

Documentary and the Space of Flows

In this talk, I want to explore how the development of contemporary digital media networks and the globalized economics and cultural framing that accompany them make it key that documentary film practices not be thought of or taught in isolation from larger discussion of the nature of space and place. I am going to look at notions of landscape in painting, photography and documentary film to suggest possibilities for an authentically contemporary documentary pedagogy.

To start I would like to acknowledge that we live in an age when information is a commodity. As my colleague Jason has suggested, the Canadian political economist Harold Innis provided a useful approach to an expanded notion, not of the documentary, but certainly of the document as a set of commodity circulations in a larger set of information flows. Innis is the originary thinker for the idea that the medium is the message. The trick today is that unlike stone or parchment, the material substrate of modern communications is itself complex and often invisible, whether the internet backbone, high frequency transmitters, cell towers, satellites, fiber optic cables, servers, and software such as HTML 5 that facilitate complex interactions with media online.

Documentary is also something that is taught, both as a cultural practice subject to critical analysis, and as an art. My lecture emerges from a career as an artist who works in documentary, but more particularly from my teaching practice, trying to come to terms with the role of landscape in documentaries, and how to teach it. So this lecture is in a way a meta-lecture, with one thread laying out an argument I might make to in a classroom, and another offering a commentary on my own approach.

For the open: a question is, does a certain way of looking at the world, a *weltanschauung*, encourage a certain way of thinking how it is constructed, and then a certain way of representing it? It's hard to imagine it wouldn't.

THE PHILIPPINES

In the 1980s I went to the Philippines, working on a documentary about sugar. My colleague and I drove south through Luzon. We were crossing a bridge when I put on the brakes. The river spread out below us. Near us, women were beating laundry on the rocks, while in the mid-ground a group of bamboo huts on stilts stood under palm trees laden with coconuts. A pile of smoldering copra

sent a wisp of smoke into the air. The dense jungle climbed to the high peaks in the background, while in the foreground a group of children were diving off the back of a complacent water buffalo. We looked at each other and nodded. I grabbed the tripod and he the camera and we raced to the edge of the bridge. As I started setting up the legs of the tripod, one of the women looked up at me and said, in an excellent American English, “Nice native scene, hunh?” She and her friends laughed; so did we, but we took the shot. For me it was what you'd call a learning moment. My career took different turns, but starting in the 90s, I started doing projects dealing with landscapes, mainly ones of war, and mainly using still images.

Project: COLD WAR IN 24 FRAMES
Date: 2001

Photography-based piece with texts, performed at abandoned 19th c. fortress “Uitermeer” as part of the Durable Reinforcement Art project on the Dutch Waterline fortress system by Jeanne v. Heeswijk, June, 2001.

On the Pacific Coast, just north of San Francisco, the last remaining American Nike Missile Site sits, a curious reminder of the Cold War, when hundreds of these secret bases dotted the US and Europe. This site, which operated from 1954 through 1973, is now a national park with an art center and a public beach. The location, with its combination of natural beauty and historical significance, invites contemplation. Martin offers a story with still images - a trajectory soaring from the long ago and far away golden State of his childhood to the cultural wisdom of today's post-ideology California.





A version of this piece is available online at www.hollandsewaterlinie.nl.
 © 2001 M. Lucas. Photos by M. Lucas and P. Hill.

Left: Radar Tracking system on Marin Headlands. Rt.Top: Nike Nosecone
 Rt. Bottom: Missile in Magazine with Marin Headlands Art Center above.

I believe that the way we see the world, the way we see the space of the world and visualize it is still built in many ways around Cartesian coordinates, and may even interfere with our efforts to envision our environs, especially when we try to think of the landscape as a space of flows.

What is at stake is our ability to represent the world we live in, rather than an obsolete version or an unhelpful idealization.

In order to “see” the visual realm of documentary film we can take the advice of W.T.J. Mitchell, one of the creators of visual culture studies. Following Mitchell I can suggest that the visual practices that lead documentarians into an encounter with the real via their cameras (a defining

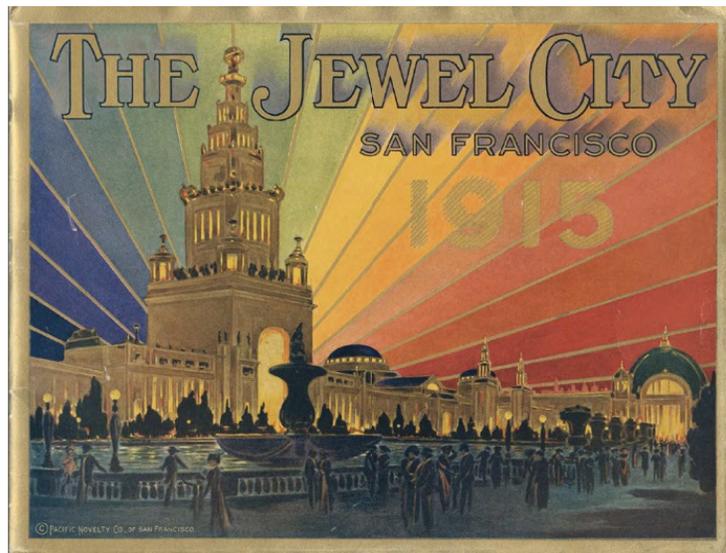
characteristic of the practice) can only be understood as occurring in a '*space* of documentary' that is not just the space in the frame, but the space of making. And at the *place* of documentary as one that is potentially in most people's lives as a making practice.ⁱ

The starting point for my discussion will lie in the history of landscape painting, with a specific look at the role of ideas of perspective. One of the most persistent myths of visuality is that in the space of representation there is a real world, full of real landscapes that will respond to our efforts with the camera. Is there a real world out there? I would like to think so, but there is no direct route to its representation.

A recent call for academic papers dealing with the role of landscape in films says in part, "Cinema is therefore a technology of place... On the one hand, it can faithfully depict landscapes and places, on the other hand, it can construct spaces that are either complementary or alternative to their real counterparts."

The idea that film can "faithfully reproduce" a landscape is true only if we understand this to mean that we can readily reproduce ideas of landscape taken largely from the history of European painting and related developments in 18 and 19c "natural history". Even the call for Visual Evidence conference I am now speaking at, with its evocation of "Frontiers,"ⁱⁱ risks eliding into 19c narratives of exploration and new worlds.

Just to be clear, those narratives have certainly been very much part of my own life as a child of the Golden West. My maternal grandmother was a cook for the road crews building the highways that made the West accessible for tourism and resource exploitation, while my paternal grandfather came out West for the San Francisco Panama-Pacific exhibition in 1915 and stayed to become a travel writer.



Poster for the Panama-Pacific Exhibition

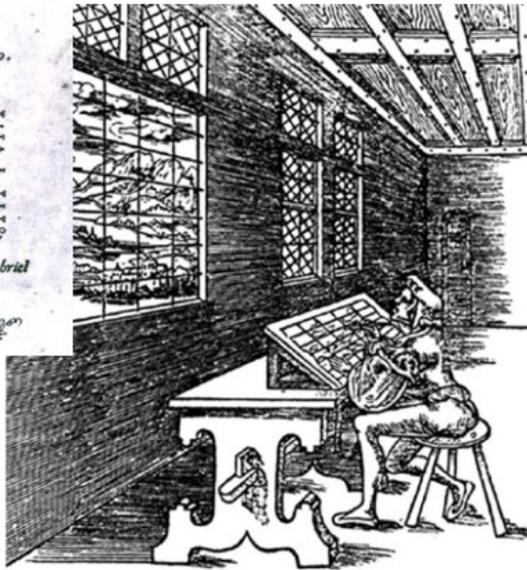
The problem with landscape is of course that what is important about it is often invisible. This would be at the heart of the definition of landscape as ideological. For Marx, it was exactly the abstracting practice of obtaining cash profit from land that developed in the shift from feudal use value to modern exchange value that allowed for the Romantic movement, and associated ideas of early tourism as suggested in the idea of visiting the Lake country. The quintessential Lake Poet, Wordsworth stood up against industrial practices and championed ordinary residents against tourists. As Malcolm Andrews suggests (and a re-reading of *Tintern Abbey* will support) by the mid-19c. “nature had become a repository for non-utilitarian values.” (p70)



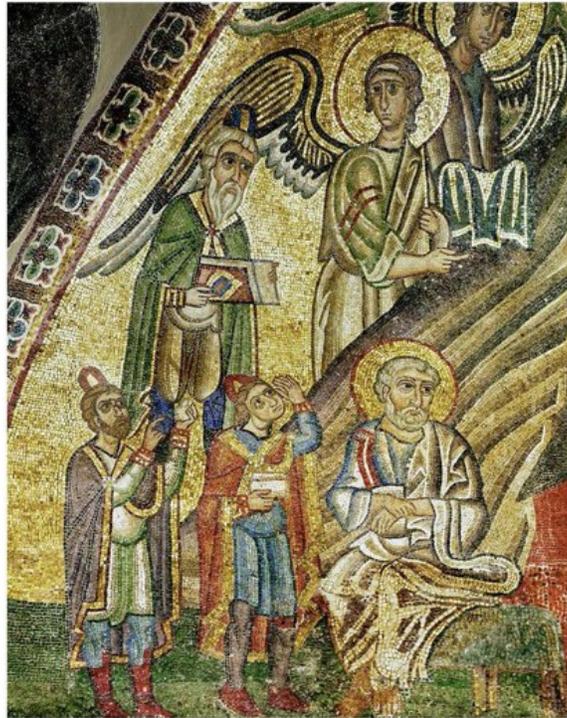
Magic Lantern Slide of Tintern Abbey

The role of landscape painting in developing modern ideologies has been pointed out by many. I think it was Mitchell who said that landscape was the dreamwork of imperialism. Simon Schama looks at the rise of Dutch landscapes as linked with what was the first Republic in Europe. A country where the citizens were at least nominally the “owners” and one where the Dutch East India Company made them participants in the extension of European empire, all available on canvas.

LA PITTURA
DI LEONBATTISTA
ALBERTI TRADOTTA
PER M. EDOVICO
DOMENICHI,
Con Gratia & Privilegio.
LXXV
DEI MDCCLXXV
In Vendita Appresso Gabriel
Giulio de Ferrari,
MDCCLVII.
Di Ottavio Scuderi scultore



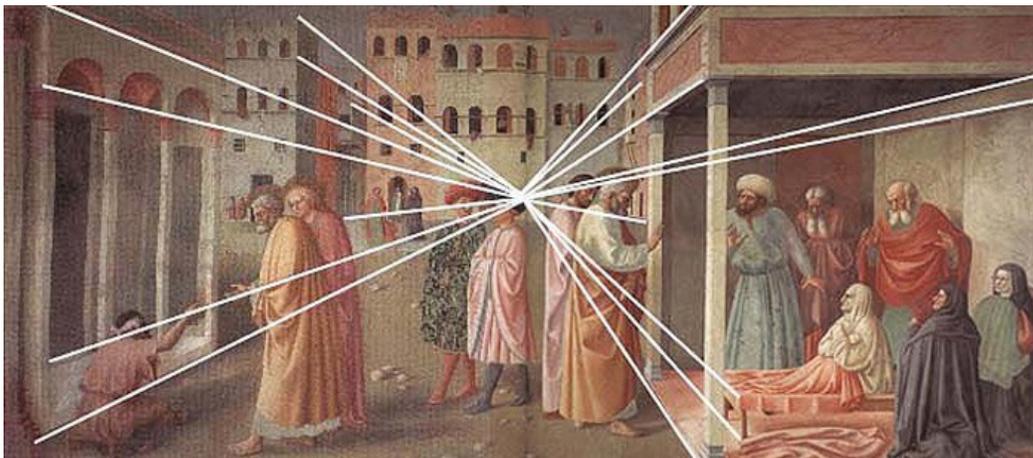
But for me, as someone who works with a camera and teaches others to do so, a key ideology is that of perspective itself. The first thing to think is that perspective, or at least the kind of perspective we think of as 'accurate' is a relatively recent invention. I think in my own childhood I thought of the development of perspective as a sort of Hegelian movement from error to enlightenment. Cave paintings were a crude beginning to an effort at representation that reached its zenith with the invention of photography. The idea that people didn't use perspective "accurately" because it just wasn't that important to them or that life just looked different to them, is one that I arrived at later in life.



Although I usually develop an involved discussion of perspective in Egyptian art, classical Greco-roman art, a good starting point is the art of the Byzantines. In Byzantine art the representation of space is less important than the link to heaven, and the relationship of the emperor to the realm of the divine. What these did have, given the use of mosaic tile as a medium, is a high degree of naturalistic detail in, for example, faces.



The history of Western European landscape starts in the Renaissance with the landscapes being the backdrop for the activities of saints. At the same time the development of perspective turned into a set of specific formulae as developed by Alberti in 1435. For me one of the most useful explorers of perspective is Erwin Panofsky. His thesis, heavily condensed, could be that people had to learn to envision space as extensive, and even geometric to take up the concerns that led to perspectively “correct” work such as, for instance, that of Masolino.



Healing of the Cripple by St. Peter, 1426-27, Cappella Brancacci, Florence

Why explore these aspects of Renaissance art history to talk about documentary film? For me, there are two related problems. One is that the kind of realism that Renaissance perspective allows for naturalizes the gaze. It produces a subject that has a certain illusion of autonomy. The other is that this realism has everything with how a camera reproduces images. So we imagine that the camera 'faithfully reproduces' the real world.

Panofsky develops an argument to show that antique perspective was part of a distinctly un-modern view of space, a non-extensive one that did not involve the kind of x,y,z axial coordinate system that modern perspective involves. But as Christopher Wood points out, his very seizure of the idea of perspective *per se* is significant because perspective seems "natural": "The laws which the intellect "prescribes" to the perceptible world and by obeying which the percible world becomes "nature, are universal."ⁱⁱⁱ

Martin Jay in his essay *Scopic Regimes of Modernity* notes "The assumption ... is that Cartesian perspectivalism is *the* reigning visual model of modernity is often tied to the further contention that it succeeded in becoming so because it best expressed the 'natural' experience of sight valorized by the scientific world-view."^{iv}

For me, a world view and perspective is important because I want to break down the one to one correspondence between the image and the world that is an implicit promise of the documentary camera. For me, the 'real' is only partially accessible, and the role of documentarians is to reveal things that may or may not be readily visible, or if they are, readily put in the picture.



Here I'd like to enlist Gilles Deleuze, who shares with Innis a kind of hydraulic sense of flows of information and energy, but who wrote about film. For Deleuze, the space of action created by the camera creates a "movement image" a chunk of a filmic time/space continuum (not a series of still images) that creates a question, and demands a response from the actor (and from the viewer). As Wikipedia suggests, "Figures are not described in motion; rather, the continuity of movement describes the figure"... But what of the ground that the figure operates in? ^v

In Cinema 2 Deleuze talks about a new kind of space that emerges from World War 2, 'spaces which we no longer know how to describe... deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction. (cinema 2, xi)



Red Desert (1964) Michaelangelo Antonioni

These spaces have a kind of blankness, an a-human agency. The disorientation means a need for thought before action. So a time-image that opens a circuit for the concept to emerge. It is also key to note that this new context is a kind of environmental disaster, in this case enough to send Monica Vitti off the deep end.

CONTEMPORARY HORIZONS

Deleuze, as prescient as he might have been, spoke of a Post-World War 2 world that is also a thing of the past. Today the relations of production are very different. In the move to an information economy land is still central, but its value derives from a set of globalized cultural practices from the promotion of branding and 'luxury' life styles to the aesthetic re-colonization of the Third World by the likes of Discovery and Nat Geo. I have no idea what the developing evolution of the 'action-image' or the 'time-image' might be.

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

For me, obviously, teaching using artists that try to depict what we know about the modern globalized world, that make the discussion a conscious one are key.



Fish Story (1995) Allan Sekula

The late Allan Sekula is exemplary in his long term project *Fish Story*. The images are complexly related to texts, one a personal meditation situated in the artists life growing up in a port city, trying to offer images that speak to the complexities of representation, another a discussion of maritime trade and the way it has been represented in art, and a third that are the actual “titles” of the images. They images themselves are open, they are story-holding more than storytelling. That info cannot “give” us a full picture of globalization, and in fact on one level his work is a revelation of the impossibilities of what Martha Rosler called “inadequate descriptive systems”



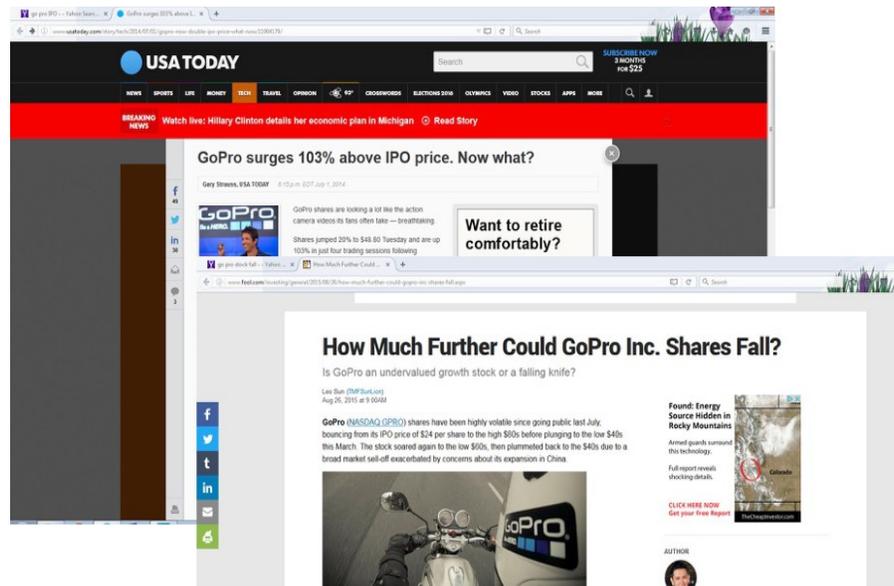
Another is of course Farocki's *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, which evokes the unfettered gaze, and shows us how much of the modern world is an effort to control the way we see the world. His camera carries the argument between the text and the repetition of images tracing the circuits of vision and power. Another favorite for me is Barbara Hammer's *Resisting Paradise*, which tries to link the visual imagination of fauvist Pierre Matisse with the realities of the French Riviera in time of war, actually interposing paint being laid down over scenes to ask tough questions about the link between beauty and politics.

TOOLS OF DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION

One way to understand the development of new forms in documentary filmmaking is through the tools used to produce it. The classic example would be the advent of portable 16 mm synch sound systems that made possible direct cinema and verité in the 1960s. My own sense is that the desire to interact with the world in a new way led to new developments and back again in a kind of iterative feedback loop. In other words, causality is ambiguous. Nevertheless, in our own era documentary filmmaking has seen an explosion of new imaging devices, notable the DSLR and the mini-cam, but also the rise of ultra high definition imaging, broadcast and projection. We've also seen documentary move online the web doc and become an immersive experience in the world of VR. Like many schools ours now offer these devices and platforms as options to students.

It is important to remember that these tools are thoroughly embedded in modern capitalism. A key factor here is the IPO. Go Pro, maker of a small extremely portable camera, replicates not the trajectory of camera manufacturers so much as it does that of the many new high tech innovators in

biotech, online sales, etc.

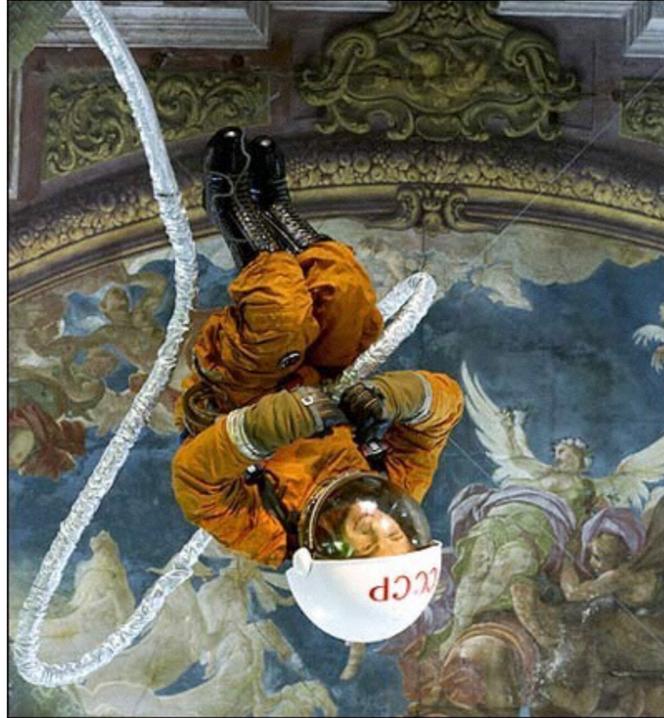


The low price enhances the ability to film with a multiplicity of these cameras, offering new notions about agency, as these cameras are mounted and run from fixed mounts, whether on helmets, on the deck of a fishing trawler, the handlebars of a bike, car, or plane, surfboard, etc. (surfing the Maldives and backcountry skiing in Chile are today's featured videos)

THE VANISHING HORIZON

While one can trace ancestors back to the stereopticon of the 19c, it's clear that the proposition of a loss of perspective was a given once people could leave the Earth's surface. Film festivals now offer a variety of new VR content, much of it with a documentary intention. Yet this is film without a frame. VR demands a 360 degree view. So the kind of Renaissance perspective I'm worrying about is disappearing in the context of easily available aesthetic experiences.

The space of VR offers a post-perspectival world. Theoretical contemplations of the world view that accompanies this loss of perspective are just starting to emerge. As Hito Steyerl points out in "In Free Fall"^{vi} the power relationship of being above is seductive, but the lack of a shared space or rather a shared horizon, diminishes community. The body disappears.



Cosmonaut (2002) Oleg Kulik

But the destabilization is accompanied by a destabilization of subjectivity as well. We live at a time when self-representation, the creation of a self as cultural capital is becoming central to capitalism. At the same time a myriad of types of surveillance monitor both our work and leisure lives.

Since 2001, what we have seen throughout the world is a full implementation of the flexible employment system, that is, of a labor regime in which worker mobility and variable hours are accompanied by continuous electronic surveillance and the managerial analysis of performance. To observe this... you must also look more deeply into all the instrumentation of the workplace, such as biometric identification devices, keystroke counting programs, electronic tracking badges that follow people around a factory floor, GPS sensors for the control of vehicle fleets, etc. All these technological systems involve people in a new relation between controller and controlled.^{vii}

We are increasingly bloggers, tweeters, Facebook posters. In a media world increasingly dominated by the presentation of a subjectivity trying to sell itself, while increasingly monitored. The environment we live in is increasingly threatened. As many have suggested, we are heavily

implicated in the processes, from global warming on down, that threaten the landscape we struggle to survive in.

We have to ask what processes and approaches will help us see the landscapes, landscapes that are sites of resource extraction, value production, neglect, dumping, etc. Janet Walker suggested something that seems like a complex reading of an environment, a kind of forensic geology, and on a media level, a kind of deconstruction of the shared imaginary created by energy culture.

A restoration ecologist I spoke with for the presentation said that viewing landscape demands research and a sensitivity to strata. When were investments made, withdrawn? What kind of infrastructure underlies the use or non-use of the land? Where are evidences of changing approaches to land exploitation? When I asked her about still and moving images she said that they were most helpful when they were unaware. That artists would general hide infrastructure, or frame it out, but then leave in things they didn't see as "un-aesthetic" like improvident farming practices, or signs of erosion or water misuse.

The kind of "unlearning to not-see" that I talk about here is only the beginning, but I believe it should inform any discussion of the current trend in geographically inclined documentary.

- i *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2005
- ii Visible Evidence 23 had four themes: environmental frontiers, as well as political, experimental, and sonic.
- iii *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York, Zone Books, 1991.) (13, 65)
- iv Scott Lash & Jonathan Friedman eds. *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992.)(179)
- v *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (Minneapolis, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986.)
- vi “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective” e-flux journal #24, April 2011.
- vii “The Flexible Personality: For a New Cultural Critique”
http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en/base_edit)