

HOSTILE FILM: DOCUMENTARY AS THE VEHICLE OF POLITICAL CONFLICT

P. STUART ROBINSON

Abstract

Documentary-film scholar Stella Bruzzi highlights the increasingly reflexive approach of contemporary independent filmmakers. Specifically, they commonly reflect on the collaborative performance entailed in depicting – and hence working *with* – human subjects, and therefore draw attention to—rather than hide—this intersubjective process, in all its artificiality and representative distance. In short, they show the workings. Awareness of such intersubjective performative potential enhances and makes more transparent the immanent power of film as speech-act, and challenges the conventional divide between documentary and fiction. It also raises new analytical possibilities, elaborated below. The focus is on the more vigorously political character of documentary filmmaking, not in terms of overt political text or slogans, but as direct intersubjective engagement – employing moving images – with a perceived ally or adversary. Documentary or “documentary style” examples, though shaped by the “new performativity,” are not necessarily transparent, either to their subjects or spectators. Their transparency is thus an important variable and question for analysis. The selected works’ power-dynamics are explored in ideological terms of the dialectics of antagonism, as hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse. The key questions for consideration are (i) the direct and local political effects of their impact on participating subjects, and (ii) their more indirect and exemplary effects, on the viewing public. The chosen material comprises three recent features placed in the context of an earlier and highly influential boundary-breaching example, *Borat* (Larry Charles, 2006). The paper builds, in this regard, on Lewis MacLeod’s interrogation of the ambivalent political dimension of Sacha Baron Cohen’s manipulative, quasi-fictional interventions.¹ The works in question are *Reindeer Island (Reindrømmen)* (dir. Fridtjof Kjæreng, 2019), *The White World According to Daliborek (Svet podle Daliborka)* (dir. Vít Klusák, 2017) and *Golden Dawn Girls (Hatets vugge)* (dir. Håvard Bustnes, 2017).

Introduction

Dalibor is a natural performer, at ease with the camera in a way that seems to elude him with ‘real live people’, and so he parades, as it were, his fascist persona for this apparently passive—and forgiving—observer. Too timid to attend a real live neo-Nazi rally, he seizes the opportunity to express himself, perhaps as never before, through the vehicle of film. His accomplice, or agent provocateur, in this enterprise is the documentary filmmaker, Vít Klusák. It is easy to imagine the poor white supremacist’s discomfort and sense of betrayal upon watching the end-product, *The White World According to Daliborek*, released in 2017. It is a discomfort shared by increasing numbers, the product of a burgeoning trend of video representation as social weapon, the emergence of what we might usefully characterise as a peculiarly *hostile* species of film. Its audio-visual “attacks,” it will be argued in the pages that follow, exemplify and help shape a changing ethical and political landscape, that is, a “world order” increasingly redolent of social antagonism and disintegration. They also express a paradoxical reflexivity regarding the conditions of realism, what is entailed in the faithful and thus honest depiction of human subjects. It is paradoxical because such reflection regarding the conditions and possibilities of honest filmmaking simultaneously and logically uncover the conditions and possibilities of *dishonest* filmmaking.

Stella Bruzzi, among others, highlights the increasingly reflexive approach of contemporary documentary filmmakers, “independents” especially (2018, 156-7). Specifically, they are more self-conscious about the collaborative performance entailed in depicting and hence working *with* human subjects. They therefore deliberately draw attention to—rather than hide—this intersubjective process by highlighting its artificiality and representative distance. In other words, they “show the workings” of their filmmaking, to filmed subject and spectator alike. Awareness of such intersubjective performative potential enhances and makes more transparent the immanent power of film as speech-act, and challenges the categorical but largely conventional divide between documentary and fiction. It also raises new analytical possibilities regarding the more vigorously political character of documentary filmmaking, not in the sense of the incorporation of political text or slogans, but as direct intersubjective engagement, employing moving images, with perceived allies and, especially, adversaries. Documentary or “documentary style” examples of such engagement, though shaped by the “new performativity,” do not necessarily make their own performativity transparent, either to subject or spectator. Their variable

¹ L. MacLeod, “‘A Documentary-Style Film’: ‘Borat’ and the Fiction/Nonfiction Question”, *Narrative* 19 (2011), 111-132.

tendency towards transparency versus what Bruzzi calls “the masquerade of spontaneity” (2018, 153) is indeed a central analytical question.

The following reflections constitute a response to an arguable lacuna created by the preferred focus of most scholars exploring the conditions of progressive politics. An issue of focus this broad cannot be addressed directly here, and so a few illustrative examples must suffice to support its salience. The work of Bruzzi is as good a place to begin as any. Her analysis of performative film is concerned, broadly speaking, with the conditions of solidarity, the ways in which human beings can be brought together in interactions and collaboration founded on relations of mutual respect and equality. This resonates with work in a wide variety of contexts. Currently highly topical examples are those efforts to understand engagements with and the conditions of solidarity with contemporary migrants (Skleplaris 2017; Gkolfinopoulos 2017; Lafazani 2012; Millner 2011; Mantanika and Kouki 2011). P. Stuart Robinson (2019), Mieke Bal (2014) and T.J. Demos (2013), among others, have addressed such questions as they relate specifically to film. Let us consider the value and limitations of this kind of work in the explicitly political terms of its potential contribution to an avowedly emancipatory agenda. Assuming a more or less oppressive social order, its resistance certainly depends, partly, on the mobilisation of its opponents: to unify sufficiently to be able to act together. This is unlikely to be enough on its own, however.

A stable social order presupposes considerable resources of power, not least those prevailing beliefs and values with sufficient purchase on human subjects to mobilise—as needed—forces of reaction. Hence, the pursuit of human emancipation depends not only on creating the conditions of solidarity but in channelling that solidarity into collective political agency. Attention to the conditions of effective struggle is therefore also needed. It may be tempting to focus disproportionately on solidarity, since this is a more straightforward, less problematic and, above all, more appealing project. It concerns reconciliation, establishing win-win scenarios, where, to rephrase a famous adage of Lenin’s, no eggs need be broken. It is a project more conducive to reform than transformation. It criticises, but also promises to refine and reproduce, the pluralistic values of liberal society. Radical, transformative opposition is not anathema to pluralism but it imposes a necessary limit. Key practices, and their supporting beliefs and values, must be resisted, not absorbed into some new, more inclusive accommodation. Otherwise, opposition will have been effectively foreclosed and incorporated into the status quo. Resistance is not futile—necessarily—but it is necessarily messy. The associated challenges are none the less what make inquiry into the process of resistance worth the candle. Its potential practical value is matched by the burning human importance of the ethical dilemmas entailed.

The contribution, actual or potential, of film to political struggle is a fruitful avenue of inquiry for two principal reasons. The first is the growing ubiquity and power of moving images and even a kind of democratisation, through the wide dissemination of mobile video technology via contemporary smart-phones. The second is the character of film itself as a putative avenue to reality, not only in terms of faithful photographic documentation, but also in the “capture” of human conditions, experiences and feelings, to operate as what the film essayist Mark Cousins once described as an “empathy machine” (2009). In this sense, film has a curious ambivalence, in its power to uncover what one may despise in human conduct, but also to interrogate its affective conditions—and thereby perhaps to lead one to despise it a little less. Such ambivalence notwithstanding, an ethical and political position “breaks eggs,” that is, hurts feelings, or even harms reputations, especially in the way it frames the use of moving images. A film in opposition is more likely to confront, deceive and entrap than accommodate, using those moving images as a power-resource to challenge, expose and resist. The filmmaker, empowered by her role, having stacked this specific game, at least, in her favour, can thus maximise its political purchase and effect.

The selected works’ necessarily asymmetric power-dynamics are explored in ideological terms of the dialectics of antagonism, as hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse. Here lies a paradox: the film’s counter-hegemonic discourse or speech-act exploits the vehicle of film to turn the tables, as it were, on dominant ideas and practices. The key questions for consideration are (i) the films’ direct and local political effects, registered in their impact on participating subjects, and (ii) their more indirect effects, on the viewing public. In short, they are analysed as direct and *exemplary* political engagements. It should be emphasised that the films are analysed as socio-political processes, in terms of the mechanisms of intersubjective power relations. The focus is not on the films’ formal or aesthetic properties, except as these are relevant to such processes. The selected examples are three recent documentary films placed in the context of an earlier and highly influential boundary-breaching “documentary style” feature, *Borat* (dir. Larry Charles, 2006). The paper builds, in this regard, on Lewis MacLeod’s interrogation of the ambivalent political dimension of Sacha Baron Cohen’s manipulative, “quasi-fictional” interventions (2011). The antagonistic dialectic is explored in the following works: *Reindeer Island / Reindrømmen* (dir. Fridtjof Kjæring, 2019), *The White World According to Daliborek / Svet podle Daliborka* (dir. Vít Klusák, 2017) (henceforth *Daliborek*) and *Golden Dawn Girls / Hatets vugge* (dir. Håvard Bustnes, 2017).

Counter-hegemonic struggle

Political analysis presupposes political context, relationships of power, broadly speaking. Such context will be provided by means of a brief sketch, adequate for our purposes, of what might be termed the hegemonic order,

including its necessary weaknesses and the associated general character of forms of resistance. The concept of hegemony has entered neo-Marxist through the classic work of Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci, Hoare and Noell-Smith 1971) and subsequently exercised a huge influence over critical analyses of the character and role of ideology in helping to perpetuate and consolidate the social order. One powerful thread of Gramsci's influence has been the initiative of Robert Cox in wedding the conception of hegemony to the research- and political agenda of the Frankfurt School, common termed critical theory, and laying out that agenda as a kind of epistemological and methodological insurrection in the study of world politics (1981). His scope is broad: the managed and/or institutionally reproduced regularity—and predictability—of human conduct on a global scale, in his own terms, the historically contingent and ever changing “world orders.” These depend above all on a core of shared beliefs, values and norms. The most important aspect of this collective “episteme” is not the explicit arguments or, in Cox's words, the “collective images of social order” but those concepts, presuppositions and habits of thought, the “intersubjective meanings,” likely to have been almost corporeally internalised and subsequently adhered to more or less automatically (136). To give perhaps the most obvious example, whatever the competing collective images of social order, from socialism to neoliberalism, they mostly share the intersubjective meaning of the state as the bundle of institutions, whose purposes and scope might be argued ad infinitum but scarcely questioned per se. Almost nobody “seriously” contemplates dispensing with the state, even as a speculative possibility. Hegemony is not a perfect reflection of the interests of the ruling class, however, freezing its relations of oppression for all time. It is rather the intersection of a mode of production, as it exercises a decisive role in shaping social relationships, and the various tensions and challenges emerging from its own imperfections as an ordering system operating in a complex organic setting and struggling, with varying success, to adapt to changing conditions. The basic thrust of this idea is not dependent on an explicit philosophy of history, in this case the neo-Hegelian frame of the historical-materialist dialectic inherited from Marx. It is easily reconciled, for example, with Karl Polanyi's argument of how the dominant ideology emerging from capitalism's project of universalising commodification sooner or later confronts the natural limitations imposed by its broader social context, and especially acutely in times of crisis (2001 [1944]). We might thus reasonably bracket philosophical questions about the nature of history and still consider the counter-hegemonic effects of film in their historical context. We might thus focus on the conditions of relative instability of a kind of Coxian “world order,” understood as the nexus of global institutions and their material and epistemic resources of power, embedded in the relatively unstable conditions of social forces and state forms (1981, 135-141).

The selected films—all released between 2017 and 2019—are decidedly contemporary. The first task of analysis will be to place them in their properly historicised context, that is, on a trajectory of changing underlying political-economic conditions. Relatively (that is, historically) speaking, the films enter the cultural field in times of crisis. A growing neocolonial instability worsened dramatically with the signal event of the radical Islamist attack on symbolically important targets inside the United States in 2011. The drastic, maladaptive responses of the US and its allies, from Afghanistan to Iraq, proceeded to reopen and deepen important neocolonial fault-lines in the Middle East. Even broader economic and social tensions came to the fore from 2007 onwards, ramped up by the financial crisis of 2008 and expressed in diverse popular mobilisations and upheavals, from Tunisia's “Arab Spring” to America's “Occupy Wall Street.” Such tensions continue to be fuelled by inequality, economic stagnation and weakened state finances, combined with a surge in international migration associated with escalating armed conflict in the Middle East. One of the consequences has been the revitalisation of extreme right-wing political movements and parties across most industrialised countries, the apparent dawning of a new age of reactionary and even xenophobic populism, reminiscent of the rise of extremism in interwar Europe. Plausibly, such developments amount to a hegemonic crisis, reflected in new institutional strains, of which the recent travails of the European Union are the most obvious example, but perhaps most importantly in the fracturing of a powerful consensus on economic policies of public downsizing and “structural adjustment.” This so-called Washington consensus is the policy expression of a neoliberal ideology committed to privatisation and the imposition of market or market inspired solutions in response to a host of governance challenges.

The parallel revitalisation of the Left and collapse of the consensual middle ground completes the picture of a newly polarised and increasingly fractious political environment. The severity of such polarisation may vary but few Western industrialised countries seem untouched. It is further intensified by the tendencies of an increasingly digitalised cultural field, which facilitates and even encourages retreat into ideological silos populated exclusively by like-minded true believers, immersing themselves in their own empirical universe, constructed according to their own preconceptions. This is achieved by means of selected documentary sources and analyses, in a representational environment where all may report on what is “really happening” and no criteria, professional or otherwise, can be trusted as ways of distinguishing the reliability of one source over another. The character of such an environment helps account for the increasingly important role played by moving images. Their peculiarly penetrative representational powers lend them an aura of authenticity, and their sheer smart-phone ubiquity makes them in any case a formidable stream of information. The concomitant circulation of witness reports is a new panoptic micro-mechanism of power whose implications we are collectively only beginning to comprehend. Such

a mechanism demands attention, on epistemological as well as ethical and political grounds, and is very much in evidence in the cinematic examples considered below.

Documentary film

Documentary film is a natural place to start politically because of the genre's long and prominent, if not mainstream, tradition of progressively minded activism. It is a tradition that the circuitry of independent cinema, complete with festivals and attendant film cognoscenti and media, continues to sustain. Its conditions lie in the very nature of documentary practice, a particular, albeit dominant, kind of non-fiction filmmaking where self-conscious goals of some kind, whether pedagogical or overtly political, come readily to the fore. The documentary, as Bruzzi describes it, is by nature "structured and motivated" (22). Moreover, many of its greatest innovators in recent years have opened up new possibilities and taken the genre in a new direction, one that taps into its peculiarly political potential with new determination and self-consciousness. Such filmmakers distinguish themselves by their interrogation of the intrinsically porous boundary between documentary and fiction. They take what Bruzzi calls the performative approach. Few have been more influential in this regard than Nick Broomfield, with works like *Driving Me Crazy* (1988), a behind-the-scenes look at a musical production that simultaneously goes behind the scenes of its own filmmaking, and the *The Leader, His Driver, and the Driver's Wife* (1991), documenting the filmmaker's own futile quest for an interview with a South African white supremacist leader. Broomfield and his ilk, from Michael Moore to Louis Theroux, have recognised that the documentary can never be a neutral, passive receptacle of "real life," whereby its filmic process is reduced to a kind of assisted viewing or projected sight, periscope style, as occasionally implied (Walton 1984; Hopkins 2016; Benovsky 2017). Such filmmakers give up, in other words, the avowed realist desideratum and associated observational values of *cinema verité* or direct cinema (Nichols 1994, 95). The effort to produce the *effect* of reality may in any case entail its own type of illusion, in creating a misleading "masquerade of spontaneity" (Bruzzi 2018, 153). The exercise of more self-conscious reflexivity about the intersubjective and performative filmic process can arguably be more realistic in the sense of bringing its limits to the attention of the spectator—as well as its directly affected human subjects—giving all involved more reasonable expectations about what is, or can be, conveyed. There is clearly an honesty entailed in "showing the workings" to subject and spectator alike, assuming the filmmaker, having acquired a new, reflexive sensitivity to her own praxis, proceeds to reveal all to these two relevant constituencies. The disproportionate degree of control the filmmaker inevitably exercises over the process ensures that the character and degree of process revelation will in any case be subject to her will and, at best, partial. Add to this the positive incentives for using this control for creative and perhaps political purposes, and it becomes clear that the relative transparency of the new performativity is very much a *variable* with important aesthetic and social effects. Consideration of a peculiarly performative, deceptive and notorious example should illustrate the point. Its full title is: *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. Its author and star is Sacha Baron Cohen.

What *Borat* demonstrates above all is that the manipulation of the boundary between fact and fiction can be a powerful satirical tool, and one wielded at the potential expense of its human subjects. Here lies the fascination and unease engendered by this work of human as well as categorical manipulation. Larry MacLeod focuses his ethical critique on the issue of Cohen's disproportionate power. This is not only disproportionate by virtue of his strategic placement at the "reins" of the filmmaking process but also his exploitation of his own relative abundance of social capital (2011). The latter is painfully apparent, for example, as, in the guise of the fictional character of Borat, he leads the unwitting clientele of a remote bar somewhere in rural southern United States in what for him, the writer and actor, is an ironical chorus of "Throw the Jew Down the Well." What is important to note in this regard, is the work's political and ethical ambivalence. From a certain ethical and political standpoint, it raises a difficult question: Does the end justify the means? The means seem hardly fair, a "stealth performance" designed to mislead and trap its unwitting participants who—foolishly or otherwise—believe themselves to be parties to a conventional documentary. At the same time, the end may be appealing. Their bigotry has been exposed and a critical point about difference and its treatment emphatically delivered. The ends-and-means conundrum is a ubiquitous challenge warranting analytical attention. Though hardly unique, *Borat*, as a peculiarly audacious example, reveals the conundrum especially clearly.

Hostile praxis

The films have been selected and organised with certain objectives in mind. The analysis begins with *Daliborek*, whose performativity is the least transparent of the three. It is, in these terms, closest to *Borat* in strategic conception if not in style. Analytically, it serves as a crucial case, as being, in its relative extremity, an extraordinarily clear illustration of the mechanisms at work. The point is to demonstrate that the clearly antagonistic uses of selective transparency can help highlight more general tendencies in films less ostensibly hostile in intent or deliberately manipulative in approach. The power-dynamic emerging so starkly in Klusák's

work should thereby become easier to detect in the analysis of the successively more subtle and ostensibly conciliatory examples to follow.

Vít versus Dalibor

Klusák's "documentary play," as it is billed, delves into the claustrophobic "world" of Dalibor, one customarily enclosed by the four walls of the cramped flat he shares, at the age of 36, with his mother. He escapes, as a rule, only to the alienating grind of his factory job. It is a world of familiar faces, not least his mother, his best mate and, as the narrative progresses, the new boyfriend and girlfriend of mother and son, respectively. The opening scene highlights Dalibor's paradoxical sense of place. His poky bedroom doubles as his window on the world, his ever-open stage. In mid-oratory, Klusák pans out to reveal another enclosure, perhaps even more dismal in combining apparently infinite possibilities with the most mundane limitations. It is the YouTube screen on his laptop, which now frames his stilted and so far indecipherable tirade, delivered for "the world out there" or, at any rate, the 179 views so far. The play in Klusák's documentary play is very much Dalibor's. He plays up to the camera, his own and/or Klusák's. Indeed, he seems to cling to it in desperation. His various fantasy roles are an escape from his everyday life: a presidential candidate, a heavy metal star, a vigilante scourge of gypsies. An unlikely friendship burgeons with a kind of rival, his mother's new boyfriend. They exchange tirades against other races, eulogies to Nazism, and even martial arts and shooting practice in the woods. Despite sharing unvarnished racism and xenophobia with all his close companions, not least his mother and girlfriend, Dalibor still struggles to fit in. He seems embarrassed by his new friend's exhortations to violence, and cornered by his girlfriend's demands that he be a "man of action" and attend a real rally – or at least break out on his own and stop living with his mum. Dalibor's reluctance notwithstanding, action, as it were, contrives to conclude and complete Klusák's "documentary play." All four xenophobes make the expedition to Auschwitz, the first ever trip abroad for mother and son, setting the scene for the film's extraordinary and surprising denouement.

First, it is the sharpest confrontation with opposing "world views" yet. The official tour of the death-camp presents in graphic, concrete form, a crime-against-humanity narrative impossible to reconcile with the romanticisation of the Third Reich. Moreover, a death-camp survivor even joins them to share her horrifying memories. When Dalibor begins to question her account, his attachment to Holocaust-denying conspiracy-theories clashes catastrophically with reality, most importantly for him, a social one. His Neo-Nazi fellow travellers turn against him, not least his shamed mother, calling him an idiot and an arsehole for upsetting the Holocaust survivor. Dalibor nevertheless stands firm: they have all been duped by "TV propaganda." Then comes the coup de grace, however, in the form of the unexpected intervention of Klusák himself. He begins by incongruously drifting on camera to upbraid Dalibor for pouring added torment on an obviously genuine Holocaust survivor. Then, a few minutes later, this time off camera, he drops a veritable depth charge into the already broiling "family soup." He confronts Dalibor with a shocking revelation, that he is himself part Jewish. Astonishingly, Klusák arranged DNA tests, which prove it. Furthermore, Dalibor's mother has known all along and been hiding it from him. This belated rupture of the filmmaker's role as hidden master narrator is jarring, but its aesthetic or poetic qualities are open to discussion but these are not the chief concern of this study. The question at hand is rather: how does this all work, specifically as a social and political intervention?

Since direct knowledge of the filmmaker's intentions is limited, the method of inquiry necessarily entails an element of cautious speculation, abducting his modus operandi insofar as it can be shown to be implied, plausibly at least, by the audio-visual devices employed. Klusák himself insists that he did not set out to demonise his subject, but rather to understand him: "I didn't want to make an activist condemnation, a documentary execution of a Nazi. It's more valuable to try to understand these forgotten, excluded...unhappy, lost people." Klusák evidently saw his task as primarily one of observation, as appropriate to the rich complexity of his subject, who exhibits (in the full sense of the word) artistic as well as fascist sensibilities. His explanation of the disintegrative ending—and the compulsion finally to intervene—makes this abundantly clear: "The observational method had reached its limits. I was not able to stand behind the camera and watch Dalibor ironizing Mrs Liskova, who had survived Auschwitz only by accident. Her dad perished on the death march" (Pickering 2017). However interventionist, the ending underscores a general feature of observation. It can never be entirely neutral, as necessarily shaped in myriad subtle ways by the perspective of the observer. Klusák intimates as much himself in describing the challenges of presenting his subject: "The most difficult thing during filming was to maintain a balance between critical distance and empathy." In other words, a point of perspective implies an affective and ultimately moral position, to exercise a sympathetic understanding but also a judgement.

At the very least, the various executive decisions, such as choice of shot and narrative assemblage, shape the cinematic view, the very conception, including organising categories, of what is seen by both filmmaker and spectator. Moreover, the work mixes more directly observational footage with reconstructed or dramatised episodes for Klusák's camera and, in many cases, primarily, ostensibly, for Dalibor's own. The presence of the camera and filmmaker is hidden as far as possible from view, and from consciousness, for filmed subject and spectator alike. The effect is a curiously double one. On the one hand, the spectator watches the subject in glorious

isolation. On the other, the filmmaker is subtly present, only half forgotten, encouraging perhaps even goading, his performer to show what he can do, while encouraging the spectator subtly, and perhaps not even deliberately, to share the filmmaker's point of view. It is the view of the duplicitous, knowing "friend," who encourages and praises but only ironically. Klusák humours Dalibor for our entertainment. The humour of the film depends on the sense of the ridiculous emerging from this dynamic. Dalibor's self-expression is his own self-condemnation, and here lies the site of judgement and satisfaction for the spectator.

The metaphor of the agent provocateur illustrates the logic – up to a point. The duplicity of the spy draws out the legally actionable conduct, just as the duplicity of the filmmaker draws out the object of disdain and ridicule. The danger of the metaphor is to lose the ambivalence of the process here, which hinges on pathos. The spectator may feel affection for what is pathetic and thus sympathetic in Dalibor but pathos entails a complex evocation of affection, disgust and dismay. Nevertheless, the spectator may indeed identify with the pathetic figure, seeing herself, in all her own aspirations and frailties. In this regard, the complex and even equivocal character of filmic hostility should be noted. Pure hostility is probably intrinsically unstable, especially upon closer acquaintance with its object, prone to mediation by contrasts and expository narrative. It readily mixes with pathos. The affective motor of an apprehension of someone being or doing what one feels is wrong easily turns on its axis of sympathy and condemnation. The well-documented incidence of the so-called Stockholm syndrome supports such a supposition. To put it another way: who is it possible to know very well without having, in one form or another, mixed feelings? Hence, there is always potential to lament the damage also inflicted (and/or self-inflicted) by the "perpetrator" herself. The relationship between Klusák and Dalibor remains elusive, but it is safe to assume, at the very least, the presence of mixed feelings. This is also the likely impression for any spectator, who will be inclined to sense not only Klusák's disdain but also his affection for his subject. She is encouraged to join in despising the poisonous, hateful views Dalibor expresses, but at once to fear for the damage they wreak on Dalibor himself. Villainy in this regard is its own punishment.

Up to now, the analysis has emphasised the way the film generates meaning and understanding. It does much more than this, however. Film is also a speech-act, an intervention into the lives of its subjects and, to a lesser degree, those of its spectators. Without the final scene, one might have supposed a kind of limited engagement whose more or less unintended consequence was most likely to draw filmmaker and film subject still further apart in their sense of self and place in the world. This is the outcome, assuming the filmmaker constitutes his joke perfectly, where the joke is—or at least is *on*—Dalibor. He either does not get the joke or does not care and, in the process, has found another outlet for, and reinforcement of, his Neo-Nazi escapist fantasies and sense of identity. The filmmaker meanwhile analogously reinforces his own—and his audience's—sense of ironic self-satisfaction and superiority. At the end of the film, however, Klusák exposes the tensions in Dalibor's views and attitudes by posing a critical question in an irresistible way: how does it feel to be the object rather than the perpetrator of those views and attitudes? How does it feel to be racially tainted and therefore despised? If the "after text" is to be believed, Dalibor subsequently suffered a sort of epiphany, renouncing his Neo-Nazi views and ties. The sight of the confusion and squirming paravariation of all four xenophobes in the final scene will certainly leaven any impression that "they all lived happily ever after," yet one is almost bound to hope if not trust that something positive—in human as well as political terms—was achieved.

Håvard versus Ourania

Whatever the political similarities, the inner circle of the increasingly formidable political movement, Golden Dawn, is an altogether different milieu from Dalibor's small coterie of misfit-outsiders. A cinematic intervention here is fraught with pitfalls and dangers of an entirely different order, which partly explains the difference of approach. There is certainly no place for a collaborative "documentary play," which presupposes substantial mutual trust. This is a movement notorious for its aggressive style and outright violence, against immigrants especially. It is a domain to be entered—if at all—with the utmost caution. In contrast to *Daliborek*, the film is heavily narrated. Indeed, Bustnes essentially provides a running commentary of his efforts, and not least his setbacks, in trying to scratch beneath the surface of the slogans and the male bravado. This is no 'voice of God' but rather a reflexive, performative exposition of the work-in-progress, for the spectator if not the subjects themselves. In this respect, it recalls the process and style of Broomfield's *The Leader, His Driver, and the Driver's Wife* (1991). Broomfield is at any rate the executive producer of Bustnes's film.

The focus is on the women of this shamelessly patriarchal movement: a mother (Dafni), a daughter (Ourania) and a wife (Eugenia) of various Party frontmen. The filmmaker may well have hoped to find a moderating influence behind the scenes of the public macho bombast. What he finds instead is that the slogans and dogma run deep. They are defences well suited to holding the filmmaker and his film at a distance. The Nazi overtones are dismissed out of hand: What could Greek nationalists possibly have to do with German Nazis? Didn't we fight the Germans in the Second World War? Undeterred, Bustnes remains in hot albeit cautious pursuit, with moving snapshots of meeting venues and interviews conducted everywhere from Party HQ to home with the kids. As central Party figures are arrested and remanded in custody, and the 2015 General Election looms, the women move

centre stage. Ourania, the leader's daughter, effectively takes over in his absence. Bustnes's hopes for a reappraisal in the face of their loved ones' arrest are far off the mark. The commitment to the party line prevails, now with a renewed defiance and sense of personal empowerment. Now it is their turn in the limelight.

Like *Daliborek*, *Golden Dawn Girls* is a conscious collaboration entered into with different, indeed, conflicting goals in mind, but both sides enter that collaboration a lot more warily. The women of Golden Dawn seek to improve their public image. They hope the film will show they are not "demons and monsters" but ordinary, even educated people doing ordinary things, playing board games, watching Disney movies. To a degree only, Bustnes is in step with this objective. He hopes to find a soft underbelly to the otherwise dismal litany of violence and hate, but more than that, to find in their humanity the seeds of doubt, the outer limits of their extremism, and the potential levers of reconsideration and perhaps even redemption. This is the goal of confronting them with the video footage capturing the movement's—and indeed their sons' and partners' own—acts of violence and seeking acknowledgment and reaction beyond dismissal or denial. In adversarial terms, he seeks to oppose their views. In conciliatory terms, he seeks a meeting-point, a basis for dialogue, which might help them see the error of their own ways, for their own sakes as well as the potential victims of their politics of hate and violence. Interestingly, neither side gains much direct satisfaction, yet much is achieved of social and political significance all the same. The blank deflections and denials of Nazi associations and acts of violence, for example, reveal a zealotry and penchant for cynical manipulation as unappealing as it is inept. At the same time, their complexities and contradictions creep out through Bustnes's own resort to manipulation. The camera is continually switched on, the women never warned. Thus, they are regularly observed, attending to their hair, gathering their thoughts, or even conferring about what to include or not include in the shot. For all the film's setbacks and small failures, Ourania, in particular, emerges rather vividly as a fully formed, complex, though still ultimately inscrutable character. In the frame of Bustnes's narrative, it is hard not to feel ambivalent about her. However uncompromising in her new role as leader, she remains strange, eccentric, almost Dalibor-like, with her attachment to her dog and her reading material, ranging from Nietzsche to *The Little Prince*. The spectator is likely to be carried along by Bustnes's determination to find common ground or even redeem her, driven, one supposes, by some affection. The affective mood of the final scene, where he challenges her once and for all to explicitly renounce violence, but to no avail, is one of disappointment, a feeling of lost potential and frustrated hopes, and a residual emptiness, accentuated by the dismal vacuity of the carpark setting.

Fridtjof versus Per

What the preceding films conspicuously share is their metaphorical entry into the lion's den: liberal filmmakers getting up close and personal with people with very different views and values. They share, in other words, a high degree of intrinsic antagonism. The final example should support the case that the antagonism intrinsic to contemporary documentary practice itself reaches far beyond such conspicuously hostile relationships. It tends to infuse the intersubjective process, even when the subjects are much less antagonistic in themselves. *Reindeer Island* is no entry into a lion's den. On the contrary, it is a story of human aspiration, almost a celebration of life per se, through the kind of everyman experience expected to offer something to everyone, just like the heart-warming Disney titles in Ourania's DVD collection. It is the story of a man clearly born to herd reindeer; the story of a dream come true. Despite its lack of overt antagonism or interventionism, a socially and politically important intersubjective dynamic emerges nonetheless.

The film is structured quite conventionally, through a combination of interviews and observational footage. The work's narrative "voice" is very much in the background. The spectator never sees film crew or hears the questions posed in the interviews, and yet the narrative structure is pronounced all the same. Its chief protagonist is Reiulf Aleksandersen, the Norwegian who has long dreamed of herding reindeer, who, from the age of three or four, complained that his name should really be "Reinulf," in deference to his beloved animal. The dream and passion of its pursuit is all the more compelling in its unlikeliness. The chances of acquiring the rights to manage a herd are next to none, as dictated by the traditions (a *lá* rights of inheritance) of the Sami, the indigenous people who span the borders of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Improbably, Reiulf gets his opportunity all the same. Having married a Sami woman, Risten, he can gain effective rights from her. Moreover, an older Sami woman holding rights for the island of Kvaløya, who has been unable to exercise them, is impressed by Reiulf's enthusiasm and talent. So she grants the rights to Risten. The film's narrative power lies in its dramatic structure. The unlikely prize could be snatched from his hands at its very moment of realisation. The lifelong Sami reindeer herder, Per Kittli, age 70, strenuously objects to the newcomers adding a second herd to the already stretched resources of an island increasingly squeezed by urban sprawl, and goes to court in an effort to nip their project in the bud. The ensuing conflict provides the driving momentum of the film, powerfully combining shots of the hard life of the reindeer herder with tense and awkward visits to city courtrooms.

The traditional "voice of God" documentary form, famously pioneered by John Grierson (Renov 1993, 6-7; Nichols 2016, 24-31), has fallen out of favour in an era in which authoritative, taken-for-granted objectivity is increasingly challenged, an era sometimes labelled postmodern (Jameson 1984, Harvey 1989). Nicholls (1991)

and Bruzzi (2018), among others, trace this decline and the development of new, more reflexive approaches. The “shut up and listen (to the truth)” approach to documentary filmmaking was perhaps a curiosity of the mid-20th Century, the product, among other things, of a relatively new medium. The drive to a position of authority or “will to power” nevertheless remains a formidable human impulse. It is therefore hardly surprising that an aura of objectivity has taken other forms in the face of the decline of the “voice of God” convention. The narrator who is conspicuous by her absence is an obvious example. Here, the filmmaker downplays the shaping of the narrative, the choice and ordering of interviewees, the questions posed. The story unfolds according to an apparently natural logic, in keeping with the facts. It smuggles in the authoritative view in the guise of a kind of intrinsic objectivity and transparency attributed to the world. This is the mechanism behind the narrative form of *Reindeer Island*. It is shaped by the off-screen narrator and interviewer, never seen or heard but silently questioning and directing. Robert Cox (1981, 128-30) is one scholar to have criticised the scholarly stance of objectivity in the field of world politics, which emerged from post-war efforts to impose a natural scientific model on the social sciences. He argues that such a stance has the effect of naturalising and implicitly legitimising one’s objects of study, diverting attention from alternatives and suppressed dynamics, and, in the end, the social roots of potential change. In other words, such a stance becomes, in fact if not in name, a deeply conservative apologetics for the status quo.

Documentary practice as, in its way, a mode of social inquiry is subject to similar dangers and similar criticism. Kjæreng arguably hides behind the aura of objectivity and its natural narrative structure in portraying the conflict in *Reindeer Island*. The appearance of balance is created by alternating between sequences showing Aleksandersen and Kitti at work or talking on camera, but the narrative form reinforces a hierarchy, and one disturbingly consistent with that governing Norwegian society per se. The spectator is encouraged to identify with Aleksandersen’s calling, reinforced by its invocation of the familiar liberal motif of individual self-fulfilment. Moreover, he is presented as, in any case, clearly doing things properly, in contrast to Kitti. Aleksandersen’s animal husbandry is more rational, as indicated by its accordance with law and regulation. The normative superiority of Aleksandersen goes deeper even than this. Implicitly, he becomes a focus of spectator identification in his greater mastery of subtle norms and conventions of conduct. He is, in other words, more normal. Kitti, by contrast, comes across, not unlike Dalibor or Ourania, as an eccentric towards whom we are similarly inclined to feel ambivalence, as a likeable maverick, perhaps, but one needing to be reined in (however unfortunate the choice of expression). Paradoxically, Aleksandersen’s reindeer husbandry even becomes a model of Sami authenticity, where state regulations, dictating that animals be kept away from urban areas, for example, are seen as its juridical expressions. It is worth inquiring into the phenomenological effects of *Reindeer Island*, with the help of some anecdotal evidence, at least. I watched the film at Tromsø International Film Festival in January 2019. There was audience laughter in response to the dysfunctional and absurd figure of Per Kitti—as portrayed. My own response perhaps illustrates both the character and the limits of the film’s political hazard. I shared the urge to laugh but also felt uncomfortable, in the manner of a guilty schadenfreude: to find it hard to resist the comic nature of the fall but immediately to feel guilty in the face of the hurt entailed. At work here, as in *Daliborek*, are the psychosomatic effects of pathos. The intentions of Kjæreng are difficult to decipher in this regard. He may have slanted the narrative deliberately to favour Aleksandersen, or perhaps felt a natural affinity for him and failed to see how this shaped his portrayal of characters and events in decisive ways. The effects are at any rate unfortunate, given the context. It behoves to err on the side of caution in negotiating the relationship between mainstream society and an oppressed (historically, certainly) and marginalised indigenous minority.

Filmmakers versus the rest of the world

What do the films collectively tell us about the socio-political choices available to documentary filmmakers and their likely effects? Such choices and effects depend above all on the substantive positioning of the film in relation to hegemonic power structures. The most important distinction is therefore between *Reindeer Island* and the others, given its positioning in broad accordance with dominant institutional structures and attitudes. It distinguishes itself by categorically not being a counter-hegemonic film. This is key to its curious, almost paradoxical power. It is the least interventionist work, with no direct role played by the filmmaker or his crew. It is not obviously manipulative either, in following conventional norms of objective observational cinema: No view is excluded; all sides are portrayed and considered. The lack of direct intervention nevertheless hides a powerful manipulating force behind the action. The observations are situated in the decisive frame of narrative and normative codes (Butler 2016, 1-32), which are readily recognised and habitually embraced. Whatever the lip-service to balance, the film tells Reulf’s story, not Per’s. Moreover, associated affective identification is intensified, not just by the excitement and familiarity of the dramatic structure itself but by its invocation of individualist values, governing and normalising social mores, and the rational unquestionability of the law of the land. The measure of such powerful effects, for all their undoubted fault-lines of guilty ambivalence, lies in the audience reaction, on the one hand, and that of the affected subject on the other. Per Kitti’s reaction to the finished product was vainly to demand the removal of his scenes and to attempt to prevent its public screening. The film’s fidelity to dominant social beliefs and values is the ultimate root of its power. The mechanisms at work are gentle

and subtle. Their affective leverage and power lie in the way they tap into pre-existing “intersubjective meanings” (Cox 1981, 136).

Daliborek shares a stance of objectivity but, being more explicitly performative, it is less deceptively so. Its more fiction-like, stylised storytelling is less purportedly factual. It might, in a way, be based on a true story, but no thoughtful spectator is likely to treat it as literally true. Though the customary and habituated suspension of disbelief associated with fiction should kick in, this is much more unstable, provisional and ultimately ambivalent than the belief in the reality of actual events observed. The suspension may bring a certain view of “the story told” to the fore (into focus, as it were) but without extinguishing an awareness, however latent, of the “actual events” (Benovsky 2017, 135), that is, the work of actors or actor-like role-players and crew, that have made it possible. *Daliborek* is by no means perfectly transparent and considerably less so to its subjects than to its spectators. It nevertheless achieves a more lucid and nuanced picture. The impression created is of complex individuals with complex conduct, achieving for the film (and audience) a much weaker suzerainty over its subjects than that achieved by *Reindeer Island*. This is a product of the Czech film’s counter-hegemonic character. In broad terms, the film works against the grain of the social order but it does so in a way that entails some paradoxical features. It is not counter-hegemonic in the sense of reacting to or challenging the core of neoliberal power or ideas. On the contrary, the focus is very much on the fractured margins of a social order in crisis. Nationalism in “normal times,” in its relative moderation and deference to the state, has had a broadly functional role in diffusing and overriding class interests and conflict. In times of crisis, however, this feature of the metaphorical social organism, or body politic, may, as in the 1920s-to-30s and today, become dysfunctional and counterproductive (not least to social elites), in the manner of once healthy cells turned cancerous. Hence, there is a political ambivalence here, as well as an affective-moral one. Films like *Daliborek* and *Golden Dawn Girls* work as counter-hegemonic interventions insofar as they engage with this ambivalence, both on the level of understanding and as speech act. Their subjects are victims of capitalist society and disruptors of its smooth functioning. They are a problem, for themselves, and many others around them, but they are not *the* problem in the sense of the overarching character of governing and oppressive social relationships. In different ways, Klusák and Bustnes both sought, not only to understand, but to enlighten and even liberate their subjects.

What distinguishes Bustnes’s work is its performative transparency, for spectators because of the way he talks them through the filmmaking process, and for the subjects because of the mutually wary and limited character of their collaboration. This is the film’s virtue and its vice. The intersubjective engagement is thus hampered. It should not be dismissed out of hand, however. Bustnes repeatedly confronts his subjects with the contradictions and unfortunate consequences of their actions. The failure to produce an on-screen epiphany in Ourania, for example, begs the question of the possible impact of such interventions on any of those subjects long-term, or, for that matter, on a potential universe of spectators. It cannot be overlooked that the most successful insights into the film’s subjects seemed to be provided by a deliberate suspension (or, from another angle, imposition) of transparency. Deception and coercion, as also illustrated by *Daliborek*, are necessary tools of effective social resistance. Their responsible use depends on leavening them with respect for the affected subjects—and their interests—who should never be considered or treated as unadulterated villains. This is the central political and moral challenge, and one unsusceptible to simple solutions. It is a challenge to be taken seriously, at any rate, and that means exercising the utmost sensitivity to the specific social conditions in which it is encountered.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined three examples of documentary film as illustrative of intrinsic propensities for, and a contemporary trend towards, a combative politics of intersubjective engagement and representation. It placed the films in their historicised context as, in the case of two of them, contemporary counter-hegemonic struggles in times of crisis. The exploration of the films’ varying methods, and forms of more or less guarded collaboration with their subjects, was constructed with two principal objectives in mind. The first was to explore the potential of documentary film as counter-hegemonic intervention, in both its impact on filmed subjects and on spectators. The second is to consider the practical political and ethical dilemmas entailed in such an enterprise. It is hoped to contribute in this way to a more profound scholarly understanding of the politics of documentary film, but also to provide guidance to those filmic-political practitioners in pursuit, not only of deeper social understanding, but also substantive – and emancipatory – political change, and who are determined to conduct such a pursuit in a morally responsible way.

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