The Bend in the Light:

Beyond Objectivity and Subjectivity, A Documentary Aesthetics of Mediation

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I'd like to begin with a single image from Rawane Nassif's *Turtles are Always Home* and see how far it can take us. It is a close up of the fluid surface of a man-made water way. Ripples of an inverted, peach-painted facade are broken up by flecks of teal and kelly green. There is a grid here. Windows and beams can be made out. But the structure featured is rendered through constant disturbance. The flicker of the light and the flux of the water constitute the shot's subject. The light passes from air to water, changing speed between the two mediums, bending. The refraction is then bounced to the lens and is inverted. We do not see the apparatus, but Nassif has set up a viewer who regards it. An Other has directed our attention towards a distortion. It is presented without explanation and with time to linger in the distortion's durational quality.

This moment is more than an impressionistic rendering. We could say that it is real in the phenomenological sense of capturing the subject's sensory immediacy. We could also say that it is real in its adequate depiction of the principle of refraction. But neither of these statements would communicate the so-called truth of the image or its function in Nassif's brilliantly subtle, short documentary. I suggest the truth of this image lies in its pointing beyond the screen, in noticing the dynamic space between the object and its transmission. Ultimately, I aim to argue that given the social and formal tools available to documentary, its most honest gesture consists

in a refusal to close the gap: in directing the viewer's attention to the distortion inherent in the medium, in giving us the tools to read it, and yet in refraining from the clarity of telling us how to read it. In the words of Harun Farocki, "the original is much less clear than the copy."[1] This reflection too must be involved in the attempt to render the "true" on screen.

Documentary is an art form that frequently denies its own formality in order to uphold an aesthetic of truth. As a practitioner who has lived the economic, social, technical, and narrative shaping that goes into any given shot, I have long grappled with the medium's connection to veracity. Documentaries differ from narrative films in that they claim, at various levels, to share a world with the viewer. This claim tethers their circulatory value to notions of education, justice, and accuracy, which complicates their relationship with the very aesthetics they articulate through. This paper asks: how can documentary film responsibly overcome the limits of two forms of abstraction: (1) the abstraction inherent to a quantitatively-oriented social structure, explained in Lukács' terms as reified consciousness, or broadly, an empiricist insistence on fact, and (2) the creative abstraction that mistakes itself for subjectivity as such, ignoring its own situatedness as an actively alienated consciousness. I will refer to the former as an "objective" and the latter as a "subjective" approach.

Methodologically, this paper employs a dialectical materialist analysis of "truth" in documentary: paying close attention to the film as text in moments of close reading, to the filmmaker's position of enunciation, and to the broader economic and social relations of both, in order to understand the framing of distortion-as-subject as a gesture of veracity. Section 1 examines reified objectivity as manifested in documentary's journalistic tradition and exposes its limits at the technological and ideological level. Section 2 turns to the subsequent trap of relativism in documentary and exposes its failure to account for the createdness of an infinitely exchangeable, alienated subjectivity. Section 3 proposes an alternative via Nassif's *Turtles are Always Home*, a documentary that denaturalizes the representational image and repurposes the alienated apparatus to foster a critical dialogue between situated subject and system.

[1] Farocki, 1989 Images of the World and Inscription of War

economic context.[39] While the tools available for interrupting simple identification in theatrical forms and filmic forms differ, as Christian Metz points out, we have arrived at our problem.[40] Documentary truth, if comprehensive, should (1) overcome the naive realism of reified consciousness, (2) disrupt naturalized and exchangeable forms of identification, and (3) maintain a critical awareness of its own mediatedness. In the following section, I will argue that Nassif manages to do all three in *Turtles are Always Home* and point to some of the formal techniques that enable such a layered task.

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Nassif doesn't just point to the distortion, she locates it within a nexus of hushed labor, colonial aesthetics, and dispossession. Despite the short film's externally facing gaze, Nassif considers *Turtles are Always Home* to be a self-portrait. This framing alone conveys an awareness that the subject is a reflection of its larger socio-economic context. After being displaced from Lebanon in 2006, Nassif inhabited a series of temporary dwellings, eventually finding herself living in Doha's Aspire Zone in 2017. The Villaggio Mall, as seen through Nassif's lens, is a place marked by placelessness. Reflections pervade the visual landscape. Planes depart but never land. Paper advertisements masquerade as windows. All signs of life rendered on screen are isolated, transient, and obscured, often mediated through a third visual plane, such as windows and water. The film's reliance on ambient sound and its absence of dialogue creates an evocative quietness that invites viewers to meditate on its imagery. Meaning is not directly elaborated but alluded to symbolically. Words only appear twice in the film: at its beginning and end. This bookended framing centers a conceptual exploration of home; the locus around which Nassif's self-portraiture revolves."Turtles take their homes with them wherever they go," Nassif noted in an interview.[41] Due to her material circumstances, she learned to do the same.

The Villaggio Mall is attended to by Nassif's lens as a hollow simulacrum, its artifice quietly noticed for its veiled perversion. While the world is often visually rendered through mediated inversions, such as the visual that began this paper, a controlled, inhuman quality pervades the soundscape. A recurring hissing noise evokes a malevolent presence, while sweeping noises suggest the labor of cleanliness, underscoring the artifice of the mall. Overtime,

[39] Brecht, *Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting*, 1978, pp. 91
[40] Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier"
[41] The Take, Interview with Nassif at Berlinale, 2017

bird calls blur into synthetic tones, and the resonance of the water shifts from the a natural flow of a river to the controlled trickle of a faucet. Toward the film's conclusion, the rush of water and the roaring of engines make way for silence. At the end of the film, Nassif's voice washes over all. In Arabic, she sings, "My dear country is a suitcase and I am always a traveler."[42] This anchors the estranged style of the film in an installed feeling of foreignness that has become the Nassif's last form of familiarity. The song echoes Mahmoud *Darwish's Diary of a Palestinian Wound,* "My country is not a suitcase. I am not a traveler. I am the lover and the land is beloved."[43] Nassif's inversion of these lines indicates a self-aware absorption of the imperialist logic of displacement and exchangeability.[44] The haunting shots of airplanes at the beginning of the film gesture at the Villaggio Mall's embeddedness within a larger global system of exchange. This also nods to how "the reality always exceeds the mediation," to borrow a phrase from Lakshmi Padmanabahn.[45] Truth is far from metonymic in Nassif's text. Instead it is breathed with the middle term, with "the and" which Deleuze wrote about in his interview on Godard, an ever "in between two things," which ever-points beyond itself.[46]

In contrast to her earlier documentary, *My Ball*, which features an observational style, *Turtles Are Always Home* foregrounds the mediation, disrupting the impulse of reified objectivity. Through stylized camera movement, the viewer is always made aware of Nassif's gaze, yet her interiority remains inaccessible. Instead it is the rhythm of her seeing, its resistance to the sterile order that registers her perspective. Through deliberate rack focuses, her camera transcends established visual planes, passing through their shiny exteriors to reveal the vacant underbelly of outsourced European aesthetics. At 5:02, a slow rack focus moves between reflected buildings, Nassif's silhouette, and the plastered image of a white woman smiling behind a glass door. Her reflection shares its visual field with that of passing security guards, symbols of the colonial aesthetic's enforcement. At 6:32, a shadow sweeps over the smiling tourist's simulacra, disrupting the veil of a candy-colored Venice and shrouding her in darkness. Soon after, the same image of the white woman is seen pasted above another door, with her neck falling just above its frame. The door opens and her two-dimensional chest creaks open, revealing a cavern behind her starched blouse. Here, we enter the bowels of image construction.

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[42] *Turtles are Always Home,* 2017, 10:13
[43] Darwish, Mahmoud, *Diary of a Palestinian Wound,* 1969
[44] Imperialist in the sense of Vladimir Lennin's "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism"
[45] Padmanabahn, Lakshmi, *Realism Degree Zero*, pp. 24
[46] Deleuze, "Three Questions About Six Fois Deux," pp. 15

The whole city is a hollow hall of signifiers. From the inside, the plastered advertisements turn distorted negatives, back lit by the sun outside.

In this liminal environment, the self becomes a reflection, perpetually displaced and redefined by its surroundings. Nassif's tripartite image at 8:26 traverses three planes in one rack focus, visually entangling (1) the apparatus of the camera, (2) the mall's artificiality, and (3) Nassif's silhouette. This strategic self portrait, as assembled through constructed environment and its mediation, enacts capital's encroachment over all spheres of existence. Nassif's form of reflexivity challenges what Anna Kornbluh calls 'too-late capitalism's' style of immediacy. Nassif's editing style lets viewers feel the disjuncture between shots, refusing to smooth transitions and even underscoring cuts with jolting shifts in sound design. This revolt against Joel Cox's naturalizing post-production dictum that "a great edit is the one you don't see," invites the viewer to reflect on the createdness of the documentary, without risking the reduction of explanation.[47]

Nassif does not choose between reified fact and subjective reality; she sublates their opposition via a mutual dependence on a distorted mode of seeing, instituted by the flows of global capital and their inscription of the subject. The myriad distortions invoked by Nassif's lens do not add up to a superseding of the veil. The work of her particular emphasis on mediation is not to resolve the dialectic of appearance and essence, but to stage it.[48] Her style of documentation resists any impulse to obtain truth as a ready-made product, instead inviting viewers to perceive the unsettling framework of its production. In doing so, Nassif appropriates the alienated apparatus as a tool for critical awareness, offering a model of documentary that locates its claim to truth not in the denial of form, but in its conscious exposure, all the while rejecting the trap of relativism.

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This paper began with the image of light refracted in a man-made waterway. Despite this shot's pastel rendering of the changing qualities of light when bent by a fluid medium, it is far from mere impressionism. What Nassif shows us, and what a documentary aesthetics of distortion make visible, is something closer to what Althusser, writing on Cremonini's obscured faces, called a "determinate absence," a social deformation, an economically instituted waning in

[47] Variety Interview with Joel Cox, "Editing American Sniper," 2014
[48] Appearance and Essence

the capacities of sight.[49] It is the distortion of quantitative abstraction, which congeals labor, essence, past, and origin.[50] Under the social relations of capitalist exchange, "persons exist for one another merely as representatives, and hence owners of commodities," distorting being through the lens of having.[51]

An honest documentary does not pretend to escape this distortion. It cannot offer us unmediated access to the real. Nor can it offer us poetic access to an unmediated subject. What it can do, and what Nassif does with beautiful subtlety, is render the bend in the light visible. I have argued that the documentary's crisis of truth is not a technical failing, but a structural one, rooted in the medium's genesis within capitalist relations of production. The camera, as an epistemological machine born of the economically engineered subject-object split, mediates a reified mirage.

Both a documentary ethics born of journalistic objectivity and a documentary ethics born of modernist subjectivity are symptoms of an alienated life process. The former naturalizes the calculating, quantifying gaze, while the latter commodifies an alienated subjectivity, collapsing truth into exchange value's same infinite interchangeability. The way out of this aporia lies in a practice that forgoes the myth of immediacy and instead embraces its own constructedness as a critical language. Documentary film must alchemize its ashamed formality into the very substance of its claim to truth. A documentary aesthetics of mediation, simply put, is one that stages distortion at the level of the apparatus, the social structure, and historically specific subjectivity – without feigning the clarity of resolution. *Turtles are Always Home* is one model of this ethos, but there are no limits to the creativity of form through which it may be realized. Chantal Akerman, Merawi Gerima, Apichatpong Weerasethaku, Agnes Varda, and others have managed similar truth effects in their own ways.

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[49] Althusser, Louis, *Lenin and Philosophy,* pp. 238-9
[50] Althusser, Louis, *Lenin and Philosophy,* pp. 233
[51] Marx, Karl, *Capital Volume I*, 1990, pp. 179