *as referent*, but its diegesis of this “otherworldly” reality ontologically ambiguous. Analysing the use of the long take in documentary films, ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall describes how the technique heightens the subjects’ “persistence of physicality” (43), fossilising the spatio-temporal relations among the profilmic’s subjects. Such an effect becomes uncanny in *Russian Ark*, where the characters of the re-enactments are presented, on the level of the narrative, as “ghosts.” In one of the opening scenes, the camera follows a pair of eighteenth century lovers as they enter the foyer of the museum. As they disappear from view, the Marquis notes how they have “gone to the underworld,” suggesting they are ghosts. Likewise, the Marquis himself is presented as a ghost who strolls through the museum like a Baudelairean *flâneur*, noticed only by a few other “ghosts” of the re-enactments. He revels in his incognito jaunt, boasting that the characters of the re-enactments in the museum “can’t see” him. However, his comments become ironic in light of the long take which starkly emphasises his profilmic presence and the spatio-temporal

relations between him and the other ghosts, who are all cinematographically presented as oxymoronic *corporeal* specters. If film “mummifies change,” then the “live” long take executes an elaborate cinematic séance, “resurrecting” the ghostly Marquis and historical characters of the diegesis as the living dead in *Russian Ark*.

However, the cinematographic realism afforded by the extreme long take in *Russian Ark* is aesthetically ambiguous. While the technique affords the re-enactments a sense of immediacy, it simultaneously renders the events fantastic and strange. The long take alone emphasises the artificial, constructed nature of the film, which arises out of the spectator’s limits of perceiving the technique’s extreme duration. Frampton notes how “film *amplifies* perceptual experience, offers ‘more’ as well as ‘less’ in relation to direct lived-body engagement with phenomena...[and] the phenomenology of film is at once both divorced from and contingent on non-filmic, metaphysical reality” (47). While this temporal disjunction often goes undetected in pre-digital long takes, which were limited in duration and only sporadically employed within a film, it becomes stark within the ninety-six minutes, digital long take in *Russian Ark*. Despite how the long take opposes the montage-created “cinematographic reality of time,” it is not wholly “un-cinematographic” as it essentially conveys the camera’s *own* aesthetics of vision which is divorced from the optical capacities of the human eye. Just as there is no unblinking eye, “long takes are techniques we can never truly experience as long takes” (Rombes 40). Thus,

while the extreme long take seemingly immerses the spectator in unfolding, “lived” time, it may only be paradoxically experienced as an artificial and distant temporal reality. Without the respite of montage, the onscreen temporal continuity created by the long take develops a hypnotic and soporific atmosphere, which mimics the continuous dream of the surreal (Breton 66).

In the “pure record” of *Ten*, a heightened “real-time effect” which is stark in moments of “dead time,” intensifies a truth claim for the film by affording an impression of durational veracity. Yet, the unobtrusive countdown leader indelibly reminds the spectator of the film’s constructed nature. The result is an ambiguous cinematographic realism that generates doubt over the authenticity of the profilmic. In *Russian Ark*, Sokurov’s employment of an aesthetically ambiguous, extreme digital long take affects a reading of the film as a simple docudrama. On one hand, the “real-time effect” of the long take lends the impression that the historical reenactments are unfolding “live,” which is incongruent within the diegetic frame of an “otherworldly” reality where it resides. On the other hand, the unnatural long take also defamiliarises the profilmic, which befits a portrayal of an oneiric “otherworldly” reality within the diegesis. The resulting effect is an ontologically ambiguous “otherworldly” reality within the constructed, fictional diegesis of *Russian Ark*. In the next chapter, we see how this ambiguous cinematographic realism in both films further manifests in the *mise-en-scène*, creating an illusion that

the events have been transparently represented, ostensibly intensifying the reality of the profilmic.

CHAPTER TWO: THE UNCHARTED *MISE-EN-SCÈNE*

“We are left with a window onto the world where once there was a presence. The window stands in for that presence, representing it as a presence in absentia.”
(Nichols, *Representing* 90)

In *Ten*, the nature of the film as a “pure record,” established by the temporal immediacy of the digital “real-time effect,” is compounded by its formal set-up in the space of a car. Filming from within the intimate setting, Kiarostami lends the impression of spectatorial proximity to the profilmic. Similarly in *Russian Ark*, Sokurov creates the impression of a diminished fourth wall by manipulating the movements of the Steadicam, pronounced by the long take, to immerse the spectator as “participant” in the profilmic. The result in both films is a spatial transcendence whereby the spectator gains an unprecedented “witness position” to the unfolding events in what were previously “uncharted *mise-en-scènes*.” In these spaces, the sensation that the event has been transparently represented is ironically undercut as the spectator encounters the “visibly invisible” (Perez 293) camera and his own act of viewing.

2.1 Dashboard Confessionals

In *Ten*, Kiarostami works with not only the *mise-en-scène* of everyday life, but intimate spaces of private life. To film the conversations between Akbari the driver and her passengers, the director statically positions two unobtrusive digital cameras in Akbari's car, such that the equipment forms a pair of incognito camera-eyes within the automobile. The use of film equipment that is "lightweight, loyal and discreet" (Kiarostami, *10 on Ten*), which frees the director from being conceptually determined by the physical constraints of location shooting, is a dream once shared by filmmakers of the French New Wave:

In 1976, the French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard began dreaming of a 35mm camera that would be small enough to fit into the glove compartment of a car...A camera, in other words, that he could cart along and use to shoot images spontaneously, as he came across them, rather than having bulky equipment determine the time and place of every filmed image. (Willis 19)

Within the space of the car, the spectator is afforded an unprecedented "witness position" to the profilmic events. The "two-point *mise-en-scène*" (Martin) which offers individual medium close-up shots of each passenger and the driver but never an establishing shot, transforms the car into a veritable confession-box. As a private space within a public realm, the mobile *mise-en-scène* of the car seems to even encourage the subjects' testimonies: "[T]he characters...only rarely turn to face the person beside them...as if their proximity to the outside gives them the space to

more easily reveal themselves, freed of the direct gaze of their fellow passenger” (Balaisis 73). The result is a contained, triangulated frame of intimacy shared between driver, passenger and spectator. In the cloistered space, Akbari plays “priest” as she discusses with a passenger the importance of finding peace through religion, counsels another whose husband has just left her and in the penultimate vignette, comforts a friend who removes her veil to reveal her shorn head.

On the surface, the manner by which Kiarostami sets up the static dashboard cameras in *Ten* erases any hint of mediation. While the mobility which Godard treasured is a feature that the portable hand-held digital camera affords (Rombes 40), the two digital cameras in *Ten* are rigidly fixed to the dashboard of the car. The resultant static framing starkly differs from the manner in which the apparatus “announces” the filmmaker’s presence in *Cinéma Vérité*:

[The] frame is rarely stable or fixed,...[t]he camera is never completely still...[and] the incessant movement of the camera indicates that the camera is hand-held, that it is an extension of the filmmaker’s bodily presence. Second, in their characteristic hesitations, indecisions, incessant revisions of focus and framing, these movements are also indicators that this is not a scripted film, that the filmmaker is only a human being, not an omniscient author. (Warren 94-95)

By shooting with “motionless” dashboard digital cameras in *Ten*, Kiarostami manifestly disclaims a human presence through the static, stable framing. Likewise, the cameras’ fixed nature minimises re-positions of a view of the profilmic,

downplaying notions that the footage has been indelibly authored through the selective framings of the filmmaker or a cameraman. By presenting the film as a product of an objective mechanical recording, Kiarostami heightens a truth claim for *Ten*.

In its cinematographic gestures of minimal mediation, *Ten* goes beyond the most strictly-observational documentaries in thematising objectivity. In Direct Cinema films, the spectator is indelibly reminded of the subjective author behind the apparatus because of the directors' reliance on the hand-held 16mm camera and the use of unnatural camera focuses.⁸ If “[d]ocumentary convention upholds the expectation of presence, of an ethic of witnessing, of a situated view, and yet excises the bodily evidence of presence” (Nichols, *Representing* 90), then the heightened intimacy to the setting in *Ten* and Kiarostami's presentation of the film as a “pure record,” presents itself strongly as a documentary film. But where Direct Cinema leaves traces of mediation, the statically-framed cameras in *Ten* do not afford the spectator the privilege of such cues. Thus, *Ten* comes across as an observational documentary that harnesses a stronger truth claim than that of Direct Cinema films.

The unobtrusive set-up of the digital cameras in *Ten* further downplays suspicions that the profilmic itself is fabricated. Central to questions of authenticity

⁸ In *Primary* (1960), a Direct Cinema film about the 1960 Wisconsin Primary election between John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey, there are numerous extreme and unstable close-ups to Kennedy's face and profile in the many scenes where the camera follows him on his presidential campaign.

is an impossibility of representing “being” on film, where the slightest detection of a camera’s presence indelibly inflects the behaviour of its subjects. Yet, the camera will always be detected unless it is unseen. The only recourse entails “either a dream of invisibility, or worse, the practice of the surveillance camera” (Warren 150). In *Ten*, Kiarostami dangerously leans toward the latter as he perfects a “cinema of transparency” (Margulies 34). By using compact digital cameras that is less conspicuous than the 16mm cameras traditionally used in Direct Cinema films, Kiarostami provides a heightened sense of security for the subjects as they converse within the space of the car. The inconspicuous apparatus even appears to be hidden from the characters who never turn to face the camera directly. Coupled with the aforementioned absence of a director’s critical, judgmental eye, the result is a formal set-up which fosters “the right mood for dialogue” (Kiarostami, *10 on Ten*) and catches life unawares. The spectator is thus led to assume that the characters are uninhibited and their testimonies the result of a candid, transparent exchange.

Kiarostami also suppresses the spectator’s awareness of the apparatus through his choice of shots. Dispensing with the point-of-view shot, Kiarostami frees the audience from the singular perspective of any character. Yet, the camera’s fixed, medium close-up shots of the characters capture their every expression. Jean Epstein characterises the hypnotic power of the close-up shot by its ability to delicately reveal a character’s subtle inner emotions (317). Borrowing the term *photogénie*

from Louis Delluc, Epstein elaborates that these close-ups occupy only a fleeting moment in a film. In *Ten*, Kiarostami goes further in making the *photogénie* itself an *event*, emphasising the close-up by often showing the character who is *not* speaking. Throughout the entire opening sequence involving a drawn-out argument with Akbari and her son Amin, we are not shown a shot of the driver, but only that of Amin. As Amin stares blankly ahead or is partially distracted by sights outside the car, he winces in irritation, increasingly annoyed by his mother's words. The quick movements of his eyes become visual cues that he is anticipating the voice of his off-screen mother, what composer Michel Chion calls the *acousmêtre* (466), and preparing to launch his retort. Observing Amin, the spectator is effectively bound to a digitally-stark, "everyday" *photogénie* within and throughout the narrative, persistently captured by the dashboard camera. As Kiarostami guides the spectator to *linger* on the expressions of the non-speaking character, the result is a "theatrical mode of investigative humanism" (Rombes 28) or an odd fixation with the moving image.

Paradoxically, the spatial transcendence created by shooting from within the private space of the car is undercut by a sense of entrapment and claustrophobia, which highlights the camera's illegitimate presence. As Kiarostami eschews the fluid, versatile framing afforded by the portable digital camera and instead, rigidly fixes the cameras to the dashboard in *Ten*, the spectator is shackled as voyeur in the

confines of the car, with no brief emancipation from the static, medium close-ups. The spectator is further reminded of the spatial intimacy of the vehicle in seemingly insignificant moments of the film, as when Akbari's sister accidentally breaks her nail on the car's window, thinking it was not wound up. Likewise, in the opening scene where Amin and Akbari are in the heat of an argument, Amin tells Akbari not to "shout in the street" even though both mother and son remain in the vehicle. Amin's comment points to how the noise generated by their fracas is amplified in the intimate setting of the car, which in turn highlights the spectator's sustained proximity to the event. The spectator's position as voyeur is further pronounced in moments of "dead time." When Akbari stops her car to run an errand in vignette "9," her sister is shown seated, impatiently fanning herself and picking at her skin while awaiting Akbari's return. Throughout the extended shot which remains on Akbari's sister, the spectator develops a discomfiting awareness of the camera's intrusion into the character's private moment and space. The ostensibly objective "pure record" of *Ten* is ironically captured by "a camera gaze at once completely passive and committed, which returns the gaze of the viewer in a highly disturbing way" (Wahlberg 92). The resultant disconcerting sense of voyeurism arising from intimacy to the *mise-en-scène* heightens an awareness of the apparatus and the act of film-viewing as such.

Within the intimate space of the car, the cinematography in *Ten* privileges an impression that the events are authentic, as Kiarostami creates an illusion of transparency that goes beyond the most strictly observational documentaries, such as those of Direct Cinema. Over the course of the film, the heightened cinematographic realism of the “pure record” reveals its double-edged nature as the spectator gradually becomes aware of his voyeuristic gaze, obliquely calling to attention the camera’s “hidden” presence in the car. In *Russian Ark* however, Sokurov first foregrounds the camera’s presence cinematographically and through the narrative in order to simulate a placement of the spectator in the diegesis.

2.2 Touring the Museum: The Invisible Avatar

There is a scene in Dziga Vertov’s *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929) where a camera, on its tripod-“legs,” “walks” onto a stage in front of a seated, human audience. The apparatus, so often relegated to an amorphous space behind the screen, literally takes centrestage as a profilmic, “physical” subject. Playing on the “morphological similarities between camera and human being” (Turvey 49), Vertov’s man-machine metaphor highlights how spectatorship is predicated on a “synthesis” between human vision and the camera’s. In *Russian Ark*, Sokurov takes these ideas of a “shared gaze” and anthropomorphic camera further by allegorically and cinematographically developing a “living camera” in the film. The result is a

radically diminished fourth wall as the spectator is no longer simply voyeur but participant in the unfolding events through the “invisible avatar” of the ghostly voice-over narrator.

While the constructed narrative of the docudrama develops “the fantasy of knowing, of having ‘been there’” (Sturken 71), Sokurov cinematographically extends the sensation of immersion by placing the spectator as witness in the *time-space* of the museum tour and the re-enactments. He does so by first establishing the disembodied voice-over narrator as an allegorical figure for the camera. Like the nature of the filmic apparatus, the voice-over narrator shares an invisible *presence* in the *mise-en-scène* as Sokurov characterises him as a ghost in the diegesis: “I only remember there was some accident...I just can’t remember what happened to me.” As the voice-over narrator rhetorically asks, “Can it be that I’m invisible? Or have I simply gone unnoticed,” he foregrounds the voyeuristic nature of the apparatus which is characterised by the act of seeing but not being seen.⁹ Indeed, the conjunction “or” in his second question emphasises how the camera’s *presence* is often taken for granted as an absence. This invisible “presence” of the disembodied voice-over narrator is further articulated as the Marquis looks directly at the camera when he converses with the voice-over narrator. In a scene where the Marquis stares at the camera, the voice-over narrator even acknowledges himself as object of the

⁹ Psychoanalytical film theorists attribute filmic illusion to the “disavowal” of the apparatus’s presence on the scene, even as it captures the profilmic event. Thus, the camera is said to possess an inherently voyeuristic “gaze” (Metz 63).

Marquis's gaze, saying, "Why do you look at me like that?" The result is that every time the Marquis addresses the voice-over narrator or camera, he effectively addresses the spectator who is situated as being "a part of" the diegesis through the voice-over narrator's invisible "presence" as ghost. Consequentially, the Marquis's act of "breaking the fourth wall" does not result in a direct "frame-breaking" event, where the spectator is jolted out of the cinematic illusion. Rather, his manner of addressing the camera extends the diegesis to the amorphous space beyond the profilmic to where the spectator resides. As Sokurov creates an impression of a "shared gaze" with the voice-over narrator, he privileges the spectator with an ostensibly direct view of the events, not from the vantage of a simple voyeur, but of a character in the diegesis itself.

Beyond this shared gaze, the ghostly voice-over narrator is further established as actual "invisible avatar" for the spectator, as the dynamic, mobile framing of the Steadicam cinematographically establishes a morphological connection between the voice-over narrator's "presence" and the camera. As the voice-over narrator or "personified" camera follows the Marquis into a new gallery, the Steadicam's hesitant, slight tilt towards the ceiling seemingly invites the spectator to partake in, and mimic its "awe" at entering the grand space. Likewise, in scenes where the camera moves towards the paintings, tilt shots to the left and right resemble the head motion of a contemplative museum visitor (Wortel 85). Even in scenes where there

is a pause in camera movement, the “[f]lexibility, mobility, responsiveness and visual dynamism” (Geuens 12) of the Steadicam render the framings steady but not lifeless. The continuous, digital long take heightens the spectator’s awareness of the movements of the Steadicam, of which seemingly human-like movements become a prosthetic extension of the voice-over narrator’s presence.

Once Sokurov establishes both a shared gaze and morphological connection with the voice-over narrator, the spectator’s embodiment in the *mise-en-scène* materialises in an interweaving narrative and cinematographic form. In a scene where the camera follows Catherine the Great into the wintry outdoors, the voice-over narrator pleads with the character to not rush, just as the camera makes a quickened movement forwards to catch up with the Russian empress. As the voice-over narrator’s pleas coincide with the labored motions of the camera, the long take intensifies the spectator’s “proprioception”¹⁰ of the ambling, heavy Steadicam. It is important to note that Sokurov goes as far as to gesture that the ghostly voice-over narrator’s presence in the scene is ironically corporeal, as the latter’s “footsteps” manifest as diegetic sound which the Marquis repeats that he “hears.” The resultant sensation is one in which the spectator is continuously *embodied* in the *mise-en-scène*. As the travelling shot of the camera advances through the maze-like, labyrinthian museum space, the spectator likewise “penetrates” through the profilmic

¹⁰ Proprioception is defined as “the perception of the position and movements of the body” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

space. Compounded by the “real-time effect” of the long take, the filmic experience essentially becomes akin to a first-person role-playing video game, or a “live,” simulated tour through the museum. Through an “invisible avatar” who is the ghostly voice-over narrator, the spectator is effectively placed in the reality of the filmic experience, where the sensation is not one of “being-in-the-world” (Merleau-Ponty 94) but of “being-in-the-film-world.”

Yet, spectatorial placement in the diegesis is undercut each time we are reminded of the amorphous characteristics of the ghostly voice-over narrator, and that our immersion in the profilmic is of an ambivalent nature. A prime example is a perception of the aforementioned long take, which generates uncertainty because of its unnatural duration, and reminds us that the persistent gaze is perhaps the undead one of the voice-over narrator’s. Similarly, the few but noticeable internal focalisations by the camera remind the spectator that the shared gaze ultimately belongs to that of the camera’s. Sokurov’s attempts to anchor a shared gaze between the voice-over narrator and the spectator through the cinematography are undercut by the very technique which reveals breaches in this link.

If the camera displays surface human-like aspects, there are also breaches in the morphological relationship between the voice-over narrator and the spectator when the Steadicam displays curious “out-of-body” moments, revealing its inhuman

or machine-like characteristics. Such a breach is stark in a re-enactment scene where the Tsar receives a Persian envoy and the spectator gains an over-head view of the formal ceremony as the Steadicam operator mounts a hidden ramp (Ebert). While the spectator is not privy to the technical manoeuvre, the aporetic hovering of the Steadicam nonetheless conjures an image of “a constantly moving, floating camera” (Turvey 14) that gestures at the voice-over narrator’s disembodied nature. This cinematographic effect is in turn compounded through the narrative, as the Marquis warns the voice-over narrator of mediums amongst the court officials who can sense his ghostly “presence.”

Another case in point occurs in the film’s coda, when the camera turns to face the ballroom crowd descending from a grand staircase, before smoothly and quickly pulling back on a dolly (Menashe 21), as if it were “unfettered from gravity and materiality” (Turvey 15). To further emphasise the artifice of the shot, the crowd then closes-in on both sides of the frame like curtains on a show, resulting in an effect both “mannered and unnatural” (Beumers and Condee 165). These breaches of “extreme manoeuvres...imply that the camera view is no longer tied completely to [the Steadicam operator]” (Johnson 48) and that the kinaesthetic profile which defines the camera’s motility now shifts towards one of an inhuman nature.

In *Russian Ark*, Sokurov intensifies an experience of the re-enactments by placing the spectator in the very action of their unfolding. However, even as the spectator is encouraged to think he is no longer simply a voyeur but a participant, he is continuously reminded of the camera's presence, as Sokurov reflexively and continuously foregrounds the nature of cinematic illusion and the camera's voyeuristic nature in order to effect spectatorial placement in the film. Indeed, Sokurov's method of immersing the spectator in the film is ambivalent. By situating the spectator in the shoes of the voice-over narrator who is, on the level of the narrative, a ghost, the spectator is effectively positioned both "in" and "out" of the film-world. As the movements of the Steadicam become obvious over the duration of the long take, its kinaesthetic profile cinematographically compounds the relationship between the spectator and the voice-over narrator while revealing breaches in this link. The result is a surreal disorientation as the spectator is afforded an immersive experience beyond a conventional docudrama, but in a manner that is strangely ambivalent.

In *Ten*, Kiarostami's formal set-up within the space of the car heightens spectatorial intimacy to the *mise-en-scène*. The spectator is afforded a privileged "witness position" to the unfolding events which appear to be transparently captured by the unobtrusive and static nature of the dashboard cameras. However, the spectator's sustained proximity to the events develops a discomfiting voyeurism

which pronounces the camera's illegitimate presence in the private space. In the final chapter, we will further explore the ethical implications of Kiarostami's double-edged "cinema of transparency." In particular, we learn about the true nature of Akbari's conversations and what they mean under the appearance of a "pure record" in *Ten*. Likewise, in *Russian Ark*, we shall see how Sokurov's ambivalent positioning of the spectator in the film-world through the Steadicam, as well as the ambiguous cinematographic realism of the long take, develop and pronounce a narrative reflexivity in the docudrama that is central to Sokurov's surrealist aesthetic.

CHAPTER THREE: AMBIGUOUS NARRATIVES

*“The cedar tree atop the hill
On whom does it pride itself*

*...
Light the fire and I’ll show you something
Something invisible if you don’t wish to see it
Something which cannot be heard
If you don’t wish to listen to its breath”*

(Kiarostami, *10 on Ten*)

3.1 The “Non-Narrative”

In studies of the Iranian New Wave, from which Kiarostami hails, critics often attempt to trace the movement’s stylistic blurring of fiction and non-fiction elements to its rich Persian culture and storytelling traditions. Hamid Naficy has written widely on this subject, illustrating the complexities of Iranian hermeneutics which is based on the “primacy of hiding the core values (that is, of veiling) and of distrusting manifest meanings (that is, vision)” (136-37). This creation of doubt is similarly central to the art of ambiguity (*īhām*), a common literary device in Persian poetry (Zeydabadi-Nejad 166). It can be said that Kiarostami, who once professed distaste for a “cinema of literary narrative” (*Around Five*), embraces an aesthetic of ambiguity by ostensibly eschewing a clearly-constructed narrative in *Ten*.

On the surface, a “non-narrative” (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 21) in *Ten* frees the film of the artifice of careful suture, compounding the cinematographic appearance of a “pure record.” In the film, the vignettes form a loose diegesis that runs counter to the linear causality of Classical Hollywood Cinema. The only semblance of narrative continuity in the episodic vignettes is when Amin, in vignette “3,” asks Akbari what his aunt said about him when Akbari earlier picked up her sister in vignette “9.” It seems that the spectator is even encouraged to view each vignette as individual units, despite how the countdown leader functions as ostensible “chapter divides.” This is apparent with Kiarostami’s insertion of an extradiegetic sound of a boxing ring bell, that monotonously marks the start of every vignette and functions as a mechanical, aural cue for the spectator to view the vignettes as homogenous—but de-linked—scenes. With neither climax nor denouement, the sequences in *Ten* are presented arbitrarily, as products of an empirical and mechanical “pure record.”

Kiarostami further shuns the hegemony of narrative by embracing instead the contingency of an “open screenplay” (Kiarostami, *10 on Ten*), which allows for the inclusion of the arbitrary events of everyday life. Throughout the film, Akbari is frequently shown engaging in “side-tracking” conversations with people outside the car. In vignettes “10,” “9” and “6,” she tells other drivers off for obstructing her way,

and in vignette “9,” bargains with a shop-owner to allow her to briefly park outside his shop. These moments heighten a sense of realism:

Bazin’s images for the incidental and the contingent have usually served to exemplify the achievement of a surface realism through the putative inclusion of the marginal, nondramatic element...Siegfried Kracauer...another reputed defender of a realist ontology for cinema, finds similar examples for an inverted relation between those images that further the story and those that can do so precisely because they “retain a degree of independence of the intrigue and thus succeed in summoning a physical existence.” (Margulies 3)

These chance events within the profilmic similarly recalls Direct Cinema’s “contingent naturalism,...dependent upon spontaneity (and those serendipitous accidents that then necessarily occur) than planning” (Bruzzi 101). In *Ten*, however, the frequency by which Kiarostami allows for these “marginal,” fortuitous moments, lends the impression that the film is but a straightforward representation of a day in Akbari’s life. The inclusion of arbitrary events which often halt the conversational flow between Akbari and her passengers and are seemingly divorced from the narrative downplays the semblance of a clearly-constructed narrative.

The authenticity of these contingent events are in turn affirmed by how Kiarostami presents *Ten* as what he himself calls the “non-made film” (Winter), or what Rombes calls an “undirected film” (132). In the film, there is no voice-over narrator to guide or address the spectator, such that neither the arbitrary events nor even the conversations within the car are afforded context. By not intruding into the

profilmic, Kiarostami further creates the impression that he is, like the spectator, a discreet observer to the “purely recorded” events. Such an approach of erasing one’s directorial presence in a film again recalls Direct Cinema’s strictly-observational “fly-on-the-wall” maxim, or what its pioneer Robert Drew calls “reporting without summary and opinion” (Chychota). Any self-referential directive, even that which disclaims a truth claim, is completely omitted in *Ten*, such that the collage of arbitrary events ostensibly speaks for itself.

However, there is more than meets the eye in Kiarostami’s “non-narrative” in *Ten*. The recurring themes within the loose diegesis form a resonant social subtext that conventionally characterises the observational documentary and goes beyond a mere representation of Akbari’s daily life. In the many conversations Akbari has with her son Amin, the topics revolve around patriarchy and divorce, as well as what defines the roles of a wife and mother. Akbari and her female passengers also tend to discuss issues of sexuality and fidelity. These sequences, which are the resultant choices of editing from twenty-three hours of footage (Hayes), collectively highlight the societal tensions of gender inequality in Iran. The effect of Kiarostami’s ambiguous narrative is one which downplays notions of the film’s artifice, yet makes the spectator simultaneously suspect of “*re-present[ation]*” (Bazin 1: 14) as the pattern of similar themes reveal the directorial intent which Kiarostami sought to suppress. This directorial intent is in turn simultaneously associated with the social

function of the observational documentary (Wahlberg 148) that many audiences often assume *Ten* to be.

3.2 The Camera's Surrogate Gaze

As illustrated in Chapters One and Two, the heightened cinematographic realism in *Ten* is ultimately ambiguous, albeit harnessing a stronger truth claim than that of the observational documentaries of Direct Cinema and *Cinéma Vérité*. As the “non-narrative” in *Ten* is further reminiscent of an observational documentary, it is not absolved from the ethical questions which underscore the genre. One of the ethical issues that observational documentarists contend with is the impossibility of objective filmmaking. While Direct Cinema seemingly skirts the complications of directorial intervention, it is impossible to verify the subject's authenticity because the subject may indelibly “perform” an image of himself,¹¹ for the Other (in the case of *Ten*, Akbari's passengers) or for the camera. These categories often overlap, but of these three, Jean Rouch believed most strongly in performances displayed *for* the camera.

As one of the founding fathers of *Cinéma Vérité*, Rouch went on to develop what Nichols calls the “participatory” mode of documentary filmmaking with Edgar

¹¹ Erving Goffman's theory of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) explores the possibility that a subject is constantly and actively engaging in the construction and regulation of his own image.

Morin in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), eschewing the dogma of non-interventionism which Direct Cinema held as sacrosanct. The director reasoned that the presence of the apparatus indelibly provokes the subjects into “revelatory performances that were different from their normal forms of behavior” (Warren 150). In *Ten*, the possibility of the subjects performing for the camera seems small, as in Chapter Two, we learn how Kiarostami’s unobtrusive set-up of the compact apparatus in the car renders it inconspicuous to the point of being “hidden.” However, Kiarostami’s off-screen directorial gaze functions as a surrogate for the camera’s, especially affecting Akbari’s performance, which goes unnoticed under the guise of a “pure record.”

Kiarostami’s approach of minimal off-screen direction seemingly complements the cinematographic authenticity of the “pure record” of *Ten*. In the documentary *10 on Ten* (2004), the director expresses how he only marginally adheres to a rough script, preferring instead to be familiarised with the “true character” of his social actors. Kiarostami elaborates on this practice of “creative distance” in an interview where he “refrained from using the word ‘control,’... [conversely suggesting, in his native tongue, the concept of] *hedayat*,...a term that retains a sense of the free will of the subject, like divine guidance” (Hayes). Indeed, an apparent respect for the subject’s autonomy guided the director’s predilection for the chosen medium: “Kiarostami has made it clear that he wanted to switch to digital

video for an ethical reason: the desire to interfere as little as possible with the people he shoots” (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 39). It seems then, that Kiarostami intended to simply capture and preserve as much of what the digital camera in *Ten* could “purely record.”

However, Kiarostami indelibly mediated Akbari’s performance, and this is contentious as the cinematography misleadingly presents *Ten* as a “pure record.” The director recounted how he would show Akbari the filmed footage and offer her feedback on her “performance”. Such a method is highly reminiscent of Rouch’s “shared anthropology,” which is predicated on a collaborative relationship between filmmaker and his human subjects (Henley 254). For Rouch, part of the aims of “shared anthropology” is to develop a more democratic exchange between filmmaker and subject in order to present a portrait of the subject that was truer to reality (Henley 151). Thus, a point of contention arises in how Kiarostami tried to accomplish the opposite by regulating Akbari’s “theatricality” over the course of these “feedback screenings,” describing his work as “guid[ing] her in order that she manifest her own self more [*sic*]” (Hayes). This oxymoronic “natural performance” (Kiarostami *10 on Ten*) demanded of Akbari comes insidiously close to what Gade and Jerslev calls “performative realism.” In their interdisciplinary analysis of the concepts of “performance” developed by Judith Butler and J. L. Austin, Gade and Jerslev notes how performative realism “masks the overt reflexivity of

performativity itself which clearly distinguishes a gap between persona and messenger” (107). This performative realism is a familiar ethical double-bind in reality television, where characters would “‘play’ reality, or realism, for the camera” (Donato 203-04). Given the digital camera’s unobtrusive nature, Akbari does not perform for the camera in *Ten*, but for Kiarostami’s “invisibly present” directorial gaze that functions as surrogate for the camera’s. Even the director admits to how *hedayat* “altered” Akbari’s “performance” and it shows onscreen (Hayes). At the beginning of *Ten*, Akbari’s character is feisty and headstrong, but towards the end of the film, she is evidently more subdued, allowing her son to win each argument. Thus, the heightened cinematographic realism in *Ten*, which harnesses a stronger truth claim than observational documentaries, dangerously misleads the spectator to assume that Akbari is uninhibited and acting as herself in the film.

3.3 The Ethics of Uncertain Frontiers

Tarkovsky once said that “the more [the director] aspires to a realistic account, the greater his responsibility for what he makes. Sincerity, truthfulness and clean hands are the virtues demanded of him” (184). To pursue the contention of directorial intervention and performative realism is to fall into a never-ending ethical loop, where each attempt by Akbari at role-playing either as herself, or as her “self” envisioned by Kiarostami, projects “synecdochic selves” which can be neither

wholly labelled as artificial nor negated at any one time. Does Akbari try to steer the narrative or prolong the conversation with the non-actors she meets when she senses potential subject matter? Does her “performance” in turn affect her interactions with the non-actors and consequentially determine the “found story”¹² within the film? These questions of transparency and authenticity have long plagued observational documentarists and ethnographic filmmakers, yet are trenchant where truth claims are cinematographically pronounced in the “pure record” of *Ten*.

The impression that *Ten* is a “pure recording” is further contentious in light of how part of the events in the film are in fact rehearsed and staged. While observational documentaries leave traces of its mediation, the heightened sense of transparency in *Ten*, coupled with the seemingly arbitrary arrangement of the vignettes in Kiarostami’s “non-made” gestures, prevent the spectator from discerning what is “authored” and what is not. With the exception of the slightly varying lengths of the individual vignettes, every one of the vignettes is given equal prominence by the “real-time effect” of the shot:

What is already there in all editing becomes massively problematic when it occurs live, in the temporal flow of current events. For this flow has the effect both of occulting more profoundly the artifices of imaging and of staging (by virtue of the impossibility of reversing the flow, in which “pieces of information comes one after another”) and of blurring the

¹² Kracauer derives the idea of a “found story” in documentary films from Paul Rotha, explaining how it lies “in the material of actual physical reality...Being discovered rather than contrived, they are inseparable from films animated by documentary intentions” (Kracauer 245-46).

difference...between reality and fiction—and even of making this difference impossible. (Derrida and Stiegler 151)

By further eschewing montage within each vignette, Kiarostami keeps filmic punctuation to a minimum. The result is that both contingent and rehearsed scenes involving actors and “social actors” (Nichols, *Representing* 29) take place in “real-time” and are presented in a uniform manner alongside each other, as homogenous products of a “pure record.” In vignette “7,” the street prostitute whom Akbari picks up is played by Akbari’s younger sister, specifically casted for the role (Andrews 65). However, the old lady whom Akbari picks up in vignette “8” was unaware of the camera’s presence, merely making use of Akbari’s car for a lift to a mausoleum (Hayes). As these two vignettes are presented alongside each other, under the veil of a “pure record,” the spectator is unable to judge the authenticity of the old lady’s testimony from the prostitute’s scripted one. Despite how Kiarostami has relinquished any truth claims for his films,¹³ the cinematography points otherwise and there are undeniable “moral ambiguities of a style in which the elements are more lifelike than ever before” (Nichols, *Movies* 15). As claims to veracity are pronounced, cinematographically, in a “pure record” and through a “non-narrative” in *Ten*, Kiarostami dangerously stakes the film’s authority on truth.

¹³ Kiarostami has noted how “[e]very film is based on a human architecture which is absolutely different from everyday realities...Even if a film is based on true stories, with real people, the film is still different from that reality” (*10 on Ten*). By openly embracing a method of “lying to [approach] the truth” (Zaatari), Kiarostami has stressed how the profilmic does not have to correspond to reality to be true.

3.4 The Digital Surreal

While the ambiguous narrative in *Ten* plays on the ambiguous cinematographic realism to mask Kiarostami's directorial intentions, the narrative uncertainty in *Russian Ark* that is central to Sokurov's surrealist aesthetic is pronounced by the cinematographic ambiguity of the digital long take and its emphasis of the movements of the Steadicam. In *The Unsilvered Screen*, Harper and Stone charts the evolution of Surrealism on film. As a parting note to the reader, they broach the rapid development of digitalism and "emobilism," expressing how new media brings us closer than ever to a Surrealist ideal (Harper and Stone 150). While the editors focus on the spontaneity of dissemination and the effects of new viewing platforms on spectatorship, they overlook the role that digital cinematography plays in the making of a film itself, in developing a unique representation of "twenty-first-century Surrealism" (Harper and Stone 7) onscreen. In *Russian Ark*, a "digital surreal" manifests in how the ambiguous cinematographic realism of the digital long take bolsters and develops the disorientation provided by a defamiliarising narrative.

In *Russian Ark*, a self-reflexive narrative generates an oxymoronic ambivalent persuasion that defies classification of Sokurov's film as a conventional docudrama. As one of the leading authorities on docudrama studies, Steven Lipkin describes how the genre is built on persuasion:

[T]he overall thrust of docudrama is neither exposition nor logical argument, but persuasion. Docudrama exists to create conviction. Docudrama strives to persuade us to believe that what occurred happen much as we see it on the screen. (9)

However, an uncertain and subjective narrative in Sokurov's film continuously provokes the spectator to suspend belief. As we tour the museum, the artworks are introduced through the Marquis's prejudiced taste. He frequently criticises the Hermitage's collection, accusing Russia for making mere "copies" of the Vatican: "Why borrow also Europe's mistakes?" As the voice-over narrator draws the Marquis's attention to a "Voronikhin lamp," the latter dismisses its aesthetic value, proclaiming that the "Empire style" that the lamp is fashioned in, is "too silly." Likewise, the Marquis critiques the placement of the artworks based on his own religious convictions:

Cleopatra is on the same wall...as the *Circumcision of Christ* by the pious Lodovico Cardi. Right next to *Saint Cecilia*? Can you imagine! By Carlo Dolci! And next to *Eastern Still Life*! As a Catholic, that shocks me.

The voice-over narrator's reliability is similarly undercut in another scene, when he bears false witness to a discussion between the directors of the Hermitage, later apologising to the Marquis that he "made it all up." As he rebukes the Marquis for his ignorance, saying "[n]othing, you know nothing," the voice-over narrator is also an unreliable narrator who provides flawed accounts of the re-enactments. While a docudrama tends to convince the viewer of the reality of its re-enactments,

Sokurov's film is more analogous to a "mock-docudrama" because a motif of epistemological uncertainty in the narrative frustrates spectatorial belief.

This ambivalent persuasion of the self-reflexive narrative in *Russian Ark* becomes doubly disorientating as it plays out in the backdrop of the ambiguous cinematographic realism of the long take. On one level, the defamiliarising narrative which alienates and distances the spectator from the unfolding events, juxtaposes with the temporal continuity of the long take which draws the spectator into the reality of the re-enactments. On another level, the extended duration of the long take, which renders our perception of the profilmic strange, develops an atmosphere which echoes the reflexivity of the narrative. The cumulative effect is an ambivalent immersion in the re-enactments of Sokurov's docudrama as cinematography and narrative interweaves to develop and multiply the surrealist thread of "*le depaysement* (disorientation)" (Harper and Stone 5).

Sokurov's ambivalent immersion of the spectator in the "film-world," as elaborated in Chapter Two, is also key to expressing the performativity of this reflexive narrative which simultaneously distances and engages the spectator. While the testimonies in *Ten* are presented as truth, the narrative in *Russian Ark* emphasises apprehension. Entering the external foyer of an elaborate masquerade ball, the voice-over narrator asks, "Has all this been *staged* for me? Am I expected to play a role?"

[emphasis mine]” As he pronounces the artifice of the reconstruction, he distances the spectator from being drawn into its reality. Such reflexivity is rare in a conventional docudrama where “the role of performance is...to draw the audience into the reality of the situations being dramatized, to *authenticate the fictionalisation*” (Bruzzi 153). A strange disorientation sets in soon after the spectator is alerted to the artifice of the carefully-orchestrated *mise-en-scène*, as Sokurov re-immerses the spectator into the reality of the re-enactments by imbuing a sense of contingency to the events. He does so through the narrators’ investigative tone in comments such as “Where does this door lead to?” and “What are they doing in there?” as the narrators wander through the “uncharted” space of the museum. At this point, the spectator is in turn invited to mimic the narrators’ curiosity through the “morphological” link between the voice-over narrator and spectator, as illustrated in Chapter Two. The aporetic hovering of the Steadicam, which the long take renders stark, cinematographically articulates the voice-over narrator’s performative sense of wonder at the artificial, reconstructed event. Thus, Sokurov’s ambivalent immersion of the spectator in the “film-world” through the Steadicam compounds the reflexive narrative which simultaneously distances and draws in the spectator to build an intensely surreal atmosphere in the film.

The surreal disorientation and atmospheric uncertainty in *Russian Ark* is summed up in a motif of blindness within the reflexive narrative. The very first of

multiple paradoxes that play on vision and sight begins at the start of the film when the voice-over narrator says, “I open my eyes and I see nothing.” On the level of the narrative, the film begins by unfolding as its own visual erasure (Kujundzic), juxtaposing with the visual excess afforded by the cinematographic long take. This motif of blindness continues in another scene where the Marquis stumbles onto a room where Catherine the Great’s grandchildren play Blind Man’s Buff—a ludic gesture no less symbolic than the cut to the eye in Luis Buñuel’s surrealist *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), invoking the spectator to discover how the ambiguous long take compounds a mood of disorientation in *Russian Ark*. As the Marquis expresses how he is “not certain” it is the Russian Empress, the voice-over narrator echoes his doubts, saying “[n]othing could be less certain.” Their uncertainty both foregrounds and undercuts the physical presence of the ghosts of the re-enactments, which the ambiguous long take cinematographically renders stark yet strange. The result is a disorientating reminder of the ontological ambiguity of the ghostly subjects and a metadiegetic gesture that the characters of a docudrama are but unreal shadows of real historical characters. Yet, the ultimate significance of this motif of blindness lies in its invocation of a “materialist” reading of the film, personified in a blind museum guest who traverses the museum without a guide. Using her hands to feel the surface of Gennaro Cali’s sculpture of Psyche (Wortel 87), the blind visitor is commended by the Marquis for “see[ing] all” with her fingers alone. Like the visitor, the spectator is “blind” without the instruction of conventional montage or a clear,

guiding narrative. Yet strangely, we all the more perceive Sokurov's surreal vision by "feeling" our way through the film and sensitising ourselves to the aesthetic complexities of the cinematographic long take in *Russian Ark*.

In *Ten*, the manner by which a social subtext within Kiarostami's ambiguous "non-narrative" intersects with the heightened truth claim of an ambiguous cinematographic realism is contentious in light of how the events in *Ten* are not wholly authentic. In *Russian Ark*, the ambiguous cinematographic realism appositely interweaves with a defamiliarising, reflexive narrative to develop Sokurov's surrealist aesthetic. At this point, it is paramount to clarify that the purpose of this thesis is not to advocate a technologically deterministic approach in reading docufiction in the digital age. Sokurov's ambiguous narrative in *Russian Ark* is not impossible without the cinematographic ambiguity of the long take. However, the latter compounds the disorientation of the reflexive narrative to render the profilmic doubly strange. Indeed, what Kiarostami's and Sokurov's manner of filmmaking in these films demonstrates, is an increasing alignment of the "'mediated" world...[of the diegesis] with the 'immediate' world [of our experience of the film's unfolding], and the sense that our experience of the two is increasingly difficult to separate" (Willis 57).

CONCLUSION

Docufiction in the Digital Age

The adage that fiction film began with the documentary has been recounted numerous times in documentary studies. It is a fact mixed with nostalgia for how the simple arrival of a train formed the very first images that signalled the arrival of film.¹⁴ Before the construction of elaborate studio sets, the non-fiction *actualités* of the Lumière brothers formed the “early hybrids” where the rushes¹⁵ were not discarded but constituted the very content of cinema. It was only in face of the rapid commercialisation of film as mass entertainment, that documentary and fiction become increasingly demarcated as separate genres (Black 2). If fiction and non-fiction film have always shared a common bond, they re-converge with vigour in the digital age. Such a phenomenon is in no small part due to an expanding cinematographic vocabulary that affords a representation of reality that “suggest[s] in the format of film what is ‘more real’ than film itself” (Rhodes and Springer 8). As we approach an absolute representation of reality, the wall dividing fiction and non-fiction film regains a new permeability.

In *Cinema in the Digital Age*, avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas is cited saying: “Once you change technology—from a film camera to a video camera, or

¹⁴ I here refer to *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896).

¹⁵ “Rushes” is a term which commonly denotes the raw, unedited footage of a film.

from an 8mm camera to 16mm—you change completely the content” (Rombes 138). His statement highlights how strongly the medium affects the message and how thoroughly the ever-changing formal aspects of filmmaking come to bear on a director’s conceptual approaches. Yet, it is hard to discern whether cinematographic techniques or narrative choices first determine the other and it is undeniable that both strategies ultimately mediate one another. I have discussed formal and conceptual approaches separately, but it is paramount that cinematography and narrative *play* on each other, as instances in Chapters One and Two reveal and Chapter Three particularly spotlights.

This thesis makes a case for greater parity in the analysis of cinematography and narrative in reading docufiction in the digital age. Such an impetus stems from the idea that Kiarostami’s and Sokurov’s employment of digital cinematography in specific, formal set-ups, generating an ambiguous realism onscreen, is no less intrinsic than narrative ambiguity in affecting the classification of a film as docufiction. In *Ten*, Kiarostami’s cinematographic aesthetic makes it doubly difficult to discern if the film is fiction or non-fiction and often misleads with the impression that it is an observational documentary. Likewise, in *Russian Ark*, Sokurov’s experiment with the aesthetically ambiguous digital long take elaborates the docudrama form through an ambivalent spectatorial immersion in the re-enactments, resulting in a disorientating, surreal experience of the reconstructed past.

Both films afford valuable lessons for reading films in the digital age. To begin with, the increasing attention paid to the issue of spectatorship in documentary studies benefits from an equal consideration of how digital cinematography continuously shifts what governs mediation onscreen. Documentary theorists have long sought to debunk the myth that documentary films are objective. A recent trend sees them moving away from tackling issues of representation to highlighting the nature of reception, where spectatorial autonomy is emphasised (Elsaesser 162). Yet, as digital technology continuously pushes the boundaries by which reality may be represented in film, the changing cinematographic vocabulary complicates spectatorial discernment in a climate where “the very conditions of the realism against which not only genre, but aesthetics, are measured no longer exist” (Rombes 152).

Indeed, in a film like *Ten*, it is very difficult to discern if the events which take place are real or unreal. Kiarostami’s film comes close to achieving what Bazin calls “Total Cinema” (1: 17); a paradoxical cinematic absolute where there is “[n]o more actors, no more story, no more *mise-en-scène*, that is to say finally the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality: no more cinema” (2: 60). At the same time, the compelling portrait of reality in the director’s “cinema of transparency” (Margulies 34) is also one that approximates the wildest dreams of observational documentarists.

Accompanying increasingly realistic signifiers is the contention of heightened truth claims. A tense ethical caveat resides in the manner by which Kiarostami seamlessly and effectively veils the half-staged events of *Ten* under an ostensible “pure record”. The director’s technique shows that even though the rise of digital video has democratised filmmaking and is the vanguard of the demotic (Conway 43), it is dangerous to assume that the phenomenon affords greater access to truth. Before reaching the thoroughfares of dissemination, its own aesthetic is currency for potent didacticism; a ripe space for the propaganda of the individual. In the wrong hands and with wrong intents, digital technology is an insidious tool. For now, these ethical complications are marginally palliated by the fact that the film which effaces itself also stages its effacement. Where truth claims are at stake in the “pure record” of *Ten*, spectatorial discernment may yet arise out of its paradoxical aesthetic, where an ambiguous cinematographic realism both intensifies spectatorial credulity and re-introduces doubt (Buckley 11).

While Kiarostami treads an ethical tightrope in *Ten*, questions of authenticity do not factor as strongly in *Russian Ark*. Within Sokurov’s fictive docudrama, the ambiguous cinematographic realism of the long take intersects with a defamiliarising narrative to develop an ambivalent immersion and persuasion in the docudrama form in a manner that is characteristically oneiric. A more nuanced analysis which draws

on the intricate characteristics of the docudrama genre—of which there is currently a dearth of studies in academic research—may generate greater insights about the implications of an expanding cinematographic vocabulary on the filmic reconstruction and archiving of memory, culture and history in the digital age. Nonetheless, we learn how the long take, often lauded as a technique for realism, does not always heighten verisimilitude. The extremity of its duration, as employed in Sokurov's film, metacinematographically exposes the inconsistencies between phenomenological theories of time and the ontology of film (Wahlberg 22). In *Russian Ark*, this double-edged realism afforded by the digital long take has appositely shaped Sokurov's surrealist aesthetic in startling ways which the director perhaps did not even envision or intend.

As docufiction continues to proliferate, there will be many more films like *Ten* and *Russian Ark* and our approaches to reading such films benefit from a consideration of the technology that made their creation possible. As these hybrid forms signal the increasing collapse of the boundaries separating fiction and non-fiction film, an understanding of docufiction necessitates a re-evaluation of these demarcations. Such an endeavour cannot be situated in inquiries of narrative technique alone. An investigation of the complexities of digital cinematography is paramount as we move closer towards increasingly elaborate, filmic fantasies of reality.

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