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How Real Does It Feel?

By A.O. SCOTT

“Is it a documentary?” “Is it *like* a documentary?” I find myself hearing (and asking) these questions so often that I have started to wonder what they mean. It’s not just that the definition of “documentary” itself is mutable: unlike other journalistic and quasi-journalistic forms, no code of ethics has ever been agreed upon by practitioners of the art, and what rules of thumb there are tend to be temporary, controversial and broken as soon as they are made. To take examples only from this calendar year, a single generic rubric covers a muckraking, talking-head essay on Wall Street like [Charles Ferguson’s](#) “Inside Job,” a ruminative memoir on parenthood like “The Kids Grow Up,” by [Doug Block](#), and an exercise in intensive fly-on-the-wall objectivity like [Frederick Wiseman’s](#) aptly titled “Boxing Gym.” And those are just the easy cases — the nonfiction films that the academy might agree to consider for its award in the always-crowded and controversial feature-documentary category.

Movies that look or feel like documentaries are much more numerous, and far more perplexing, especially since video truthiness has become the default setting of so much media. When we say “like a documentary,” do we really mean “like one of those sitcoms pretending to be a documentary,” in which characters glance at and sometimes speak directly into the camera? “Like reality television?” “Like the evening news?” Or do we mean something less specific? Do we mean something that tries to make us forget we’re watching a movie, by giving us what seems like direct, raw, unmediated access to characters and their stories? Or do we mean the opposite: a film that reminds us with every awkward cut and jolting camera movement that what we are watching is not the literal truth?

Or both at once? The French critic Serge Daney once formulated an essential paradox of cinema, bringing to it the special polemical force that only a French critic could have mustered. It was an axiom, he said (the axiom of Cahiers du Cinéma, by the way, the journal that spawned the New Wave), “that the cinema has a fundamental rapport with reality and that the real is not what is represented — and that’s final.” Yes, of course. But this insight is less the solution to a puzzle than a description of its shape.

The basic epistemological conundrum of cinema has been there from the start. What *has* changed, though, is how cinema makes its inherent contradictions apparent. Reality in movies used to resemble the medium commonly taken as the most reliable sign of truth: the newspaper photograph. Reality was black and white (as documentaries and realist dramas remained for a time, long after more fanciful genres like westerns, musicals and comedies had gone over to color). Reality was grainy. Reality was the awkward opacity of the nonprofessional actor rather than the expressive polish of the pro. Reality, once the equipment became available, was shoulder-mounted or handheld cameras and portable sound-recording units.

Now, however, reality is everywhere you look, taking dizzyingly protean forms. For every blockbuster that conjures a brand-new, hermetically sealed cosmos of fantasy, there are at least a dozen movies chasing after that “fundamental rapport” in new and sometimes confusing ways: 2010 may be the year of the multiplying reality effect. We have seen outright hoaxes, possible hoaxes, movies in which real people play fictional versions of themselves, exercises in *trompe l'oeil* navel gazing and ruthless self-examination. Not to mention slickly packaged, meticulously detailed attempts to reconstruct the truth of history, occasionally by making it up more or less from scratch.

Take the movie everyone seemed to be talking about this fall. Is “The Social Network” accurate? Is it true? Do its polished surface and carefully engineered visual and sonic effects count as realism at all? Every commercial biopic invites this kind of scrutiny, and whenever a new one is released, someone publishes an article lining up the discrepancies between the historical record and the Hollywood version. Even before “The Social Network” was released, [The New Yorker](#) broke the news that [Mark Zuckerberg](#) (the real one, not the one played by [Jesse Eisenberg](#)) has had a steady girlfriend for most of the period covered in the film, a detail omitted from the movie, which makes much of its protagonist’s inability to sustain relationships, or even conversations, with women.

But the public surely knows — don’t we? do we? — that movies take liberties, and that the words “based on a true story” or “inspired by true events” appearing before the opening titles offer at best a loose and flimsy tether to reality. We are either sophisticated enough not to trust that what we see corresponds to what was, or jaded enough not to care. There may be an extra dose of cognitive dissonance when the biopic subject is, like Zuckerberg, still alive, not yet 30 and very much in the public eye. But surely we are used to that kind of feedback loop as well.

Other movies trod muddier ground, turning the question “Is it real?” into a kind of double

dare. To ask the question is to risk seeming naïvely literal-minded; not to ask could make you a sucker. That, at least, was the trick attempted by [Casey Affleck's "I'm Still Here,"](#) a multimedia publicity stunt wrapped around a transparently fake documentary. The subject of this carefully staged celebrity train wreck, [Joaquin Phoenix](#), provoked much puzzlement with his infamously hairy and unhinged appearance on "The Late Show With [David Letterman.](#)" By the time he and Affleck revealed that the actor's bizarre public behavior — rambling incoherently, growing a beard, announcing that he was forsaking acting for a career in hip-hop — was a put-on, and the movie a prank, pretty much everyone already knew and pretty much nobody cared. The attempt to make a point about the fungibility of identity in an age of shallow celebrity foundered because it was too obvious, too elementary. Pretending to be someone else, or a different version of yourself, in front of the cameras is no great feat or revelation. It's a fairly normal mode of being, for the famous and the obscure.

And besides, the simple binary choice that Affleck and Phoenix offered viewers — earnest or ironic? hoax or not? — was much too unsophisticated. They were the ones who looked naïve for supposing that anyone would fall for their stunt. But "Catfish" and "Exit Through the Gift Shop," two documentaries that premiered at Sundance in January, were more slippery. The credited director and, at least at first, the ostensible subject of "Exit" is Banksy, the artist whose conceptual graffiti are as recognizable as his face is unknown. But what begins as a tour of the world of international street art quickly becomes something else. A documentary about Banksy and his colleagues, directed by an amiable Los Angeles-based Frenchman named Thierry Guetta, turns into its opposite, as the would-be (and apparently incompetent) documentarian remakes himself into an art-world pseudo-celebrity known as Mr. Brainwash, whose rise to fame is dutifully recorded by Banksy himself.

Is Mr. Brainwash the perpetrator of a fraud, the subject of a prank or just an ordinary guy caught in the viewfinder of a crafty filmmaker? Similarly vertiginous questions surround the Michigan woman who turns out to be the title character in "Catfish." The film's directors, Ariel Shulman and Henry Joost, set out on the road with Ariel's younger brother, Nev, to find an 8-year-old artistic prodigy and her seductive older half-sister, both of whom were Nev's friends on [Facebook](#). What they found was a case of mistaken — or rather deliberately manufactured — identity far more audacious and strange than anything Mr. Brainwash or Joaquin Phoenix could have imagined. The two girls were not exactly whole-cloth inventions, but in the form Nev had come to know them online, they were the alter egos of their mother, Angela Wesselman-Pierce, a fabulist of considerable talent and nerve.

But the queasiness of “Catfish” — the suspicion that it is not entirely on the level — comes less from Wesselman-Pierce’s imposture than from the filmmakers’ response to it, which feels at the very least disingenuous. Wesselman-Pierce does not seem to be their creation, any more than Mr. Brainwash is Banksy’s brainchild, but the way the directors pivot from credulity to shock at her deceit does not entirely ring true. Surely, young adepts of the Internet like these New Yorkers would know better than to take Facebook self-representations at face value. By insisting otherwise, Joost and the Shulmans manage the trick of looking like patsies rather than cynical con men. For most of the movie, they sustain the idea that they (or at least Nev) are innocent dupes, even as their film is built on, and ends by affirming, the assumption that they are smarter and more sophisticated than Wesselman-Pierce.

It is hardly news that documentaries manipulate reality with effects that can be morally toxic. This danger is the subject of “A Film Unfinished,” [Yael Hersonski’s](#) remarkable exploration of the blurred line between propaganda and reportage. Uncovering footage that the Nazis took, and staged, in the Warsaw ghetto, Hersonski shows that what later generations have taken to be firsthand, raw images had instead passed through the machinery of ideological illusion making. They were real, but not exactly in the way they appeared to be.

In that case, it is troubling to contemplate how easily we can be deceived. But more often, audiences consent to being fooled just for the fun of it. Horror movies, for decades ruled by the technical conservatism of the shock cut and the point-of-view shot, have rediscovered, almost a decade after “The Blair Witch Project,” the scary pleasures of the hoax. The first “Paranormal Activity,” purporting to be an amateur video recording of demonic possession, may not be surpassed for sheer, dumb formal ingenuity, but its influence has spread beyond its own sequel to the half-clever “Monsters” and the almost-clever “Last Exorcism,” both cheap sensations that crept in and out of theaters this year.

The most radical reality effects today may come from young filmmakers who adopt an almost willfully guileless attitude toward the artifices of filmmaking, recording themselves and their friends playing people like themselves and their friends in situations barely distinguishable from ordinary existence. Mumblecore, as this tendency is unhappily called, has already moved beyond its D.I.Y. origins, infiltrating the comic mainstream most notably, this year, in “Cyrus,” a scruffy, icky domestic comedy that married the anti-technique of mumblecoreans [Jay](#) and [Mark Duplass](#), who directed, with the awkward star power of [Jonah Hill](#) and [John C. Reilly](#), who played variations on their usual roles as

half-grown men looking for love and reassurance.

The undisciplined shooting and haphazard framing of “Cyrus” don’t look conventionally movielike, which makes the film puzzling, irritating and also, in its way, exemplary. The presence of professional movie stars in a film that looks so systematically amateurish in its disregard for (or plain ignorance of) the norms of cinematic craft may well be a sign of things to come, since the Duplasses’ antistyle represents an emerging aesthetic. This is perhaps easier to identify than to name, but you can see it working in small-scale projects like [Lena Dunham](#)’s “Tiny Furniture,” Benny and Josh Safdie’s “Daddy Longlegs” and Kentucker Audley’s “Open Five.”

What makes these movies interesting and difficult to assimilate is less the fact that they blur the line between real life and representation than the way they accomplish the blurring. “Open Five” may be notable mainly for shifting the landscape of aimless, youthful contemplation from the city to the countryside, but its record of the ambivalent desires and drifting ambitions of a group of friends is artful enough to be touching as well as vague. “Tiny Furniture” and “Daddy Longlegs,” autobiographical films about Manhattan children and their bohemian parents, present a similar — but at the same time, in each case, highly idiosyncratic — blend of coyness and sincerity. The scenes feel improvised; the stories emerge almost haphazardly out of long takes and meandering shots. Your expectation of seeing life framed, organized, made somehow more coherent, is teased, frustrated and sometimes thwarted outright. This is not entirely a pleasant or comfortable experience, and you may find yourself asking, Where is the art? Or even, What is the point? Can you just aim the camera at something that’s happening and call the result a movie? What else would you call it?

ONE OF THE best-known stories about the birth of movies — which has always seemed to me at least partly apocryphal, the way most such tales are — takes place in 1895 in a Paris cafe, where Auguste and Louis Lumière screened a film, scarcely a minute long, of a train arriving in Ciotat Station. Legend has it that the assembled public fled in panic, seized by the momentary belief that, in spite of the absence of either a railroad track or a soundtrack, an actual locomotive was bearing down on them.

This anecdote can be used to remind us of the now-unimaginable novelty of cinema, a strange and wonderful late-19th-century invention that must have seemed, at the time, to refute the very laws of physics. Or we can wonder (and laugh) at the naïveté of the audience, who supposedly failed to grasp the distinction between reality and representation that is so obvious to us now. We know better than to believe what we see.

But we also, sometimes willfully, let go of that knowledge, and it is possible to discern in the frenzied reaction of that ancient Parisian crowd the first recorded eruption of a distinctively modern form of pleasure. We may not be fooled by images, but maybe sometimes we would like to be. The Lumière brothers called their spectacles (the first of which showed workers filing out of the family's factory) "actuality films," and they have gone down in history as early instances of both the documentary and realist tendencies in cinema. As such, they stand in contrast with the roughly contemporary work of Georges Méliès, cinema's first great fantasist, who famously used the nascent medium to conjure the imaginary and the impossible — voyages to the moon! extraordinary illusions! — rather than to capture what actually existed.

Now, more than 100 years later, the Mélièsian universe grows ever more crowded and elaborate. The refinement of digital special effects, displacing the camera with the computer, has only extended its domain. But at the same time, the Lumière-esque urge to record, to use the camera to see rather than to dream, has itself been strengthened by new technologies, notably the ever-wider availability of cheap, portable, easy-to-use cameras. Everyone with a flip-cam or a cellphone can be a documentary filmmaker, or at least an Internet auteur. You want trains pulling into stations? YouTube has plenty of those, and an endless supply of babies doing cute, messy things with food, including the one in Lumière film No. 88, a 44-second tour de force called "Baby's Lunch."

The appetite for actuality has hardly waned, but it remains an unstable, contradictory hunger, compounded of doubt and credulity, the will to believe and the wish to be tricked. This observation can easily be applied to the realm of politics and media at large — where every supposed debunking seems to produce its own kind of bunk, and where the idea of reality television flips from oxymoron to tautology in the space of a commercial break — but let's stay with the movies for now. What did you see this year? And more to the point: What did you believe?

A. O. Scott, a chief film critic at The Times, last wrote for the magazine about the filmmaker Olivier Assayas.

