



Susanna Helke

# NANOOKIN JÄLKI

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TYYLI JA METODI DOKUMENTAARISEN  
JA FIKTIIVISEN ELOKUVAN RAJALLA







Ulrich Seidl: *Animal Love* (1995)

#### DOCUMENTARY, MISE-EN-SCÈNE AND THE STYLE OF EXCESS

In the mainstream tradition of documentary film, constructing a *diegetic* story world has not been essential. Especially in approaches based on commentary or interviews, more important than the coherence of the story is the treatment of the theme or the consistency of the argument. Even in *Nanook*, the structure of the story is looser than in a classic fictional narrative.<sup>52</sup> Nichols sums up his view of the difference between fictional and documentary realism as follows: "In fiction, realism serves to make a plausible world seem real, in documentary, realism serves to make an argument about the historical world persuasive."<sup>53</sup> His idea is that documentaries primarily bear witness to things that exist in history, while fiction creates a coherent imagi-

nary world whose characters we are supposed to identify with.

Observational documentaries and, above all, classical direct cinema documentaries marked a shift in the use of non-diegetic devices. The viewer was positioned, in the same way as in a fiction film, as an invisible observer. David MacDougall makes the same observation: "Many of us who began applying an observational approach to ethnographic filmmaking found ourselves taking as our model not the documentary film as we had come to know it since Grierson, but the dramatic fiction film, in all its incarnations from Tokyo to Hollywood."<sup>54</sup> Paradoxically, direct cinema, and the *style of authenticity* that is rooted in it, crucially draws upon a film tradition that is archetypically 'fictional'.

*Models* (1998) is director Ulrich Seidl's documentary film about Austrian photographic models. The film is a staged documentary in the same sense as Flaherty's *Nanook*. The main characters





are real models working in the fashion industry. Vivian, Lisa, Tanja and Elvyra, act out fragments of their own lives in film sequences constructed with precise compositions. They argue with their boyfriends in their bedrooms, meet their lovers in hotels, take drugs and vomit in their bathrooms. Seidl does not film situations spontaneously as in observational documentaries. He does not interview the models, nor do they react to the presence of the camera. The main characters are *somewhere else*, in the film's diegetic world just like the actors in fiction films. In the film, there is a tension between the illusion of the invisibility of the camera and the self-conscious performances of the main characters. The controlled compositions and staged situations disrupt the assumption of spontaneous observation and the *style of immediacy* associated with documentary – especially in the conceptions of direct cinema.

The theme of a film made according to the ideals of puritanical direct cinema has to be something that happens spontaneously without the filmmaker's interference. The approach requires events in which the dramatic tension and narrative structure was 'ready-made'. When addressing questions about current social reality, the filmmaker faces a dilemma: how do abstractions such as money, power or social injustice appear – where and how do they *happen*.

The dialectic relationship between event and *non-event* is a key in understanding the method used by Ulrich Seidl in his films. Seidl does not primarily approach social reality as events that happen to occur in front of the camera. He does not solely observe the free and spontaneous

flow of events, but rather dramatizes and stages scenes in which the main characters perform their lives. He creates condensed narration, coercing the events in his subjects' lives into crystallised fragments with staged and highly composed shots.

In observational documentaries the perception of being present at a particular historical moment is strong. The viewer is convinced that the filmmaker has been witnessing the undisturbed flow of time and the particular historical moment portrayed in the film. Even though the filmmaker inevitably inserts his own ideologically biased interpretations of the contexts surrounding the presented moments, in observational documentary the sense of historical specificity is, nevertheless, quite powerful.<sup>55</sup> In Seidl's and Flaherty's approach, the representation of time, narrative elements and thematic motifs is compressed and condensed. One image or scene does not refer primarily to a specific moment in history. Both directors present sequences of typical, recurring events related to the main characters' lives, but in the composition of the film as a whole these events take on a meaning that goes beyond the concrete situation.

Nichols describes *history*, *story* and *myth* as three axes that are in play when representing people in documentaries and it is in the tension between them that the representation of historical reality takes place. While documentary subjects are both agents in history and characters in the film's narrative, on occasion, they also take on the properties of mythical figures. Nichols uses the term *social actor* to describe the two dimen-



Ulrich Seidl: *Animal Love* (1995)

sional task that the people in documentaries have; they are agents of both history and narration. In documentaries, these characters can be constructed as complex, ambivalent or stereotypically simplified.<sup>66</sup> However the characters are represented, only a fraction of their historical counterpart is revealed.

With classical direct cinema, character-based narrative has already become an accepted means of documentary expression. However, the act of attaching the elements of myth to a real person is controversial in relation to the presumptions of authenticity applied to the genre. Both by associating mythical properties with people and constructing them as characters in a story, historical people are given features that magnify or reduce the dimensions of their real lives.<sup>67</sup> Transformed into a mythical figure, Nanook has become “larger” than Allakariallak; ‘he’ has lost his historical specificity and a large portion of his human characteristics. In a sense, this always happens. As

the subject of a film, a historical person is transformed into something else. Nevertheless, in observational documentary the style of immediacy causes friction and keeps us conscious of the specificity of the historical moment. The people stay within the scale of their temporality.

Nichols argues for an expression in which history and historical individuals would be represented not as being enclosed within the narrative, nor as permanent and simplified. “This very process of mythologization works in two directions, transforming the dead into the eternally remembered and taking from the living something of their historical specificity,” he has written. “Once made into an icon, symbol, or stereotype, the individual is erased.”<sup>68</sup> Nichols emphasises the simplifying tendencies inherent in constructing icons or myths. Entering into the area of myth can, however, be seen not only as a simplification, but also as a possibility for expanding upon the representative capabilities of the subject matter. Seidl and





Flaherty dissolve the individual – tied to a certain time and place – so to be able to express something timeless.

One interesting question is whether a documentary has to be bound to temporality and specificity in order to remain a documentary. Defamiliarization – as defined by formalists as being the purpose of all art<sup>59</sup> – virtually requires a loss of all traces of particular and historical specificity. Almost every master piece of art history has lost its connection with the historical individual who was the model for the picture.

In applying the idea of condensed expression to Seidl's and Flaherty's approach, I understand this kind of device also as a possibility for achieving something that would not be possible by observing the spontaneous flow of events. The people are disengaged from their temporality. In *Models*, Seidl does not primarily tell us about these specific photographic models or about certain periods in their lives, but rather sets them up

to represent his idea of the way the appearance industry commodifies women. The main characters carry the narrative forward like the characters in a fictional film; they are agents of the narrative. But through his stylistic strategies Seidl even goes beyond this. By constructing tableau shots where the thematic elements are presented in a condensed form, Seidl forces his main characters to appear as iconic and mythical figures.

In his film *Jesus, You Know* (*Jesus du weißt*, 2003) Seidl deals with issues of faith and transcendence from the viewpoint of people's personal relationship with God. He places the main characters, praying, into highly composed tableaux and static stages. They surrender to the most intimate rituals of faith in front of the camera. They talk to Jesus casually as though to a friend, telling Him about the everyday crises and relationships in their intimate lives, as befits the western individualist practice of religion. In this film, the iconic nature with which the filmmaker is playing transcends



Ulrich Seidl: *Models* (1998) and *Animal Love* (1995)

the Peircean semiotic application of the concept. The connection between the theme and the style in this film reminds us of the origins of the word iconic, since iconic art, as a ritualistic way of making images, gives form specifically to the transcendent. Icons are not merely symbolic images, since the object of faith is understood to exist and is believed to be true. It is considered to be as real as –if not more so than –the *real* world. An icon is an image that depicts something that cannot be depicted, but which is believed to exist.

Seidl makes sacred images of people, whose relationship with transcendence is astonishingly commonplace, trivial and worldly. In doing so, he uses his compositions to show us something that a conventional, spontaneous recording of an act of prayer could not reveal. He shows the paradox of the faith of the contemporary Western individual: the sacred has become profane.

The documentary authenticity is bound to the expectation that the documentarists should convey reality in a manner consistent with the worldview of their subjects. In Seidl's documentaries, however, the style is forceful and obtrusive. It transcends its subjects' 'own voice'. Through the visual style – without an explicit commentary – Seidl constructs a "tone" that guides the way we perceive the characters.

The concept of *excess*, introduced by Kristin Thompson, relates to Seidl's expression. *Excess* is something that is not necessary to create the spatial and temporal continuity of the film.<sup>60</sup> The *excessive* stylistic devices are not essential for an understanding of the film's narrative, but rather they function as a means to create an overall tone

through which we perceive the film. The dominant style in Seidl's films resembles that of Jacques Tati, who constructs comical observations of modern civilization by using dense expression. In his films, the plot structure is secondary; they do not rely on a classic narrative based on spatial and temporal continuity. What is more important is inducing a certain way of observing things, through which the director reveals the archetypal comicality of our visual environment.<sup>61</sup> Tati uses visual style to construct comedy, in Seidl's films style helps to create a disconcerting atmosphere.

Seidl does not appeal to our capacity for identification with the aid of a fluent and transparent narrative or a fictional psychological realism, nor with the use of the style of authenticity of conventional direct documentary. With the aid of style, he shows the everyday and the archetypal differently. Seidl shows humankind as brutal, but does not provide an opportunity for the viewer to empathize emotionally. Using a rigid style, the viewer is kept at a distance as anecdotal situations are closed off without explanation. He shows the ordinary and everyday, in a way that is typical of western civilisation, yet a way that makes the ordinary appear strange. For example, *Animal Love* (*Tierische Liebe*, 1995), set in the modern city of Vienna, is a study of the emotional ties between people and their pets. The director places the people with their cats, dogs, guinea pigs and rabbits on the stages of their homes and in archetypal suburban garden landscapes in a way that makes western people's relationship with animals appear strange and almost perverse.

