

Documentaries as Contemporary Memento Mori

In contemporary culture, documentary film as genre and medium is particularly suited to bringing about awareness of mortality. In the first place, documentaries operate as indices of death. As film theorist Laura Mulvey (2006) and others such as Kracauer (1997 [1960]) and Bazin (1967) have noted, the medium of film has a material relationship to empirical reality. Documentary distinguishes itself by relying upon knowledge of, and making claims about, the extra-cinematic world, as philosopher and phenomenologist of film Vivian Sobchack (1984; 1992; 1996; 2004; 2011) elucidates in her discussion of film experience and consciousness. Of all concerns of the empirical world, the survival or non-survival of a being's bodily existence including "most animals", but especially humans, endures beyond all other concerns (Sobchack 2004, 279). As films – especially documentaries – reference reality, this survival or non-survival is of prime importance. At the same time, documentaries also rely on "artificiality" and "convention" with a particular history and function, especially rhetorical function, as documentary film theorist Bill Nichols argues (1983; 1991; 2001; 2010; 2013; cf. Cowie 2011). I suggest, then, with the help of Sobchack, Mulvey, and Nichols, that in their indexical and conventional capacities, documentaries such as *Powers*, *Notebook*, and many, many other potential examples of documentaries, segments of films, and select footage, may operate as occasions for composed transformative experience as human viewers become conscious of their own mortality. In short, I suggest documentaries are an especially apt and most prominent form of memento mori in contemporary culture.

5.1 Documentaries Index Death

From early in its history, philosophers of film have observed that the medium of film, first in photography and then in cinema, has a distinctive relationship to "the world beyond the film", including, I would add, the limits of human existence. As the twentieth century German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer puts it:

Film brings the whole material world into play; reaching beyond theater and painting, it for the first time set that which exists into motion...It is

interested in...what is just there – both in and outside the human being. [Furthermore, the] face counts for nothing in film unless it includes the *death's-head* beneath.¹

HANSEN 1997, VII

For the human figure, film takes on a role closely related to the ancient practice of the death mask. As Mulvey (2006) points out, André Bazin:

identifies [film with] the death mask (...) a direct imprint, tracing the practice back to the “mummification” of bodies in ancient Egypt. The death mask is (...) an index; it is an image formed by an actual imprint of the deceased’s features. (...) This process, holding the flow of time, or “embalming” time, and preserving the actual features of the dead person through an imprinted image, would, Bazin argues, be realized finally and perfectly with photography. Photography would thus take over a function that art had struggled, in the meantime, to fulfill. (...) The connection was understood very quickly in the nineteenth century as people adopted photography into the rituals of mourning and memorials. The deathbed photograph came to replace the death mask. Both record the reality of the dead body and, in preserving it, assumed a ghostly quality.

58–59, citing BAZIN 1967

Historically, the technology of celluloid-based film relies upon the imprint of light and chemical reaction, through the mechanisms of the camera. As Mulvey puts it, “The index [is] an incontrovertible fact, a material trace that...is a property of the camera machine and the chemical impact of light on film” (55). And: “Whatever their limitations, photographic machines register the image inscribed by light on photosensitive paper, leaving the trace of whatever comes in front of the lens, whether the most lavishly constructed of sets or the most natural of landscapes” (19).

The material relationship between film and the empirical world provides a rationale for conceiving of documentary film as an index of empirical death. Historically celluloid-based film, including photography, “may have other properties”, Mulvey writes (2006), but “the physical link between an object caught by a lens and the image left by rays of light on film” is the reason for “its privileged relation to reality” (18). Mulvey draws upon Roland Barthes (and others), who addresses this link in his classic work on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980; 1981). She notes that the film theorist Peter Wollen (1998 [1969])

1 From Kracauer’s notes toward a book on film aesthetics, November 1940, cited by Hansen.