

# The Art of Attention in Documentary Film and Werner Herzog

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## Abstract:

In this article I examine the role of attention as a defining aspect of photography and documentary film. When we pay attention to how the world looks it might sometimes surprise us. It might perhaps show us that we are too set in our ways of seeing and that the world can reveal things unknown, or as Stanley Cavell remarks: “how little we know about what our relation to reality is, our complicity in it”. This is, I claim, the task in which the documentary image can guide us. In order to arrive at this conclusion I will start by examining how the documentary image adheres to knowledge, without falling back on a generic epistemological or representational framework. I start by discussing the final scene in Werner Herzog’s film *Echoes from a Somber Empire* (*Echos aus einem düsteren Reich*, Werner Herzog, 1990) as an example of the aspect of documentary film, that aids us in refraining from projecting our preconceptions on the uncanny. I continue by discussing Nietzsche’s understanding of knowledge as a process of domestication and contrasting it with Merleau-Ponty’s and Bernhard Waldenfels’s phenomenological account of perception, in which the role of attention becomes paramount. This is an attempt to show how the question – what makes the documentary image unique – is entangled in epistemological questions concerning the relationship between vision, image, self and object. A closer investigation of the ambiguities inherent in the concept of “documentary” reveals something important concerning how the unknown becomes known.

**Keywords:** Werner Herzog; Documentary Film; Attention; Phenomenology.

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In his book *Doubting Vision* (2008) Malcolm Turvey outlines an answer to the question concerning how the art of film helps us understand the process of the unknown becoming known, by describing a central tendency in classical film theory. Revelationism<sup>1</sup> is in Turvey's terms a theoretical commitment to perceptual skepticism – the idea that the camera sees more accurately than the human eye, and due to this feature it can reveal things unknown to the viewer (p. 3–4). Turvey has an ambiguous relation with this tenet. On the one hand, he agrees with the point that cinema has the capacity to reveal things that we usually fail to acknowledge, and in this sense the camera aids us in our understanding of the world (p. 113). On the other hand, Turvey disagrees with the point that this is achieved due to the camera's superior objectivity compared to human vision (p. 15). Along the same lines I propose that cinema, and more precisely the tradition of documentary film, is an art form that is able to tease out aspects of reality that we often fail to perceive. My explanation for how this process is to be described is however a bit different, although not contradictory to, Turvey's suggestions.

The idea that I will introduce here is that a certain proficiency of the camera stems from the workings of our attention. The camera is able to aid our perceptual actions of delineating certain elements and bringing them to the foreground while moving others to the background. This proficiency is pointed out by Hugo Münsterberg in one of the earliest theories on film. Münsterberg understands cinema as a way of controlling our attention and steering our perception in a visual reality that is a chaos of impressions ([1916]/1970, p. 31–36). In this sense attention becomes a faculty that domesticates the chaotic world of visual impressions. There is however another aspect that we need to take into account in order for us to understand the workings of our attention, especially in the context of documentary film. In the phenomenological tradition, Maurice Merleau-Ponty talks about attention as a “natural miracle” (2012, p. 29), and, in the same vein, Bernhard Waldenfels relates attention to the concept of *pathos*, which signifies that “something is done to us which we do not initiate” (2011, p. 46). The important difference here from Münsterberg's understanding of attention as a way of domesticating the chaotic world of impressions is that Merleau-Ponty and Waldenfels understand that attention is able to reveal things that break with our previous knowledge and our habitual ways of seeing. Attention does not solely aid us in ordering our impressions; it also breaks down already established orders.

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1. With this term Turvey is mainly referring to the theoretical work of Jean Epstein, Dziga Vertov, Béla Balázs and Siegfried Kracauer.

In this way attention can connect us to alien or unknown visual elements that interrupt our habitual ways of perceiving the world. What this epistemology of attention means for the theory of film is that it introduces a new emphasis. Turvey takes to heart one thing from the movement that he calls revelationism, he holds on to the idea that cinema truly does allow us to “see more and better” (p. 114). I would not deny this, but add that documentary film allows us to refrain from our preconceived projections and thus see more clearly, and in this way it helps us revise and revitalize our habitual ways of seeing.

As Merleau-Ponty (2012) points out, the faculty of attention is puzzling, almost miraculous, since without changing anything in our optical view, attention still changes the focus within that view, including our conceptions of the visible (p. 29). The unique task of attention is then to change our relation to the visual, without tampering, transforming or changing anything within the empirical world. In this sense attention does not domesticate the visual world by subjugating it to our will and intentions, it connects us to what is there to be seen, even when something does not comply with our intentions and preconceptions. This task of refraining from domestication is deeply embedded in the practice of making documentary images.

### The Reading Image

One documentary scene that made a significant impact on me is the ending of Werner Herzog’s film *Echoes from a Somber Empire* (*Echos aus einem düsteren Reich*, Werner Herzog, 1990). The film follows journalist Michael Goldsmith in the Central African Republic. Goldsmith had earlier spent time in the region during the rule of notorious dictator Jean-Bédél Bokassa. The idea with the film is to track down memories and historical facts about the Bokassa regime with Goldsmith as a guide. The film ends in a rundown zoo in the Central African Republic. One of the animals in the zoo that catches Herzog’s attention is a monkey addicted to nicotine. It is not only the actual scene that fascinates me, but also what Herzog tells us about the scene and what his commentary tells us about documentary depiction. In the interview book *Herzog on Herzog* (2002), he writes:

In the decrepit zoo we found one of the saddest things I have ever seen: a monkey addicted to cigarettes thanks to the drunken soldiers who had taught it to smoke. Michael Goldsmith looks at the ape and says something like, “I can’t take this any longer” and tells me I should turn the camera off. I answer back from behind the camera, “Michael, I think this is one of the shots I should hold.” He replies, “Only if you promise this will be the last shot of the film.” While this dialogue and my use of the animal was

a completely scripted invention, the nicotine-addicted monkey itself was not. There was something momentous and mysterious about the creature, and filming it in the way I did brought the film to a deeper level of truth, even if I did not stick entirely to the facts. To call *Echoes from a Somber Empire* a “documentary” is like saying that Warhol’s painting of Campbell’s soup cans is a document about tomato soup (p. 242).

When I see the smoking monkey in a rundown zoo in Herzog’s film, I have no earlier image or understanding to fall back on. The film sequence takes me to a place and presents me with a situation that I can not imagine. It is not clear to me what this image means. But it has an impact on me. It is unnerving, provocative. It makes me uncomfortable and sad. It reads me. It puts me in this state because it shows something unknown to me. These reactions that I have are hard to articulate, but there is one common feature that needs to be analyzed further. It becomes evident that the act of seeing images is not only a one-way relation in which I stand before an image and interpret it; the image does some work as well. When I write, “the image reads me”, I indicate that the direction that we often presuppose when we talk about interpretation, a one-sided relation in which the subject interprets the image, is turned around: the image interprets me. The scene with the smoking monkey tells me something about myself that I perhaps did not know before. It reveals something of the world regardless of my projections and interpretations.

To quote Kracauer when he talks about the close-up as a cinematic technique: “Such images blow up our environment in a double sense: they enlarge it literally; and in doing so, they blast the prison of conventional reality, opening up expanses which we have explored at best in dreams before” (1997, p. 48). In accordance with Kracauer, I would put the scene in Herzog’s film among those which “blasts the prison of conventional reality”. But, in the case of the documentary, it is not imagination that alters our optical and direct visual world, rather the scene is reality that goes against the grain with our preconceptions, our intellectual assumptions about the world. This is more in line with Kracauer, when he writes: “All these things are part of us like our skin, and because we know them by heart we do not know them with the eye” (p. 55). Kracauer points out how film can bring us into contact with elements that “certainly go far in defying our habits of seeing” (p. 49). In the case of the documentary image the opposite of our “habits” of seeing is not another metaphysical reality, but our way of seeing beyond, or despite of, the habitual. It is not another non-visual world, or a different visual world, that which is beyond the habitual are events in which we are attuned to the present historical world – to our perception – rather than to our preconceptions or our thinking.

In the essay “What Photography Calls Thinking” (2005), Stanley Cavell explores this obstinate aspect of photography, the way in which photographs evoke uneasiness in us due to their ability to show us the unexpected. He writes:

To say that photographs lie implies that they might tell the truth; but the beauty of their nature is exactly to say nothing, neither lie or not to. [...] I believe the motto [that photographs lie] serves to cover an impressive range of anxieties centered on, or symptomatized by, our sense of how little we know about what our relation to reality is, our complicity in it; that we do not know what to feel about those events, that we do not understand the specific transformative powers of the camera, what I have called its original violence; that we cannot anticipate what it will know of us – or show of us (p. 116–117).

Based on Herzog’s commentary, the smoking monkey seems to evoke exactly this kind of ambivalent reaction in him during their encounter. It reminds Herzog of “how little we know about our relation to reality” and “our complicity in it” at the same time. Up until the ending scene the film has been a description of Bokassa’s eccentric, brutal and sadistic regime. Goldsmith bears witness of torture and even cannibalism, and he himself was imprisoned and tortured at the hands of Bokassa. Still the smoking monkey stands out as something that even he, a seasoned journalist, cannot bear. The monkey and the sad fact that it has picked up the habit of smoking changes something within Herzog; it reads him and informs him about something concerning himself. This is what Bernhard Waldenfels refers to as *pathos*. The alien influence is something that challenges the self, but it is not contradictory to the self. Only through this process of facing the alien can we construct what we call self. Waldenfels writes: “The onness without which nobody would be him- or herself can only come about because of an openness to the alien which nevertheless evades us” (2011, p. 28).

Although Herzog constructs the scene and heavily influences what we see and hear, he is still drawn to the monkey exactly because it is beyond his interpretations and inventions. When Herzog talks about the scene in the interview book, he reveals that it was scripted through and through. The commentary in the scene that seems spontaneous and casual is predetermined as is the editing with close-up shots of the monkey’s hand and the Schubert soundtrack that is added on to the scene. But there is something that is not scripted or created. The smoking monkey is there to be seen and it tells us something that goes beyond Herzog’s deliberate interventions. Herzog himself is reluctant towards calling this film a documentary. His reluctance here is to be understood against the

backdrop of a certain tradition within documentary film. Herzog (2002) speaks of *cinéma vérité*<sup>2</sup> as the “accountant’s truth” and continues: “Through invention, through imagination, through fabrication, I become more truthful than the little bureaucrats” (p. 240).

I believe Herzog intuitively addresses something significant when he makes this distinction. But I do not see this as a split between two traditions within documentary film. Rather, like Cavell shows, what is at play here is a tension within the documentary image itself. Through the interventions, through editing and dramatization the scene draws our attention to the element that is there independent of any manufacturing. The questions concerning what is there prior to Herzog’s intervention and what is there in the scene because of it arise. Herzog understands that the line between the discovered and the invented is blurred, therefore he makes it into his method to actively emphasize the distinction between the scripted and the unscripted, for example by adding an apparently dramatic soundtrack to a scene that does not seem dramatized from the start. These interventions are put into use in order for the unscripted features in the encounter to become more apparent. The intentional play

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2. What Herzog refers to here is perhaps a bit confusing since *cinéma vérité* is in itself a term that is often used confusedly. Herzog’s use of the term is one example of this confusion. In order to understand Herzog’s polemic remark Bill Nichols’s explanation of what he calls the observational mode of documentary film is helpful. Nichols (1991) writes: “The observational mode stresses the nonintervention of the filmmaker. Such films cede ‘control’ over the events that occur in front of the camera more than any other mode. Rather than constructing a temporal framework, or rhythm, from the process of editing as in *Night Mail* or *Listen to Britain*, observational films rely on editing to enhance the impression of lived or real time. In its purest form, voice-over commentary, music external to the observed scene, intertitles, reenactments, and even interviews are completely eschewed. [Erik] Barnouw summarizes the mode helpfully when he distinguishes direct cinema (observational filmmaking) from Rouch’s style of *cinéma vérité*.” (p. 38). The confusion concerning *cinéma vérité* has in this sense to do with a discourse between different movements within documentary cinema. Diane Scheinman (1993) explains how *cinéma vérité*, a style of documentary filmmaking invented by French filmmaker Jean Rouch, actually came about as a criticism of the idea of “neutral” documentation. In his filmmaking Rouch acknowledges that the camera’s presence entails a transformation of any given situation. In this sense Rouch also acknowledges that the camera is never neutral, its presence always has an influence on the subjects in the scene. Scheinman describes the context in which the term *cinéma vérité* gained its significance, she writes: “Stylistically, the film [*Chronique d’un été* (Jean Rouch, France 1960)] was inspired by the ideas of Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov who, in the 1920s, wrote about *kino pravda* (film truth), suggesting that the camera recorded life and therefore led to a ‘cinema of truth’. Rouch, in contrast, felt the camera provoked the behaviour of those in front of the lens, resulting in a ‘truth of cinema’” (p. 194).

with the differences between the scripted and the unscripted makes the difference more apparent, as it permits the unscripted to stand out.

What makes this scene a prime example of the aspect of the documentary (despite Herzog's reluctance to call his film a documentary), which enables a refraining from preconceived projections, is that the means used by Herzog are used in order to show what was actually there in front of his and Goldsmith's eyes. The intervention that the presence of the camera inevitably entails is used to bring forth the uncanny visual world that challenges our previous perceptions; but still it is not *another* world. Techniques of cinematography like editing, close-ups, soundtrack and narration, give Herzog the means to show what we do not usually see, and still they aid us in perceiving the actual world, they are not used to create another fictitious world,. In this way the scene helps us re-evaluate our relation to the world. As Turvey points out, the classical tradition within film theory understood this revelatory capacity of photography as stemming from the photographs ability to aid the eye in seeing things invisible (2008, p, 5). In my example above the revelatory proficiency of documentary film does not present us with the invisible, it does not make the invisible visible, rather it connects us with what actually is there to see. Siegfried Kracauer makes a similar point when he writes about the unseen as "blind spots of the mind". With this he refers to our cultural and habitual ways of seeing that do not permit us to acknowledge what is there in front of our eyes, that which "escapes our attention in everyday life" (p. 53). In these cases it is obvious though that we are not talking about something invisible, but something that can be seen if we can get past our set ways of seeing (cf. Turvey 2008, p. 123). The scene from Herzog's film, exemplifies the intricate way in which documentary film can aid us in this task of getting past our set conventions of seeing.

To capture or tease out that which is out there despite our preconceptions is a thoroughly documentaristic attitude toward depiction. What is to be gained by this kind of strategy is hopefully new perspectives and knowledge. When the ephemeral – the world as it is despite the director's intervention – is made conspicuous, it engages us to revise and revive our attention and our conceptions. Here it is important to notice that if we agree that Herzog succeeds in capturing the unconditioned, he does so through his intervention, not due to refraining from intervention.

On this view, the documentary image builds upon an idea that emphasizes our engagement in actively re-establishing our ways of seeing and knowing, beyond our fixed and predetermined knowledge. The smoking monkey in *Echoes from a Somber Empire* does exactly this. Although I know that the scene is scripted, that it is made possible

through interventions, the editing and the manipulation that Herzog does when he makes the scene, it is still able to show me something beyond the manufactured. This could be understood as a paradox. If we think of the essence of the documentary as a kind of mold in which more intervention means less neutrality (less realism) and less intervention means more neutrality (more realism), it will be hard to comprehend what goes on in the example with the smoking monkey.<sup>3</sup> This is what the example actually tells us: there is little room for neutrality in this discussion. Herzog's interventions are not neutral; they are fabrications, even deceptions. As for the smoking monkey, it is not a figment of Herzog's mind, but neither is it a neutral object. For Herzog, it is bewildering to encounter the monkey, and the presence of this bewilderment engages my perception of the scene. Or, to make this point stronger: precisely because I get the sense that this particular element of the scene – the smoking monkey – cannot be made up, it appeals to me and engages me. The smoking monkey does not address me in a neutral way; if it were neutral it would not address me at all. Neutrality does not fit in as a concept to describe what makes this scene documentary, rather I suggest that this documentary appeal of the scene has to do with a change in direction between the subject and the object, or, the interpreter and the interpreted. Suddenly the gaze is turned on Herzog, and through him on us. When Goldsmith utters “I can't take this any longer”, our attention is turned towards Herzog. And, when the smoking monkey looks into the camera, the gaze is directed to us. How can we fathom what we are looking at? The event of what Waldenfels refers to as *pathos* is signified by this change of direction. When we become addressed by the alien, he writes: “Perceiving does not start with

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3. The dichotomy “neutrality versus intervention” is a common backdrop for theoretical discussions on documentary film. For example, in her book *New Documentary* (2006), Stella Bruzzi introduces the concept of performativity. Bruzzi shows how the realization that the presence of the film-camera always in one way or another alters the situation that is filmed has put in question earlier understandings of the authenticity and objectivity of documentary film. Bruzzi makes a distinction between a classical tradition of realism within documentary film that hides the performance and actions of the author, and a (new) documentary practice that make the performative aspects, actions and processes of production, known to the viewer (p. 185–187). However, I do not see this performativity as a quality that stands behind a certain category of documentary films, rather it is an aspect within each and every image. To some extent every image is a result of the actions of its author. Likewise, neutrality is a common feature in documentary images. The idea of the documentary builds on a very specific way of bringing out that which is there despite the intervention of the camera-crew, but here the result, the revealing of that which is unconditioned, is a result of the intervention, it is not there to be seen without the camera-crew's engagement.

an act of observation; on the contrary, it arises with an event of attention that is aroused and provoked by what strikes me. [...] They emerge from situations marked as something that attracts or repulses, which frightens or tempts us" (2011, p. 45).

Here we arrive at a genuine difficulty when we try to understand what the term "documentary" stands for. My proposition is that it stands for images that bring out the contingent and ephemeral, the world as it is, independent of our preconceptions. Here we are at the core of this difficulty, since the world never is "independent of our preconceptions". Our conceptions give form to the world, and still, without our gaze it is not formless. Merleau-Ponty begins his last book with this same pivotal philosophical question when he writes: "This is the way things are and nobody can do anything about it. It is at the same time true that the world is *what we see* and that, we must learn to see it" (1968, p. 4). This is the point where our concept of knowledge starts to invite the difficult questions: how should we describe the processes of knowledge and perception? So far I have shown that the clear-cut dichotomy of knowledge as either discovery or invention does not take us all the way. We have to start looking for alternative descriptions of the process of perception and knowledge in order to understand how the unknown becomes known.

#### Knowledge as Domestication and Knowledge as Wonder

The ambiguities that are inherent in the concept of "documentary" that I have described above are linked to a more general problem concerning the concept of knowledge within philosophy that builds upon the juxtaposition between fixed knowledge and an ephemeral contingent visual world. Nietzsche (1992) describes this juxtaposition:

The nature of our psychology is determined by the fact (1) That *communication* is necessary, and that for communication to be possible something must be stable, simplified and capable of being stated precisely (above all, in the so-called *identical* case). In order that it may be communicable, it must be felt as something *adjusted*, as *recognizable*. The material of the senses, arranged by the senses, reduced to coarse leading features, made similar to other things, and classified with its like. Thus: the indefiniteness and the chaos of sense-impressions are, as it were, *made logical*. (2) The *phenomenal* world is the adjusted world which *we believe to be real*. Its "reality" lies in the constant return of similar, familiar and related things, in their *rationalized character* and in the belief that we are here able to reckon and determine. (3) The opposite of this phenomenal world is not "the real world", but the amorphous and unadjustable world consisting of the chaos of sensations – that is to say, *another kind of phenomenal world*, a world which to us is "unknowable". (p. 85–86)

The view that Nietzsche describes here is, in a nutshell, the basis for an empiricist understanding of the concept of knowledge. Or, to be more precise, what Nietzsche describes here is the dialectic between empiricism and rationalism, or, their modern counterparts, realism and idealism. There is something in this duality that builds upon the juxtaposition between the fixed or adjusted world and the chaotic world of sensations that leads us astray. If we think of knowledge as a product of domestication, then the real world, the world as it is prior to our conceptions of it, becomes essentially an unintelligible world of chaos. That is, if we think that domestication is – and this is the key here – the only way to knowledge, then this understanding presupposes that the real phenomenal world of “the material of the senses” is in itself unintelligible.

In the passage above, Nietzsche ends up in a misguided conclusion according to which the world prior to our domesticizing is in fact “unknowable”. When we end up in an epistemology in which knowledge by necessity is a form of domestication, in which the mind and the senses transform the chaotic and ephemeral natural world into an anthropomorphous order, we have to realize that the theory leads us astray. In order for us to surpass this misunderstanding, we have to acknowledge that there are other ways through which we acquire knowledge, or more precisely, that knowledge acquisition is a more complicated process than simply domestication. We have to understand that the direction between the subject and the object can be turned around, that “the other” also acts upon us (Nietzsche 1992, p. 86). When this change of direction occurs we are confronted by uncertainty.

Standardization, rationalization, and fixating are certain ways through which we acquire knowledge. In making things knowledgeable we organize and rationalize our sense impressions into categories, we create order in the ephemeral world of sensations. The practice of making documentary images has often had this role of organizing sense impressions into a unified fixed picture. A film can, for example, describe the change of the seasons from winter to spring by reducing this event into a two-hour assemblage of sounds and images. A film is, in this sense, a reduction by necessity since it rearranges sense impressions into a reductive formalization of the actual event (cf. Münsterberg 1970, p. 37).

This is one way to understand how knowledge comes about. In this sense knowledge is a way of domesticating the chaotic world of phenomena and experience, of making it into an anthropomorphic order, through interpretation, rationalization and representation. However, this is not the only way through which we acquire knowledge and it is not a very fruitful theory to start with, since it produces a very narrow understanding of both what we call “knowledge” and what we

call “sense-experience”. In this dialectic of empiricism-rationalism our knowledge becomes a process of transformation in which the real always has to be transformed into something else, the object has to be transformed into ideas. Sartre (2002) describes this as a process like digestion, when he writes: “We have all believed that the spidery mind trapped things in its web, covered them with white spit and slowly swallowed them, reducing them to its own substance. What is a table, a rock, a house? A certain assemblage of ‘contents of consciousness’, a class of such contents” (p. 382). Sartre reveals a certain temptation to understand knowledge as domestication, whereas this is just one aspect of how we acquire knowledge. And if it were the only way to describe how knowledge comes about, it would mean that the real would always be a result of how we construct an order through domestication. If this were to be true “life would be determined only by habit without allowing for anything of the alien” (Waldenfels 2011, p. 58).

What the scene in *Echoes from a Somber Empire* tells me, is that there are things I did not know, and that although I can feel and be touched by the faith of this monkey, I cannot, at that initial moment of viewing the scene, comprehend or fathom what I actually see. The encounter with the scene is a starting point for re-assessment: wonder, re-assessment and engagement are then another set of ways by means of which we acquire knowledge. The difference here, compared to knowledge as a form of domestication, is that I cannot intentionally choose to experience wonder. It is something that happens to me, not something that I intentionally can put into play (cf. Waldenfels 2011, p. 39). I cannot choose to be surprised or astonished. In this sense, the element of surprise is not intentional. When wonder announces itself it is as if the world tells me something. In such instances I can react as if the world were chaotic, I can feel that the world does not make sense. But I can also see these instances as openings towards revising my ideas. Wonder can change the way in which I think and what I know. In this sense, the ideas cannot be changed by ideas alone. Sense perception stands in this way as an opponent to my thinking (I will get back to this difference between thought and perception at the end of this article). What I want to indicate here is that without these kinds of experiences of wonder it would be hard to understand the proper role of knowledge. These categories of fixing the world (domestication) and permitting oneself to be conditioned by the world (wonder) complement each other. There is no conflict or actual paradox between fixating and re-assessing *per se*, as the juxtaposition between realism and idealism would have it, they are both important aspects of knowledge.

This is one important starting-point when we are concerned with the puzzling character of the term “documentary”. We have to understand

that it does not adhere to any clear-cut division between images that are fabricated and images that are neutral reflections of what is in front of the camera at any given time. The scene from *Echoes from a Somber Empire* does not hide the fact that it is dramatized, that it is an intervention in the real world that guides our way of understanding the subject of the smoking monkey. It is through this intervention that we are able to share Herzog's wonder or bewilderment. It is through Herzog's arrangement of the shot, his actions and his use of the smoking monkey in it, that the non-scripted, unconditioned features in the scene are captured. It is these contingent and ephemeral features that are unnerving, that make us uneasy, because they conflict with our habitual understanding of the world. This is neither achieved through neutrality nor through domestication, but through engagement: the reciprocity that the encounter with the unknown demands.

### **Thought, Perception, Attention**

What I am trying to outline here is a distinction that explains the role of the documentary, but this is philosophically challenging as every distinction seems inaccurate. Donald Evans (1979) writes: "In art the natural objects which serve as correspondences are replaced by manufactured ones. We create rather than select correlates to our inner experience" (p. 236). If we stick to Herzog's own account of how the sequence with the smoking monkey came about, this is not the case. In this case it would be inaccurate to claim that Herzog simply created the object that correlates with his experience, he discovers it and attends to it. In this way the art of the documentary, the action that is performed with distinction in order to succeed in making a proper documentary image, is an art of attention. Attention does not tamper with the object, it does not transform the object or re-create the object. In this case, the experience of Herzog is not inner, it is not an event happening inside of Herzog that domesticates or defines the outer view, the experience is in the view. The meaning of the sequence is established through an encounter in the world. The smoking monkey sequence gains its meaning from the situation in which it belongs.

Merleau-Ponty (2012) makes an important distinction when he writes: "The real is to be described, and neither constructed nor constituted. This means that I cannot assimilate perception to syntheses that belong to the order of judgement, acts, or predication" (p. lxxiv). I would disagree with Merleau-Ponty here on the last few words, since "to describe" is also an act. But let us consider what describing means in contrast to constructing or constituting. For starters, we have to note that representation is a practice in which we create an object in the likeness

of another object. Describing is not the same act as representing, since representation means literally that I construct something in the likeness of something else, whereas, for example saying “in the decrepit zoo we found one of the saddest things I have ever seen: a monkey addicted to cigarettes thanks to the drunken soldiers who had taught it to smoke” is not a way of re-construing that something. The sentence points to the encounter with the smoking monkey. The same can be said about photographic depiction in general. Roland Barthes (1981) highlights this function of photography when he compares it with the Sanskrit concept *tat*, he writes: “*tat* means *that* in Sanskrit and suggests the gesture of the child pointing his finger at something and saying; *that, there it is, lo!* but says nothing else” (p. 5). In this understanding of photographic depiction, the photograph is a kind of picture that is designed to point at the objects in the world. The photograph does not re-create or re-construct. The way in which it shows me the world is not through copying or reproducing the objects in the world, it is not a model or an ersatz for the real object, but a description that points to the qualities of the objects in the world, it attends to the world (cf. Turvey, p. 117).

Merleau-Ponty (2012) writes: “attention creates nothing, and nothing less than a natural miracle (as Malebranche more or less said) can make spring forth precisely these perceptions or these ideas that are capable of responding to the questions I ask myself” (p. 29). Here, attention reveals itself to be a faculty that does not transform the optical view, it focuses perception and enables it to perceive the meaningful features within that view. In this sense attention is opposite to the rationalizing and domesticating faculty of reason that transforms, categorizes and standardizes our perception. We have to acknowledge that attention is not a faculty that is completely ruled by our intentions and our will, attention is not primarily a domesticating faculty. Waldenfels (2011, p. 59) notes that the root of the word “attention” is the Latin *tensio*, for “tension”. It signifies an event that is neither reducible to the subjective or to the objective; it resides in the tension in-between.

We can attend to something without it being intentional, in perception, attention surpasses intention as a guiding faculty. Merleau-Ponty (2012) writes: “Since the act of “*Bemerken*,” or of “taking notice,” is not the efficient cause of the ideas to which it gives rise, it is the same throughout all acts of attention, just as the searchlight’s beam is the same regardless of what landscape it illuminates. Attention, then, is a general and *unconditioned* [my emphasis] power in the sense that it can at any moment indifferently cast its light upon any of the contents of consciousness” (2012, p. 29). In the same spirit Alva Nöe (2012) writes on the attentive aspect of perception: “Perceptual experiences are ways of

coming into contact with the world, not ways of building up or constructing representations of ways things are or might be. Perception is, in this sense, a nonintentional relation to the world” (p. 73). As with the visual realm, the photograph does not yield to our intentions, through and through.

An important aspect of attention is that it is primarily a function of visual perception, and consequently the documentary is a visual art form. In order to exemplify what I mean here, let us look at the distinction between thought and perception. This is a big topic in philosophy<sup>4</sup> and I can barely scrape the surface of this discussion here. It is however important to acknowledge that this difference is not a clear-cut epistemological difference, as the main dialectical movements in philosophy have described it. Neither thought, nor perception, have any pre-given or context-independent priority as a means of knowing.

There are tendencies within philosophy that tempt us to make a clear distinction between thought and perception, to describe this distinction very bluntly, we could say that thought is usually understood as something inner, whereas perception is, or at least adheres to, something external. Much of what I have stated above could be understood within this dialectic. And this is not a completely incomprehensible way of trying to make sense of our faculties of

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4. If we look into the origins of how perception became conceived as a form of thought, this development can be traced to the philosophy of Descartes. Daniel Heller-Roazen (2009), writes: “Within a few years, the classical doctrine of sensation was to be famously contested by the thinker who has been regarded, more often than any other, as ushering in the modern age in philosophy. Starting with the *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, which are thought to have been composed before 1628, Descartes asserted that the indubitable foundation of all knowledge could lie nowhere other than in the representative activity of the rational being, which he called, with a term at once old and new, *cogitation*, ‘thought’ [Descartes, *Ouvres*, vol 10, pp. 359–62, eds. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Vrin 1996)]. He would later explain that such a ‘cogitation’ could not be opposed to perception as the ‘intellection’ of the medieval doctors had been distinguished, at least in principle, from ‘sensation.’ The reason was that perception, for Descartes, was in every sense an act of the representing, conscious and thinking ‘I’; for him every human sensation was, in other words, an act of cogitation. By the term ‘thought’ [*cogitationis nomine*], the philosopher would thus explain in the ninth principle of the first part of his *Principia philosophiae*, ‘I understand everything which we are conscious of as happening within us, insofar as we have consciousness of it [...]’ in the second set of *Replies* he was even more explicit. Speaking of the expression *cogitation*, he declared: ‘I use this term to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it. Thus all operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination, and the senses are thoughts’” (p. 165).

thinking and perceiving. But at the same time, when we make this distinction into something definitive, we will encounter problems. Nietzsche (1992) can be said to invite this kind of philosophical problem, when he writes: “There would be nothing which could be called knowledge if thought did not first so *recreate* the world into ‘things’ which are in its own image. It is only *through* thought that there is *untruth*” (p. 87). This is an understanding in which knowledge is conceived as domestication. What the smoking monkey sequence shows is that there is something misguided in this conception of knowledge. To be precise, Nietzsche actually misunderstands the role of thinking here, since he understands thinking as a way of reproducing the outer object into an inner ersatz, an image, of the object. As if perception always had to be translated or transformed into thinking in order to grant us knowledge. But we have perception, and it is not a form of thinking, it does not always need to become thinking in order to grant us understanding. This is what documentary images bring to the table: perception can be meaningful without being translated to thought. The camera aids us in attending to our faculty of visual perception.

My point is that thoughts are not recreations or reproductions of sense perception, because thought and perception are not straightforwardly compatible faculties. A picture cannot represent a thought; if it could, it would become superfluous. Wittgenstein (1967) notes: “one cannot follow one’s own mental images with attention” (p. 16e). We can for example not trace the outlines in our mental representations or move further away or closer to a mental representation, as we can do when we are dealing with perception and “external” images. Attention, the act of attending to something, is an action in which one is turned toward the world. Visual attention requires a spatial world of space and time, i.e. a visual world. No photograph carries everything that the photographer or the viewer thinks about the photograph. The photograph does not carry all the sentiments that we project onto it. Our thought does not carry all the visual information that is in a photograph. Our thoughts do not need to carry the visual information, since we have perception guided by our attention and external images to perform this task. The discrepancy here is not primarily due to a conflict between objective fact and subjective judgement (although this example fits this description as well), it stems from the difference in the actions of perception (as attention) and thought (as rationalization).

In our common experience of vision, we are not usually surprised by how the world looks, it does not clash with our thought. But when we pay attention to how the world looks, it might sometimes surprise us. It might perhaps show that we are too set in our ways of seeing and that the world

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can reveal things unknown. What I have tried to highlight in this article is how the documentary image can guide us in this visual task.

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