

Fragmented Memories of Spectatorship

My "Documentary" Top 10 by Eyal Sivan

When I was asked to curate -- as we like to say nowadays -- the "Top 10" list of documentary films to be screened at IDFA 2009, I accepted with almost no hesitations. It might have been a degree of arrogance or overconfidence: I honestly believed as a spectator, a practitioner and a teacher of documentary cinema, that this kind of exercise was going to be an easy task. Obviously, I was soon disillusioned. I realized that I had to face reality or even better -- I had to create a reality with a pre-existing one: the immensity of the artistic practice we call documentary.

Beside the fact that I deliberately ignored the order and the symbolic hierarchy of a Top 10 list, choosing ten works became just like one of those moments of conflict in the editing suite. In order to compose this list of masterworks, I had to frame, to exclude (more than what I am going to show). I had to choose an angle, to weave a discourse, to hide, to cover up. And in order to provoke the process of re-memorization of a title, to emphasize an important film, to singularize an author, a colleague or a comrade, I adopted its absence. A process that is somewhat similar to the exclusion of some great shots, rare scenes, or unique images that find themselves outside the edited film, as the archive and the memory of a film.

While reflecting on the strange idea of choosing a list of Top 10, I constantly thought about the conclusion of one of many conversations with Werner Dütch, my best and dear teacher of documentary thinking, producer, commissioning editor, writer and above all, a true *cinophile*. With some sadness and much serenity, Werner reminded me once that a finished film is just the gravestone of the rushes, of the process. Such is this "Top 10" list of documentaries. It is just the gravestone of a gigantic, eclectic, rich, and disturbing *corpus* of worldwide documentary moving image practices that composes part of the reality in which I live. A contradictory reality made simultaneously of documentary filmmaking and of its critique and sometime radical opposition to it.

Luckily, some rare and unexplained moments of documentary cinema still remind me of the pleasure of spectatorship and reconcile this contradiction for a moment, such are in my memory all these moments of cinema which make up this list, most of which I have seen only once and a long time ago.

By accepting to compose the "Top 10" list, I gained the privilege of seeing these films, of experiencing them again and hopefully of sharing the magic of watching them for the first time, the emotion, surprise, and sometimes the jealousy I felt while watching these moments of documentary cinema.

During the process of selection, some benchmarks occurred to me immediately: some titles of films, names of directors, of masters, inspirations, and unidentified images and scenes came to my mind like a memory of a film in a festival, or the surprise of a miracle moment on a boring night while channel surfing in a hotel room after a screening of my own film.

Whatever the case, I clearly had in mind that at this very political moment -- when documentary cinema or the subjective representation/interpretation of reality is becoming a commodity among other cultural commodities -- there is a need to insist on the fact that the concept of “courage,” easily used in the world of documentary practice, only makes sense in the face of danger. As the vast majority of Western and non-Western documentary filmmakers are working with and/or in the West and are not facing real danger yet, I have followed my desire to revisit some of the documentaries that remained, in memory, as documents of resistance and even clear challenges to the dictatorship of “the story,” and the subjective logic of the dominant voice called moderation.

The films I have chosen were thought of or envisioned as a corpus. They do not share a theme or a topic, do not belong to a period or to the same identified genre, they do not have a common geography or a common aesthetic. And if it happens that the directors share the same gender, it was inadvertent. Or maybe it wasn't.

Thus, despite their differences and without exception, all the makers of these 11 films deserve to proudly bear the title of manipulators, genius manipulators --in the noble sense of the word -- of images of reality.

They all simultaneously articulate a cinematic and a political reflection. From the *Blind Child* (1964) by Johan van der Keuken, passing through *Ici et ailleurs* (1976) by Jean-Luc Godard, the lesson of cinema, interview strategy, montage, and politics that is *The Memory of Justice* (1976) by Marcel Ophüls through *S21, The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003), the fictionalized documentary by Rithy Pan, or the futuristic documentary *Punishment Park* (1971) by Peter Watkins that becomes a point of view on the actual reality: all dare to take a simple, subversive and provocative act - thinking; provoking the dangerous process of thinking and first of all reflecting on what, in fact, we actually see when we watch, and as a consequence, what we are given to see.

This is the case in the commissioned and appropriated *Philips Radio* (1931) by Joris Ivens, as it is in the deviation of the gaze of the original filmed material into a new expropriated archive by Vincent Monnikendam in *Mother Dao, the Turtlelike*.

Provoking thinking is also the case in the generational radiography, the lesson of listening which is represented by *Hitler? Connais pas!* (1963) by Bertrand Blier or Michel Khleifi's *Ma'loul Celebrates its Destruction* (1984) as is *Testimonies* (1993) by Ido Sela. All these films struggle not just to make the invisible visible, to unveil the hidden, to provoke the scandal, to fight the *starification* machine, or the privileged preaching on freedom of speech. Their common goal is to provoke a change, to articulate the debate, to influence the scandalous hegemonic representation of reality.

As such, they refuse the favorite Western-Christian spectacle of victims and victimization and call upon the responsibility of the spectator, and, unlike most TV channel decision makers, they consider us, as spectators, to be emancipated political subjects.

In an act of rebellion against the rules of the “Top 10” game, I've insisted on including an 11th film: the joker of my selection, *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976) by John Smith which

encapsulates the joys and miseries of the manipulator of images of reality: the illusion of absolute power on one hand and reality's resistance against being manipulated.

In fact, all eleven films respond, each in its own way, to Walter's Benjamin call in the heart of the European catastrophe, to brush history against the grain, and as such they are all not just contemporary, but of an actual emergency.

At this point, I must admit the rationalization; justification, and analysis of this corpus of documentaries, which compose my Top 10, followed a simple true and sincere desire to see these films again, and even run the risk of disappointment.

Or it might be just an attempt to get closer to a blurred memory from my childhood. I still remember the sensations I felt after cutting school and tuning in to the sole television channel that was broadcasting in Israel at the time: the black-and-white educational station. If I feel the need to get closer to those moments, it's not because of nostalgia or longing. It's because I believe that it might have been then, during my young adolescence in Jerusalem, while being exposed to ethnographic, anthropological, nature, and propaganda documentaries, that I developed the passion and criticism, the fascination and repulsion, and above all suspicion of documentary cinema. A passion and suspicion that I believe should be shared.

Biography

Eyal Sivan is an Israeli documentary filmmaker and essayist, and teaches at the University of East London's School of Humanities and Social Sciences. Born in Haifa in 1964, Sivan worked as a photographer in Tel-Aviv until he started dividing his time between Israel and Paris in 1985. Sivan has directed more than 10 critically-acclaimed feature-length political documentaries and produced many others. His works have been released in theaters and broadcast on TV all over the world, and they are regularly exhibited in many major international contemporary art shows. Sivan publishes and lectures on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, documentary filmmaking and ethics, the representation of political crime, political use of memory, and genocide and representation. He was the founder and artistic director of the Paris-based documentary film production company Memento, and works as an editor and columnist for cinema, social, and political journals.