

Documentary Intersubjectivity

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Eric Coombs Esmail is an artist and scholar interested in documentary philosophy, poetics, and the politics of human migration. Trained as a cinematographer, he has worked across film and video production for interactive media, performance, installation, and theatrical release. His practice has taken him both far afield and close to home, from Palestine to Pennsylvania, where he has explored ideas around power, place, and human experience. Committed to a community-oriented practice, he shares his work in spaces intended for local impact. Eric is also the director of the Center for Documentary and Ethnographic Media, which hosts the Mimesis Documentary Festival.

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I propose that documentary can effectively navigate the slippage in idealism between solipsism and intersubjectivity. Following the pluralistic idealisms of Leibniz and Berkeley, as well as the dual-aspect monisms of Hegel and Schopenhauer, I develop a documentary monadology that establishes the ontological basis for documentary as a form of phenomenological description espoused by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. In this context, I employ Carolyn Forché's poetry of witness to examine two documentaries – Burnat and Davidi's *5 Broken Cameras* (2011) and Tatian Huezo's *Tempestad* (2016). In analysing these works using documentary monadology and phenomenology, I arrive at contemporary feminisms of Haraway and Neimanis. These thinkers extend the previous discourses, and alongside a reframing of Grierson's notion of the creative treatment of actuality, reveal documentary to be a form of situated knowledge in the idealist tradition and a site for posthumanist Husserlian intersubjectivity.

KEYWORDS

documentary, intersubjectivity, phenomenology, witness, posthumanism

A Documentary Monadology

In this paper, I propose an understanding of documentary that can effectively navigate the slippage in idealism between solipsism and intersubjectivity. To formulate a working conception of documentary intersubjectivity, I will demonstrate that documentary can be understood as a part of an anti-solipsistic tradition in idealist philosophy. As far back as Christian Wolff's use of the term "idealism" in 1747, idealism was described as a system of thought with two mutually exclusive tendencies. The first would reject the existence of any other mind other than its own, and the second would accept the existence of other minds (Guyer & Horstmann). Documentary's world-as-experience is a shared world, in which experiences can be had among experiencing bodies (i.e. experiencers). Rather than a communication that moves from within to without (that is, from internal and personal to external and social), I argue that personal experience is co-constitutive of the social insofar as it is founded on an inherent relationality of experience itself, making any solipsistic idealism not only an undesirable framework from which to understand the documentary impulse on ethical grounds, but altogether absurd. This relationality is not limited to the human, or even to the living. Relations are a function of positionality, which demands the existence of a multiplicity of possible perspectives that are inhabited by experiencers. To fully articulate a theory of documentary as a socio-relational world-as-experience, I will draw from idealist philosophies of pluralistic idealism and dual-aspect monism to formulate a documentary monadology that will serve as the basis for documentary intersubjectivity.

First, I will solve for contradictions in the monadologies of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and George Berkeley using Hegelian logic and Arthur Schopenhauer's concept of "will," arguing that minds are composite structures enfolding immutable relations rather than irreducible disembodied substances. I will then employ Merleau-Ponty's body schema to demonstrate how these structures operate as the embodied subjects of perception. Using this phenomenology, I arrive at a conception of witness, informed by Carolyn Forché, that is grounded in the monadic positionality of experience. Analysed in this context, documentary examples from Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi and Tatian Huezo reveal documentary practice to be a form of phenomenological description that evinces Husserlian intersubjectivity. This allows for an idealist reading of John Grierson's definition of documentary as the "creative treatment of actuality" ("The Documentary Producer" 8). Finally, I apply my documentary monadology to the nonhuman composites implicated in documentary practice, opening new possibilities for documentary futures informed by the posthumanist feminisms of Donna Haraway and Astrida Neimanis.

Throughout this conversation, I will use documentary as a term for approaching the world-as-experience, rather than as a genre of media to be theorised about. Documentary can take many forms – as archive, anecdote, reportage, etc. Here, I will consider the documentary in its pre-formal state as an impulse to share experiences with others. I consider this to be inherently

mediatic. Thus, I conceive documentary as a relational process of sociality-through-technicity, rather than a taxonomic structure for categorising media. Over the course of this paper, I will investigate this pre-formal impulse through its formal manifestation as a cinematic art, rather than through the myriad alternatives e.g. photography, radio, writing, etc.

Monads as Mirrors of the Universe

In proposition 57 of his *Monadology*, Leibniz writes, “through the infinite multitude of simple substances, there are, as it were, just as many different universes, which however are only the perspectives of a single one according to the different points of view of each monad” (24). Here, we clearly see a system of idealist thought that is anti-solipsistic, a pluralistic idealism that recognises the existence of a multiplicity of perceiving entities without necessarily falling into dualism. From here, we can infer that the monad is not only predicated upon its indivisibility (Leibniz 17), but of its positionality. This, however, is not enough to confirm the documentary world-as-experience. Stated another way, the supposition that positions are always *taken up* is not yet demonstrated to be necessarily implied by their existence. The question arises: how, then, can we be sure that the universe is populated by more than one experienter?

Leibniz begins to struggle with this in propositions 10-14, where he takes “for granted” that monads are subject to change. This results in the conclusion that monads, despite having no parts as such, do have a “plurality” of properties and relations. This leads him further to the idea that, “the transitory state which enfolds and represents a multiplicity in a unity, or in the simple substance, is exactly what one calls *perception*” (18). Leibniz contends, here, that perception is the result of a monad’s inherent capacity for change, and that this capacity logically necessitates that monads have distinguishable properties and distinct relations, despite their apparent indivisible unity. Once perception is thus established in Leibniz’s thought, he can address the existence of other monads more directly. He argues that monads must essentially be imperfect, which is revealed through the relative “distinct” or “confused” nature of their perceptions. External *action* is the condition of perfection, and passive *reaction* is the condition of imperfection. Monads must accommodate each other in terms of action and reaction, but the “influence” of one monad on another is still ideal in nature, and – here is where Leibniz introduces an actual *deus ex machina* – that influence can only have an effect “through the intervention of God” (Leibniz 23).

This is, for me, quite a dubious method for reconciling the apparent contradictions in his monadology concerning 1) the existence of more than one monad, and 2) the apparent presence of properties and relations in or of a simple substance. However, in proposition 56, he opens the door to an alternative understanding where any supreme being would be made redundant. Leibniz describes the process of monadic accommodation, which

exposes a fundamental relationality through which monads express the entirety of the universe:

Now this interlinkage or accommodation of all created things to each other, and of each to all the others, brings it about that each simple substance has relations that express all the others, and is in consequence a perpetual living mirror of the universe. (Leibniz 24)

This is remarkably similar to conclusions drawn by Alfred North Whitehead centuries later, in the era of quantum mechanics, who said, “the ingression of every electron into nature modifies to some extent the character of every event. Thus the character of the stream of events which we are considering bears marks of the existence of every other electron throughout the universe” (102). Leibniz does not see this relationality as the result of causal influence, and nor shall we when arriving at a documentary monadology. Relations are not causal in any spatiotemporal sense – they simply are. While Leibniz relies on hierarchies of perfection and the intervention of God to explain how these relations effectuate the universal harmony of infinite monads, we will attempt to do so by dissociating the monad from the concepts of the soul, spirit, or mind, insofar as they are used to represent individual (non)human persons or beings.

The Personhood of Monads

Claims regarding the real in various idealisms suggest a privileging of subjectivity, which we can loosely define here as a preoccupation with a sort of personhood that enfolds experience. It is an issue that documentary also wrestles with to this day – that is, to what extent the authorship of experience is constituted by a subject, or a will, with a rational identity. This is an ethical question firmly grounded in an idealist tradition. If monads are real in that objects can only exist through their capacity for perception, do we then (re)produce the objects of the world simply in the act of experiencing and documenting them? Atrocities and all? Furthermore, how do we make any claim to the real existence of others, if we cannot directly perceive each other as anything but objects? Put bluntly – is documentary anything but the crass objectification of the other by solipsistic subjects? In *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley (36) acknowledges that in his system of immaterialism, in which all knowledge is constituted by spirits (minds) and ideas (that which is perceived by minds), an explanation for how the existence of other minds can be known is due.

Berkeley, like Leibniz, espouses an anti-solipsistic form of pluralistic idealism wherein “there is not any other Substance than Spirit, or that which perceives” (13). When it comes to the existence of what he calls “unthinking things,” we come to his famous phrase: “Their *Esse* is *Percipi*.” Their existence, ontologically speaking, is in their perception by thinking minds, i.e. perceivers or experiencers. The way in which he conceives of minds (as spirits or souls) is also quite similar to Leibniz’s monads, in that “the Soul is

Indivisible, Incorporeal, Unextended, and it is consequently Incorruptible” (52). This weightless, spaceless, matterless, timeless mind recognizes itself through affect, or what Berkeley calls “Feeling and Introspection” (37), while other minds are known to exist through reason. He goes on to say:

[A]s we conceive the Ideas that are in the Minds of other Spirits by means of our own, which we suppose to be Resemblances of them: So we know other Spirits by means of our own Soul, which in that Sense is the Image or Idea of them, it having a like respect to other Spirits, that Blueness or Heat by me perceived has to those Ideas perceived by another. (52)

We reason that other minds exist because, after affective introspection, we come to know ourselves in some way. We then recognise similar qualities (or what Leibniz would have called properties and relations) in other ideas, and subsequently infer the existence of other minds. He likens this to a kind of mutual perception – a precursor to a phenomenological intersubjectivity, perhaps, but fundamentally flawed. He claims that we can know other minds exist because we can perceive the same qualities in an idea, like colour or temperature, even if we cannot directly perceive each other. Faced here with similar problems to Leibniz, Berkeley begrudgingly reconciles the persistent existence of unthinking things (mere ideas), which provide the basis for his own theory of the plurality of thinking things (minds), with the notion that they are always being perceived by at least one thinking mind: God (31).

While any documentary monadology will owe much to both Leibniz and Berkeley, our parameters for an ontological framework upon which documentary intersubjectivity will be constructed cannot be met by either of their conceptions, whether of minds or of monads. We can find a solution for both Berkeley and Leibniz’s reliance on a supreme being by using logic, without falling into contradiction, in resolving that: 1) monads must be immutable and absolute – monads cannot change or have properties, 2) monads must be disassociated with minds (or souls or spirits) – monads cannot be thinking subjects or have personhood, 3) monads must be free from obligation, custom, or reason – monads cannot be defined within ritualistic or religious frameworks, and 4) monads must constitute the world-as-experience – monads cannot be inaccessible transcendental objects. To address these points, I will use a logical framework of dual-aspect monism derived from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s concepts of “finitude” and “the absolute” as well as Schopenhauer’s “will” and “representation.”

The Logical Mysticism of Monads

Hegel explicitly rejected so-called subjective idealism. The Welsh idealist John Evan Turner confirms this in his text *The Essentials of Hegel’s Spiritual Monism*, in which he demonstrates Hegel’s aversion to the reduction of facts to “a purely personal world, created by ourselves alone” (63). Following Turner’s claim, I use Hegel’s concepts of “the finite” and “the absolute” to

help articulate a monad free from both God and reason. This is not to say that we are rejecting Berkeleyan immaterialism outright, or Leibniz's monadology for that matter, but rather refining their propositions with a brief foray into Hegelian logic.

Finitude, for Hegel, is indelibly marked by its inherent transience. Only in finitude is there a capacity for change because it is, by definition, something that ends. If a monad is to be infinite, its infinity must be absolute and thus sublimate the finite. Stated in another way, a monad's infinity cannot be negated by the finite, and it must also contain the finite to be infinite, because nothing can be outside of absolute infinity. This is apparently paradoxical, in that if finitude is sublated by the absolute, then the finite must itself be eternal. Hegel writes, "The determination of finite things does not go past their end . . . this finitude is their unalterable quality, that is, their quality which does not pass over into their other . . . and so finitude is eternal" (102).

Crucially, the absolute must not be completely outside or "*beyond*" the finite (Hegel 119). Rather, the finite finds its delimitation (and thus its definition) in the infinity of its end, or perishing. It is not "mere" infinity, which forever approaches a limit without achieving it, but absolute infinity, which is unitary, indivisible, and all-encompassing – in other words, monistic. An infinite monad, then, would not be a monad that contains an ever-increasing asymptotic quantity (e.g. 1, 2, 3, 4 . . .), but rather, an unquantifiable monad that nevertheless sublates the (quantifiable) finite without any need to accommodate it (e.g. by expansion or internal displacement).

This monad, being absolute and containing within it all that is eternally finite, would indeed be a mirror of the universe. But, to pin it down, we need to reformulate proposition 56 in Leibniz's *Monadology* to read: simple substances *are* relations that express all the others (Leibniz 24). This is a small but meaningful change. Monads cannot *have* relations, as that renders them delimited by constituent parts and thus finite. If monads *are* relations, then they are free to express all the others through the process of sublation as a true infinity. Relations relate by definition and without prejudice. They require no awareness on the part of the things that are apparently related to persist, and they persist even when the conditions from which they arise perish. I know that my being close to my mother did not end upon her death, as much as I know that a footprint in the sand will forever have been there, despite being washed away. Indeed, it is the relation that produces the finitude of its manifestation, and instantaneously and absolutely sublates it without the need for any accommodation effectuated by the intervention of a god. All relations are, and the things from which they arise have been. The conditions do not delimit the relation because the relation is essentially nothing but itself insofar as it is not quantifiable, yet it sublates all quantities in the same manner as Whitehead's electron, whose influence "permeates the whole universe" (Turner 64).

I am using the word relation here as a technical term, based on its etymology, to mean "to bring back again." In this sense, to relate is to recognise the

contrast or difference produced by the finitude of composite structures, and in so doing, to see those differences collapse back into infinity, restored to the monads that constitute them. Composite structures effectuate the conditions which enfold relations, but do not constitute them. I am naming these conditions the *deuro* (δεῦρο) of relations. *Deuro*, from the Greek, means “hither,” “come!,” or “the present.” It is an exclamation of the here and now, a cry of finitude that perishes as soon as it is uttered. The *deuro* is always sublated by the relation, while the relation is what constitutes its *deuro*.

The Will of Relations

Still, our monad is not yet properly defined, because we have not yet determined why and how relations relate. Until now, we have developed the foundation of our documentary monadology on the work of German and Irish philosophers, but the roots of the idealist tradition spread beyond European shores. The ontological meditations found in the Indian subcontinent’s Upanishads deal explicitly with the propositions of idealism. They articulate a dual-aspect monism through the concepts of *ātman* and *brahman* and their *bbedābbeda* (simultaneous difference and non-difference), for which Hegel’s finite and absolute could be analogues. Indeed, in Swami Paramananda’s notes on the very first page of his translation of the Isa-Upanishad, he begins with a discussion of the “finite” and the “Absolute” in strikingly similar terms (*The Upanishads* 25). Much like our own task to divorce the monad from obligations, custom, or reason, the Upanishads generally oppose ritual. They understand our day-to-day existence as fundamentally illusory, or representational – a veil that is borne from the truth while simultaneously occluding it. There was perhaps no Western idealist philosopher more directly inspired by these texts than Arthur Schopenhauer. In his *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer builds on the work of Immanuel Kant and Indian metaphysics to develop a philosophy of pessimism that can help to answer the how and why of relations through his concept of “will”:

Existence itself, and the kind of existence, in the totality as well as in every part, is only from the will. The will is free; it is almighty. The will appears in everything, precisely as it determines itself in itself and outside time. The world is only the mirror of this willing. (Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1 351)

Schopenhauer formulates the will as something self-determined that permeates all things completely independent of time – it is absolute. Everything we experience in the world is constituted by will. For Schopenhauer, will is both insatiable and irrational in that it wills for the sake of itself, rather than willing for something outside of itself. In fact, it has no choice. He writes, “the will must live on itself, since nothing exists besides it, and it is a hungry will” (*The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1 154).

This “hunger” is not necessarily good, evil, or even purposeful – it has no *telos*. It belongs to no entity, no god, other than itself. Will does not choose to will, just as relations do not choose to relate. Will is not causal. Causality is reserved for representation, that is, the appearance of the world as we experience it, which is constituted by will but not caused by will. Rather, the world is given either as will or as representation, but never as representation by will (*The World as Will and Representation, Vol. 1* 100).

In the same way, we can say that relation has no causal relationship with its *deuro*. Consider a constellation of stars in the sky as a metaphor. The void is there, its substance and its being undisturbed by its inhabitants. If each star winked out in a sudden and massive increase in their entropy, the void would persist. And yet, without the void, the stars collapse into each other instantly, the very fabric of reality torn away, rendering them a single shapeless blob of meaningless light. It is the void, then, that creates the stars, and the void is infinite and absolute such that it has also already swallowed the stars into itself, as stars are always *in the sky*. The constellation is both sublated and constituted by the void. The why and how of relation is this void, it is will. Will is not reasoned or purposed other than for itself, likewise relation. Will, like relation, is absolute and true, it is “incapable of further explanation, but is the basis of every explanation . . . it is the most real thing we know, in fact the kernel of reality itself” (*The World as Will and Representation, Vol. 2* 351).

A Documentary Phenomenology

*I've lived with so many experiences . . . they burn in my head . . . like a hot flame.
Pain and joy . . . fears and hope . . . are all mixed together. I'm losing track. The
old wounds don't have time to heal. New wounds will cover them up. So I film to
hold onto my memories.*

-*Five Broken Cameras*, Burnat Davidi

These words are spoken in voice-over in the opening sequence of Burnat and Davidi's *5 Broken Cameras* (2011). The images are familiar, in that they have the quality of a father failing to stop recording at their child's football match, the automatic lens swinging wildly across landscapes and skyscapes, grinding in and out of focus, finding blades of grass or clusters of pebbles here and there. It is familiar in the way that it makes us think less of the camera and more of the cameraperson. It is a camera operated without particular intention or regard for the image, becoming less a tool for representation and more an appendage of the body, a medium for experience, a mode of perception. Glitches and pixelations, rather than simple flaws in the apparatus of mechanical reproduction, are indicators of an embodied experience – an experience of interruption, of division, of occupation, of war, of violence, and of brokenness. It is not glitch at all – it is a witness.

Through our documentary monadology, we have determined that relations and their *deuro* are precisely what is at stake in a world-as-experience. Our conscious minds are no longer cast as irreducible spirits, but as composite

bodies of immutable and innumerable relations. These minds are free to experience the world in and as such bodies, always incorporating new relations, always resulting in new *deuro* that bear within them the wounds of creation and annihilation. It is from this distinct positionality that we are also free to share experiences *as* documentary. Emad Burnat goes on to describe this very impulse in subsequent scenes throughout *5 Broken Cameras*: a work that gives an account of the Israeli occupation of Bil'in, a Palestinian village west of Ramallah in the West Bank. The piece is structured into chapters based on the cameras that were violently destroyed during its creation. Burnat narrates over the images of his mangled cameras, lined up on a table like so many severed limbs, "Every camera is an episode in my life" (00:01:30-00:01:33).

An early sequence intercuts images of Burnat's new-born son, Gibreel, with the images of Israeli excavators tearing up ancient olive trees from his family's farmlands in preparation for the construction of a barrier. He claims to have gotten his first camera to film Gibreel, a documentary impulse borne out of joy rather than indignation (00:02:49-00:03:49). The camera is revealed to be a relational tool first, in this case quite literally for Burnat's newest relative. Operating the camera is a particular kind of experience borne by those relations. Its observational qualities are ancillary to its experiential function. This experience is firmly situated in Burnat's positionality. It is not rationalised, abstracted, or detached, but grounded in the body as an orientation toward the world. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, "I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body" (94-95). Burnat's cameras bear wounds like a body, they carry scars, both in their memory (tapes) and in their corporeal apparatus. Their use and subsequent destruction are given meaning by their intimate association with Burnat himself, the pain he has suffered, and the wounds he carries. As I previously described in the chaotic opening sequence, they become part of Burnat, composed as such by their relations to him.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is useful, here, as an alternative to the intellectualism of idealism and the empiricism of observation – it can help us navigate the interplay of relations and their *deuro* by grounding us firmly in a distinctly perspectival experience akin to the pluralism of Leibnizian monads. Rather than any attempt to transcend subject/object dualism, we will instead reformulate the subject through our understanding of the object. Both being composite structures, we do not have to consider the Kantian "thing-in-itself" as we have demonstrated it to be perfectly accessible, in its own way, as the relation. Instead, we can look at the multiplicity of Leibniz's "worlds" as objects according to the positionality of experiencing bodies, in that an object is an object in and through its capacity to be experienced from different perspectives, like walking around a sculpture in the centre of a gallery. It is not the sculpture's constancy, but its capacity to change, in concert with the shifts in positionality of the viewer, that gives it the quality of an object (Merleau-Ponty 103). This recalls Leibniz again, who suggested that change was indicative of perception. Objectivity, then, is the result of the constitution of an experiencing body-as-subject. This subject, rather than

being the source of the object, is a composite of relations expressed as an outburst against the tyranny of the absolute, an exclamation of affirmation for the finitude of its existence, and a yearning cry for its eventual end. In other words, it is *deuro*. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, "there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself . . . a subject destined to the world" (xii).

What makes this possible, for Merleau-Ponty, is *perception*. He writes, "Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them" (xi). Read through this lens, *5 Broken Cameras* is a documentary about the experiences of a particular composite body, that of Burnat's body-with-camera(s), with which he navigates a continuum of relations in a manner particular to the perceptual capacities of his (cyborg) composition. In Burnat, the camera(s) become part of what Merleau-Ponty calls the "body schema." He writes:

The theory of the body schema is, implicitly, a theory of perception . . . by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is . . . the subject of perception. (Merleau-Ponty 239)

The nature of the self, for Merleau-Ponty, is in perceiving *as we do* with our bodies, and the body is what we are properly perceiving when we perceive. It is not that there is a body first, and then perception, but rather the capacity for perception is of the body. Our body-as-subject is the subject *of* something, and that something is perception. What the body perceives is *itself in the world*. And so, the world (or at least *a* world) is the object of the perceiving body, which we call experience. It is important to fully embrace the body as the progenitor of the space that it occupies, rather than as a fleshy bag of organs and bones and lenses and memory cards that fills space that could otherwise be used by another entity. The space *of* the body is *from* the body, and not vice-versa. The space of and through a body-with-camera will be different than the space of a dismembered body-without-camera, which is different still from the body-before-camera. This is why documentary requires its own monadology. These composite camera-bodies must be understood as reconfigurations of an already composite body – an object-cum-subject in and through itself as a perceiving constellation of relations enfolded by its *deuro*. The body brackets these relations and allows us to metaphorically lean back from the *fact* of their existence to examine the *nature* of their existence, in all of their apparent paradoxes. This is the enactment of what phenomenologists since Husserl have called the phenomenological reduction (Merleau-Ponty xvi).

Merleau-Ponty affirms our turn away from the Berkeleyan mind-as-m Monad in the following passage, where he writes:

If we were absolute mind, the [phenomenological] reduction would present no problem. But since, on the contrary, we are in the world,

since indeed our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux . . . there is no thought which embraces all our thought. (Merleau-Ponty xv)

Reflection is the result of the phenomenological reduction, and it provides us with opportunity to “step back” rather than “withdraw” from the world such that we do not take the world for granted as common sense, but as “paradoxical” and wonderful and “strange.” It “slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice” (Merleau-Ponty xv). It is in the enactment of the phenomenological reduction that we can engage in phenomenological description and interpretation. Simply holding up a camera to the world is an extension of our already-composite body. Not necessarily in the common-sense manner as described by Marshall McLuhan, but rather more like Donna Haraway’s cyborg, in that the body is already an infinitely mutable assemblage. It is in that extension that we can enact the phenomenological reduction, the camera helps to push us back from the facts of existence and engage in documentary as phenomenological description to discover its nature.

Phenomenological description, first suggested by Edmund Husserl, is characterized by the exclusion of what he calls “deductive theorizings” (*Collected Works, Vol. 2* 169), or the mapping of general ideas to the particularity of experience. Rather, phenomenological description is a strict description of experience itself as embodied perception. By describing experience this way, Husserl argues that we can “determine . . . the generic essence of perception taken universally” (*Collected Works, Vol. 2* 168). In other words, we map the particular to the general, rather than vice-versa. In her text “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” Donna Haraway adds a critically important ethical dimension to the application of such a phenomenological method. She raises the epistemological stakes, noting that how knowledge is formed leads to very real social consequences. The “god trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway 581) is precisely what phenomenological description avoids. When we start with experience, we explicitly start *somewhere*. This somewhere is the body as an orientation to the world, rather than in a disembodied “objective” space. It is situated and, importantly, it is partial. This means that, despite our efforts to move from the particular to the general, “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (Haraway 583). As Astrida Neimanis writes in *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*:

[W]hat we can know about things resides neither in a transcendent platonic realm of ideals nor solely in our solipsistic imaginings; it emerges in the ineluctable imbrications of body and world in a lived experience that is necessarily somewhere, sometime, and somehow. (Neimanis 43)

Documentaries like *5 Broken Cameras* are a form of phenomenological description, a mapping of the particular to the general, because they are

explicitly accounts of experience in and through perceiving bodies that are positioned in the world, i.e. situated somewhere, sometime, and somehow. In contrast documentary, here, with mere documentation, which makes no effort to produce knowledge as such, only to observe and catalogue. Documentary, regardless of intention, is always situated – even when it denies its partiality and makes a claim to a view from nowhere. Such a claim is made, of course, with the intention to declare a specific body's knowledge as universal and map it to the particularity of other bodies as a technique of domination, i.e. power. Using recording technologies, whether recorded by cameras, audio recorders, pen and paper, or simply memory and orality, documentary is always situated, and always embodied, in the sense that it uses mediating devices to extend perceiving bodies in the enactment of the phenomenological reduction.

Documentary as Witness

56 minutes and 45 seconds into *5 Broken Cameras*, Burnat is documenting a small demonstration against Israeli occupation. Much has happened since the opening sequences, including imprisonment, the invasion of his town, the invasion of his home, and the ongoing growth of his son. In the previous scene, his partner pleads with him not to go to the demonstration, to stay home, and to stop filming. “I have to go on filming” (00:56:03-00:56:34), he states bluntly in voice over. The demonstration, we understand, is grounded in a documented legal argument barring Israeli settlers from occupying buildings that were unlawfully constructed on Palestinian lands. As the demonstrators approach the gates, an Israeli soldier raises their firearm in the distance and discharges it, the bullet landing a direct hit on Burnat's camera as he is operating it.

“Your camera's busted” (00:57:05-00:57:08), a nearby demonstrator informs him, as Burnat reels from the impact of the gunshot, holding his ear and wincing in pain. We often imagine that rolling cameras shield us from harm, because the footage can be used as evidence against an aggressor. Burnat even suggests this in a previous scene when Israeli soldiers knock on his door in the middle of the night and attempt to evict him from his home. “I take the camera to protect myself” (00:51:26-00:51:30), he says. Whatever protection might be offered by holding a recording device, Burnat-with-camera is proven to be a target as well, precisely because of his capacity as a witness. And so, he is violently dismembered.

Experience is a term often understood in a semi-passive way. We experience things that *happen to us*. I am using experience more actively, in the sense that to experience means to ‘try out’ or to act ‘out of risk’. Experience does entail risk, and the risk of documenting is the risk of becoming witness. The poet Carolyn Forché develops a theory of a poetry of witness, as a third realm of documentary poetics, which Sandra Beasley explains in her article “Flint and Tinder.” She writes:

Poetry of witness occupies a third realm between the ‘personal’ (lyric acts) and the ‘political’ (oratorical acts). Forché opts to call this the ‘social’ realm of our lives. While all three realms can house resistance, social resistance incites a peer – whether a character in the poem, or its reader – to connect, and finds strength in connection. (Beasley)

Documentary operates in this social realm, the realm of witness. It is a realm of experiential risk as well as a realm of connection, a conversational realm wherein we privilege the partiality of each interlocutor’s perspective, situating ourselves as social beings in a world of other social beings. The body-with-camera, or the documenting body, is a resisting body and a target for violence because of its extended capacity to witness. It is also a distinctly social body, in that its configuration becomes an exponentially extended nexus for connections with other bodies.

Fig. 1 Still from *5 Broken Cameras* (2001).



Documentary witnessing is not always as straightforward as Emad Burnat’s experiences making *5 Broken Cameras*. Indeed, there is a complex matrix of witnessing that unfolds from the act of documenting, which provides a rich and compelling framework for documentary analysis that has the potential to go far deeper than traditional film criticism. An example of a piece that evokes these complexities is Tatiana Huezo’s *Tempestad* (2017). The documentary weaves together two women’s stories of loss, dismemberment, and violence. They find themselves on opposite sides of rampant human trafficking in Mexico, fuelled by the necropolitical border and immigration policies of the United States.

The first story is of a woman named Miriam Carbajal who, working as a low-level immigration agent, is scapegoated and charged with human trafficking for apparently political reasons. She is sent to a prison run by the cartel, endures torture, and witnesses terrible brutality. She recounts her story in voice-over, without appearing on camera, as the viewer is taken on the same bus journey from Matamoros to Tulum that she took to get home after her eventual release. The second story is of Adela Alvarado, whose daughter was

kidnapped on her way to university and never seen again. Assuming she was taken by traffickers, her family searches for her, but is denied meaningful help or justice by corrupt officials. They are now operating a traveling circus, still searching for their lost loved one.

Tempestad reveals a constellation of relations manifesting as an assemblage of composite bodies. Huezo, as the artist, is witness to her subjects telling these stories of unimaginable loss. She is also witness to the other subjects of her camera: the anonymous bus passengers, the shrimp processing facilities along the gulf coast, military checkpoints, circus performers rehearsing, and all throughout, the Mexican landscape always on the cusp of rain and storm. Her subjects, likewise, are witness to her. They adjust, react, and accommodate the creative process. They are not simply as they are, but they are now assembled as documentary subjects in relation to Huezo's interests and investigations. We, the audience, are not witness to any of this, but rather, we are witness to the documentary, which is no less real of an experience. We know that these images and sounds, depictions and representations, can put us at risk, both physiologically and psychologically.

In a notable scene of reflection and reflexivity, the women of the circus gather under a tent to have a conversation. Laughing, they directly address the recording technology, joking about farting on mic. Suddenly, they seem to spontaneously break down into tears in a moment of love and tenderness for each other, overwhelmed by the grief of loss, memory, and their own positionality as documentary subjects (*Tempestad* 00:59:42-01:03:57). To bear what they have witnessed is a great burden, and we, the spectators, become acutely aware that they are not only witnesses to the content of their stories, but to the documentary process, which we are also witness to on the other side of the screen. Rather than sympathy or pity, although both are warranted, it is the inherent positionality of the subjects in relation to the artist, and the audience to the documentary, that produces what Husserl calls intersubjectivity.

In the fifth of his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl defines intersubjectivity in terms of monadology. He first identifies the same problems we found earlier in Leibniz and Berkeley. Husserl articulates the problem thus: "if what belongs to the other's own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same" (109). He goes on, much like we did, to determine that monads are by nature positioned. A monad is constitutive of its *deuro*, and as such its positionality in the world is specific to the experiencing bodies that enfold it. The experiencer in a Husserlian model is "Here," while the Other is "There". That an experiencer can move through the world means that any Here can be made a There. However, he argues that we are entirely unable to inhabit the same positionality as an Other experiencing body. It is not through simple analogy, recognition of mutual similarity, or even empathy, that a true intersubjectivity is possible. Rather, it is in our radical otherness, made explicit by the logical necessity of monadic positionality which cannot be shared, that we must acknowledge the Other as real. He writes, "What I

actually see is not a sign and not a mere analogue, a depiction in any natural sense of the word; on the contrary, it is someone else” (*Cartesian Meditations* 124).

The inherent positionality of the documenting body as witness, in a complex network of relations with other experiencing bodies, is precisely what formulates absolute otherness in a documentary context. This is an intersubjectivity that is not determined by consensus or by the sameness of a shared experience, but by the sharing of experiences as radically and infinitely Other. Ellie Anderson’s paper “A Strict Phenomenologist” demonstrates that Jacques Derrida also arrives at this very conclusion through the concept of witness. She quotes Derrida from an unpublished seminar as saying:

No one can enter into the consciousness of the other. I am alone with myself, at a given moment, and the condition of bearing witness is that someone who is alone with him- or herself . . . can say to someone else: this is what I feel . . . this is what I live, this is what I understand . . . Husserl has rigorously described the impossibility of an originary intuition of the consciousness or ego of others. (Derrida qtd. in Anderson 5)

In other words, that we cannot enter into or inhabit the consciousness of the Other is confirmation of the Other’s existence. In an untranslated interview, Derrida goes on to say that the “distance between someone else’s here and my own is infinite,” (qtd. in Anderson 6) and of course it is, because it is a distance determined by the absolute infinity of a relation. It is this infinity and absoluteness of radical otherness – of monadic relations – that produces documentary intersubjectivity.

The filmmaker John Grierson defined the term documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality” (“The Documentary Producer” 8), which he then elaborated in his “First Principles of Documentary” as method for engaging with lived experience as an opportunity to “perform creative work” (21). In doing so, he was already placing documentary on the continuum of an idealist tradition. Grierson’s insistence on documentary as an art form under the direction of an artist reveals that even early documentary was seen as a distinctly oriented practice. In a description of Robert J. Flaherty’s working method, he writes that documentary “must master its material on the spot, and come in intimacy to ordering it. Flaherty digs himself in for a year, or two maybe. He lives with his people till the story is told ‘out of himself’” (“First Principles of Documentary” 22). In this, the original conception of documentary cinema can be seen as a kind of phenomenological description. If Merleau-Ponty would think space from the body, then Grierson would think documentary subjects from the self. Far from claiming any common sense notion of unbiased objectivity, documentary is grounded in the partiality of perspective as a way of engaging with others in and through experience. The creative treatment of actuality is, in and through its aesthetic dimensions, a creation of *deuro* that enfolds the immutable relations lived by experiencing bodies in the world. Documentary’s real power is not in the

rhetoric of its argumentation, nor in any capacity to act as evidentiary proof, but as an art of intersubjectivity. In other words, documentary is the art of the Other.

Conclusion: Documentary Posthumanism

As the bus journey to Tulum concludes, Huezo's *Tempestad* takes us into a *cenote*, one of many watery pits on the Yucatán Peninsula. The camera is deep in the water, looking up at the oblong gap in the limestone that lets the light in. Floating in the centre of the frame is the figure of a woman. The camera steadily rises, and as we get closer, we notice she is an amputee – one leg is missing from the knee down. She is dismembered (01:39:16-01:40:50). We know that this is Miriam Carbajal, because she casually mentions this feature of her body in an earlier voice-over. In watching this scene, we are confronted by the specificity of her existence, the tremendous loss and trauma of her experience in the cartel's prison, and the lasting damage the whole affair has caused, both for her and for her family. It is a trauma not unlike dismemberment, in that it cannot be undone, just as a relation cannot be unrelated. Reminded of Bernat's composite body-with-camera, which we considered as a bodily extension, we are now faced with the blunt reality of an apparent bodily reduction. This reminds us that the composite nature of our bodies is not trivial, but rather, it is essential to our capacity to experience, to witness, and to document. Neimanis writes, "our bodies are also always disrupting and disorganizing . . . we live our bodies not only via a secure command centre that keeps us all together; we live our bodies even as we are falling apart" (49).

Fig. 2 Still from *Tempestad* (2017).



Neimanis figures the human body as a body of water in her posthuman feminist phenomenology. She demonstrates the more-than-human qualities of our bodies, with water acting less as a central metaphor and more as a phenomenological description of the "wet" way that we experience the world. Although dismembered, Miriam Carbajal's form floating gracefully in the *cenote* recalls a kind of return to a primordial, fluid state that belies the

ostensible closedness of our bodies. Encountering this image, it becomes apparent that the extension and reduction of our bodies as composites is not necessarily reliant on traditional conceptions of our physiology. Neimanis writes, “our bodies of water are neither stagnant, nor separate, nor zipped up in some kind of impermeable sac of skin” (65). Indeed, it is in Carbajal’s dismemberment that the apparent boundary of the skin quickly dissolves. The living, human body is revealed to be deeply imbricated with molecular and meteorological hydraulic cycles of the planet, which include not only the nonhuman, but the non-living. It is here that a posthumanist turn becomes necessary in documentary intersubjectivity. If Burnat’s camera becomes part of Burnat’s body, then the camera itself can be understood not only as an object that changes according to our perspective, but as an experiencing subject in that the capacity to change is entwined with the capacity to perceive. The relations that constitute any object, therefore, necessarily demand that the object simultaneously has its own subjectivity. In this way, the camera is not only extensive of the human body, but the human is likewise extensive of the camera body. If we properly and ethically consider the reality of the Other, we are forced to acknowledge that the nonhuman and non-living Other is also inherently positioned in the world as the result of their constituent relations. The implications of this are myriad, but for a theory of a documentary posthumanism we must start with the proposition that the documentary itself is a composite body of relations enfolded by its *deuro* that perceives and experiences like any other subject. A true documentary intersubjectivity must consider the possibility that the documentary is also our witness.

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