

# La Vérité d'une vie

Études sur la véridiction  
en biographie

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## CHAPITRE XI

### THE ETHICS OF TRUTH IN BIOGRAPHICAL DOCUMENTARIES

This essay is based on the premise that biography scholars and documentary filmmakers should abide by the same principles of ethics. Biography scholar Jerome G. Manis defines ethics as “the basic rules of conduct or moral principles which guide individual behaviour in relationship to others” and calls for a code of ethics specific to biographical writing that includes “thorough study, documentation, careful interpretation, and cautious speculation. Especially significant is the dictum of truth, the essence of scholarly knowledge”<sup>1</sup>. Documentary theorist Bill Nichols also argues that ethical issues are central to documentary filmmaking and warns that the indexical quality of the image to re-present reality may lead to misinterpretation; he therefore insists on the responsibilities of filmmakers as “representatives of those they film”<sup>2</sup>.

Both scholars underline that biographers’ ethical responsibility lies in the encounter with the other, for the biographer has the power to shape the narrative of a life and the public image of a subject: Manis is concerned that derogatory biographies rely on “questionable detractors, doubtful allegations, and unsupported claims”<sup>3</sup> whereas Nichols worries that filmmakers may feel obligated to respect or perpetuate the image public figures wish to maintain. Biographical documentaries reflexively display the power relationship between filmmakers and their subjects, who often appear as interviewees in these films<sup>4</sup>; the

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome G. Manis, “What Should Biographers Tell: The Ethics of Telling Lives”, *Biography*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Fall 1994), 386. Gail P. Mandell also argues that “the biographer must first tell Gail Porter Mandell, *Life Into Art*, Fayetteville, University of Alabama Press, 1991, 8.the truth.”

<sup>2</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2001, 2010, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> Jerome G. Manis, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

<sup>4</sup> Biographical documentaries tend to blend with commemorative hagiographic practices when addressing the deeds of dead subjects.

director's framing and editing exhibit narrative choices that determine the perception of the subject. Although the camera endows filmmakers with power over the filmed participants and the audience, Nichols notes that "power flows the other way, when subjects are *not* dependent on the filmmaker to have their story told"<sup>5</sup>. In other words, the filmed participants may have more power over their public image than the filmmaker as renowned subjects. Biographical documentaries in that case navigate between the biographical and the autobiographical in a conversational style that foregrounds the tension – or the complacency – between the biographer and the subject. While written biographies may incorporate the voice of their subject, the author does not physically confront him/her. Although editing provides the filmmaker with the power to cut and reorder an interview, the documentarian's ethical commitment to truth may deter him/her from intervening in the recorded materials.

Manis aptly remarks that the trend "seems to be toward malicious, debunking, questionable, and extremely profitable biographies"<sup>6</sup>. From Errol Morris's *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003) and Ray Müller's *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (1993) to Spike Lee's *Jim Brown: All-American* (2002) and Shola Lynch's *Free Angela and all Political Prisoners* (2012), many documentaries seem to illustrate this point by focusing on figures with a controversial legacy. While most biographical documentaries are devoted to reconstructing the lives of deceased characters from the standpoint of an external narrator's present, thereby weakening the impact of contentious elements through discussion with different experts, these biographical films provide an internal perspective on the retrospective examination of events that have shaped one's personality by having the subjects themselves take part in the documentary. Speaking in the first person, which lends authority to their opinions, their testimony highlights the differences between their perception of themselves and how others view them.

While a biographical documentarian's pledge to truth and to respecting the balance of power between subject and filmmaker is essential to the genre's authenticity, intervention on behalf of the filmmaker may be

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<sup>5</sup> Bill Nichols, *Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2016, p. 160.

<sup>6</sup> Jerome G. Manis, *op. cit.*, p. 392.

necessary to counter deception and reveal a deliberately disguised truth. The treatment of biographical material raises questions of ethics that may undermine the very principles at the basis of a documentary, for biographical films blur the boundaries between historical truth and reconstructed History through re-enacted sequences that signal the director's tampering with original information. An intrusive camera may also fathom the intimate character of the man (or the woman) behind the headlines by capturing uncalculated moments in one's self-representation.

Influenced by the ongoing trend of so-called "neo-biographies that are ideological, consider a portion of a person's life or work, or are a blend of intellectual biography and cultural studies",<sup>7</sup> documentary filmmakers include a diversity of sources as evidence to be probed in order to decipher a subject's behavioural characteristics. Biographical documentaries are defined by their hybrid construction, including images that testify to the importance of representation as regards the construction of a public figure. Barbara Caine aptly notes that biographers "focus on the different ways in which individuals represent, construct or fashion their identities either in texts or in a range of different kinds of performance"<sup>8</sup>. The subject's participation in a biographical documentary provides evidence of self-representation that should be analysed as character development.

Through the close examination of several films, this article will question the ethical pact followed by filmmakers who, opportunistically or not, shed light on the life path of subjects with a controversial past. It appears that the biographical pact of documentary filmmaking is based on three interrelated points: films open up spaces for self-representation through interviews with the subject; they provide an intertextual network of sources that support different versions of truth; finally, they are auto/biographical endeavours that make visible the filmmaker as an author who may (or may not) express critical insight, notably in light of historical (and non-historical) elements of a larger context.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Paula Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography*, 1999, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Caine, *Biography and History*, Hampshire, UK, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> Gérard Gengembre, *Le Roman historique*, Paris, Klincksieck, 2006, p. 99.

## 1. CONVERSATIONAL BIOGRAPHY AND SELF-REPRESENTATION

Many biographical documentaries include interviewing sequences that permit the subjects to gain a voice in the narrative crafted from the events of their life and to take part in fashioning their own image. Although the filmmaker is also in charge of editing after shooting, therefore proceeding to cuts that might be reflective of his/her own interpretation of the subject's declarations, s/he nonetheless compromises his/her authorial power as narrator by engaging a discussion with the biographical subject.

In *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, Ray Müller can be heard interviewing the woman whose successful filmmaking career during the Nazi era and her subsequent downfall is related; however, he never appears on screen and can hardly counter an authorial strategy which Riefenstahl has developed over the years. She has repeatedly argued for a distinction between artistic desire and political commitment, performing the role of an innocent victim of history. She obviously dominates Müller's film through her extensive participation as an interviewee who refuses to acknowledge her political role as the director of *Triumph of the Will*—the film that epitomizes the power of Nazi propaganda. While the interviewing sequences allow her to expand on her “naïve” involvement as an artist working for the Nazis without ever joining the party, they also expose the woman's authoritarian traits: she repeatedly tries to interfere with Müller's directorial choices by telling him where to place his camera and she bluntly responds to questions that annoy her—including when Müller recalls the social intimacy she shared with Goebbels. Most revelatory is her fascination with her own film as she details the techniques she used to turn a political event into what she considers to be art. She explains with fascination how she made the camera more mobile or used cuts during speeches to add movement to the political rally she filmed. Müller adds a voice-over to provide complementary information that he cannot obtain through the interviews. However, the factual tone of the female narrator conveys little critical distance to the self-serving comments that the camera uncritically captures, arousing sympathy for the figure of the elderly woman standing by herself in the stadium where the 1933 Nazi rally unfolded. The camera zooms out and portrays the pitiful elderly woman's loneliness as social abandonment, a judgement which the voice-over seems to question in these words. After the war, Leni Riefenstahl, the obsessed and politically linked filmmaker was boycotted and universally despised. To this day, she has not been able to

make another film. That is the price she has had to pay for her brilliant career under the Nazis.

Film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum is quite critical of Müller's biographical attempt: "The film has only a few sceptical asides, and it shirks certain basic historical facts—allowing its subject to insist, for instance, that *Triumph of the Will* was a 'straight' documentary, with no allusion to all the carefully crafted studio retakes"<sup>10</sup>. Riefenstahl closes the film with a question that eschews ethical judgement: "Where does my guilt lie?", refusing to be judged by spectators that were not confronted with similar constraints.

Interviews also structure Spike Lee's *Jim Brown: All American*, with snippets of discussions with Jim Brown placed throughout the film, allowing him to convey a personal perspective on events that turned him into a cultural phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> Lee explores the gap between Brown's interviews and various witnesses' memories of him to point out the distance between the man's perception of himself and his public image: Brown underlines the societal pressures that weighed on his career as an African American athlete, simultaneously pointing out the internal strength that has sustained him, whereas coaches and friends depict his exceptional capabilities. From his college years where he excelled in several sports, including football, basketball, track and lacrosse, to his experience in Cleveland's National Football League team, Jim Brown ran up against a host of restraints imposed on coloured athletes by the racial divide that permeated sports culture, especially in the southern states. His life story permits Lee to illuminate the concrete impact of race on an individual's experience. The film restores Brown's voice in opposition to his commodification by the media, questioning the myth construed around him as a Black athlete, a Blaxploitation actor, and an alleged rapist.<sup>12</sup> *Jim Brown: All-American* lays bare the racial discourse that pervades the treatment of Jim Brown as a public figure, whose deeds have often been depicted through the filter of racial stereotypes. The documentary provides him with the opportunity to counter the controversial image

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum, "The Wonderful Horrible Life Of Leni Riefenstahl", *Chicago Reader*, July 1, 1994. <https://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/1994/07/the-wonderful-horrible-life-of-leni-riefenstahl/>, accessed on 23 November, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> *Kobe doin' Work* (Spike Lee, 2009) also offers an interesting reflexive take on the biographical genre: the subject (Kobe Bryant) is watching himself perform on film and then creating his own narrative about his performance. See Delphine Letort, *The Spike Lee Brand: A Study of Documentary Filmmaking*, Albany, SUNY, 2015, 27, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

fabricated by the media by posing as the architect of his own life; Brown expands on the choices that he made as an athlete who practiced all kinds of sports in an attempt to overturn the racial barriers erected on his path to success. He lingers on anecdotes that both demonstrate his strength of will and his provocative behaviour whereas Lee often cuts to archive material that make his words all the more ironic,<sup>13</sup> while also using skewed angles that are characteristic of his filmic style, enhancing Brown's performance of himself.

African American documentarians use their films to highlight the activist commitment of their subjects, casting light on their struggles in adversarial environments. In *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton states that "the narrative of our life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives; it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identity"<sup>14</sup>. *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners* is a montage film that isolates Angela Davis's voice as she retrospectively comments on the notorious events that made her name headline news. This type of narration underscores her fighting spirit as an individual who has survived events that have not shattered her self-confidence. The documentary extends the political underpinning of a life narrative that Davis herself has couched in terms of race and class. The woman activist turned the narrative of her life into a political tool through her autobiography, which she acknowledges in the introduction to the second edition of her book: "I did not measure the events of my own life according to their possible personal importance. Rather I attempted to utilize the autobiographical genre to evaluate my life in accordance with what I considered to be the political significance of my experiences"<sup>15</sup>. Shola Lynch's documentary *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners* is based on Davis's autobiographical narrative, which a shot of the silhouetted

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<sup>13</sup> Brown projected racial pride and assertiveness as his sport performances gained him respect, thus merging his black masculine identity with his sport image, foreshadowing the Black Power iconography of the 1960s. During his senior year at Syracuse University, he purchased a large red and white Pontiac Bonneville that he provocatively drove around campus. Lee ironically pans across an old advert for the Pontiac, suggesting that Brown appropriated a symbol of success in American white patriarchal society. He used the car to break the unwritten segregationist rules when he drove a white girlfriend to one of his home lacrosse games and kissed her on the mouth in public [31:30].

<sup>14</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* in *Negotiating Cultures: Modes of Memory in Novels by African Women*, by Catriona Conelissen, PhD, University of Toronto, 1997, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: an Autobiography*, New York, Random House, 1988 [1974], p. viii.

figure of her iconic hairstyle indicates in the opening sequence. The film is an elaborate montage of various archival documents (television footage, testimony interviews, press photographs, among them), which either alternate or interweave with Angela Davis's retrospective comments. Her autobiography delves into the various events that have shaped her perspective on life—including growing up in “Dynamite Hill” Birmingham, her studies in Brandeis University and in Germany. Shola Lynch evokes this background to point out the dramatic impact of visuals that shocked Angela Davis into returning to the US. The film also includes public statements by the Black Panther Party leaders Huey P. Newton's and Bobby Seales, providing a context for Davis's political commitment and life choices. Editing establishes a direct relationship between the media photographs of Black Power figures protesting the treatment they receive from a racist police and Davis's commitment as an African American intellectual determined to fight for racial justice. She nonetheless articulates a critical view of the Black Power movement when she observes: “I was involved very briefly with the BBP, the SNCC, and a Black student organization on my campus, but I did not like the nationalism, I did not like the male supremacy, I did not like the fact that women were expected to take a back seat and literally to sit at the feet of the men”.<sup>16</sup> She thus provides a reason for turning to Franklin Alexander, leader of the Communist Party, and the Che Lumumba club, which was used as an argument for dismissing her from her position as a lecturer at UCLA. Shola Lynch uses the biographical angle to cast a critical light on the turbulent 1970s, providing an insider's viewpoint in counterpoint to the media footage of the period.

## 2. DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF THE TRUTH

While editing allows film directors Shola Lynch and Spike Lee to juxtapose the various types of discourses built around their subjects, trapping the man and the woman in stereotypical images of blackness that caused them to be perceived as public threats, Errol Morris introduces fiction to undermine the autobiographical voice in *The Fog of War*, *Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*. The documentary is based on a long interview with Robert McNamara, who served as Secretary of Defence under Presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. The

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<sup>16</sup> Angela Davis in *Free Angela*.



man retraces his career in the private industry (Ford Motor Company) and explains what his responsibilities were during the Cold War and the first stages of the escalation of the Vietnam War.<sup>17</sup>

Morris disrespectfully associates a diversity of images with McNamara's words, weakening his authorial voice and spoken narrative by cutting to fictional sequences that provide a critical counterpoint to his version. When McNamara mentions the use of firebombs in Japan which he recommended to General Curtis LeMay by running statistical analysis, Morris replaces the bombs being dropped from a plane with figures indicating the rates of destruction, thereby symbolizing the cold calculations McNamara put forth to crush the belligerent country. "We burned to death 100,000 Japanese civilians in Tokyo—men, women and children", McNamara recalls coldly.

The documentary is pervaded by the tension between two narrative voices: Morris accelerates the rhythm of the film in a compilation of archive footage that negatively characterizes McNamara as one of his generation's "whiz kids"<sup>18</sup>, using embedded archival extracts from a variety of media sources—television programmes and newspaper articles that convey a derogatory portrait of a man ("The McNamara monarchy", "whiz kid", "the best man", "self-made", "brainy", "the revolution in the Pentagon", "egotistical", "cold logic", "order from chaos", "effective and efficient" [05:50]), whereas McNamara slows down the narrative pace by dwelling on details of his family life in an attempt to downplay the political dimension of his career. Morris, however, uses a diversity of means such as editing to point out contradictions which McNamara will not

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<sup>17</sup> "President Kennedy knew I would bring to the military techniques of management from the business world, much as my Harvard colleagues and I had done as statistical control officers on the war," (Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, New York, Knopf Doubleday, 2017, p. 3). "The Pentagon was captured by a generation of systems analysts who brought with them an obsessive love of numbers, equations and calculations along with them a certain arrogance that their calculations could reveal the truth. They transformed not only the vocabulary of war but also the prevailing philosophy of force. [...] McNamara had first risen to prominence during the Second World War when he had distinguished himself as the first of the most brilliant analysts in the Statistical Control Office, where he conducted operations research for the Air Force using IBM counting machines. During the strategic bombing campaign of Japan, he had recommended a switch to firebombing and lower altitude mission, both of which were adopted with devastating effect in 1944. [...] McNamara was once referred to as a 'human IBM machine' who cared more for computerized statistical logic than for human judgement", (Christopher Coker, *Ethics and War in the 21st Century*, Oxon & New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 38-39).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38-39.

confess: private phone conversations between McNamara and President Lyndon B. Johnson show a complacent Minister of Defence, agreeing to cover up the Vietnam crisis through communication (“I’ll handle it in a way that will minimize the announcement” [1:14:00]). The discrepancy between the discussion on the oral track and the embedded archive footage showing the escalating war in Vietnam illustrates the gap between McNamara’s intimate beliefs and public statements; small blanks in the recorded conversation further translate an embarrassed response to President Johnson’s determination, which McNamara would rather repress in his public declarations: “The most vivid impression I’m bringing back is that we’ve stopped losing the war” [1:15:00].

Editing both characterizes the weak character of the Secretary of Defense and signals the biographer’s intrusive presence in the construction of the narrative, exploring the power of the image track to challenge the verbal. Devin and Marsha Orgeron contend that Morris exploits images to show what words fail to convey: “His work suggests the degree to which images cannot act as witnesses in their own right without the intervening of words, and vice versa”<sup>19</sup>. Contrary to Müller, Morris intervenes directly in the narrative of his interviewee by drawing eleven lessons from his testimony; the interview is divided into eleven chapters whose clear-cut titles reflect the rational mind of the Secretary of Defense.<sup>20</sup> Documentary scholar Lucia Ricciardelli notes that such intervention may be necessary to reach the truth and to counter an interlocutor’s deception: Morris’s replacement of the stylistic conventions of direct cinema with a complete new set of documentary rules (e.g., dramatic reenactments, high-tech studio interviews, staged shots, unusual camera angles, evocative music, and the like) is ultimately meant to reveal the arbitrariness of direct cinema’s conventions as “signs of truth”<sup>21</sup>.

McNamara uses the film as a platform to pursue the autobiographical account he published in 1995, entitled *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and*

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<sup>19</sup> Devin Orgeron and Marsha Orgeron, “Megatronic Memories: Errol Morris and the Politics of Witnessing”, in Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, eds., *The Image and the Witness, Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*. London, Wallflower Press, 2007, p. 241.

<sup>20</sup> 1 – Empathize with your enemy; 2 – Rationality will not save us; 3 – There’s something beyond one’s self; 4 – Maximize efficiency; 5 – Proportionality should be a guideline in war; 6 – Get the data; 7 – Belief and seeing are often both wrong; 8 – Be prepared to re-examine your reasoning; 9 – In order to do good, you may have to engage in evil; 10 – Never say never; 11 – You can’t change human nature.

<sup>21</sup> Lucia Ricciardelli, *American Documentary Filmmaking in the Digital Age, Depictions of War in Burns, Moore and Morris*, Oxford and New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 134.

*Lessons of Vietnam*, and in which he responded to various critiques levelled at America's foreign policy during the Vietnam war—be they formulated by Senator Wayne Morse contesting the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Barry Goldwater scathingly commenting on McNamara's "deceit, wrong decisions and dictatorial arrogance", Chester Cooper calling for a "fourteen-point peace package", or historian George C. Herring regretting his weak position as a member of the Administration<sup>22</sup>. When McNamara retraces the events in the film, he unfolds a cause and effect narrative that, he seems to insist, gave him little leeway. Morris includes a fictional sequence that shows a line of dominos fall across the map of Vietnam, thus providing a visual metaphor for the mental framework that dominated and limited the political thinking of the period.

The metaphorical sequence visualizes the implacable domino theory and its imagery prompts reflection on the closed system of thought that prevailed; the visuals symbolize an abstract political theory behind an aggressive international relations policy. They also provide a critical look at the tenets of a theory bound to extend warfare across Asia. The film interestingly offers a different understanding of politics through the fictionalized sequence, echoing Robert Sinnerbrink's definition of cinematic ethics in relation to emotions: "Ethical experience in the cinema does not generally involve an intellectual or abstract reflection on moral problems or ethical dilemmas, but unfolds rather through a situated, emotionally engaged, aesthetically receptive response to images that work in us in a multimodal manner, engaging our senses, emotions, and powers of reasoning"<sup>23</sup>.

Biographical documentarians resort to such fictional means as the addition of a musical score to involve the viewers in the ethical dilemmas raised by their subjects. Spike Lee introduces excerpts from the Blaxploitation films in which Jim Brown played to point out the fictional character of his persona. Shola Lynch re-enacts a scene when Angela Davis was hiding in the dark before she was arrested to convey the state of anxiety provoked by paranoia. Errol Morris fictionalizes the narrative of Robert McNamara to question the ideological framework behind his statements. The fictional devices introduced in biographical documentaries also articulate the directors' authorial interventions in the autobiographical narratives of their subjects.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert McNamara, *op. cit.*, p. 136, 295, 230, 233.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film*, London, Routledge, 2016, p. 231.

### 3. AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL FILMS

Freud analyses “the emotional involvement of biographers with their subjects”<sup>24</sup>, which may shift from admiration to disdain. Be they writers or filmmakers, the biographers’ relationship with their subject cannot be qualified as neutral. The ethics of truth that should prevail fails to take into account the narrator’s invisible slant.

The English translation of Müller’s documentary title, *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*<sup>25</sup>, alludes to the double bind that best defines Riefenstahl’s life and Müller’s paradoxical relationship with the woman: Müller offers the woman a platform to speak about her “tragic” life as a successful filmmaker whose films received international praise before the horrors of the war turned them into shameful and distressful memories. Müller’s chronological narrative allows Riefenstahl to demonstrate her professional dedication to filmmaking—which comes out as a quality even though her films served Nazi propaganda. The woman director has fuelled contradictory sentiments, which film historian Jean Bimbenet’s French study *Quand la cinéaste d’Hitler fascinait la France (When Hitler’s director fascinated France)* deftly signifies<sup>26</sup>. Rainer Rother’s biography *The Seduction of Genius: Leni Riefenstahl* also praises the woman’s sense of determination by quoting from an interview in which the German filmmaker identified “strength of will” as her main character trait<sup>27</sup>. Although the biographer tones down the arrogance of her statement by saying that “this was a characteristic she was forced to conceal for much of her career”, Rother also singles out her position as a woman filmmaker working in a male-dominated field to underscores her exceptional determination throughout the book<sup>28</sup>. The Nazi filmmaker has written her own memoirs and given multiple interviews in an attempt to redeem the films that have caused her to be seen as a propagandist or a profiteer, thereby fashioning her own image as an artist who created “cinematic poetry” from the 1933 Nuremberg rally<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Caine, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> The original title *Die Macht der Bilder: Leni Riefenstahl* would best be translated into *The Power of the Image*.

<sup>26</sup> Jérôme Bimbenet, *Quand la cinéaste d’Hitler fascinait la France, Leni Riefenstahl*, Paris, Lavauzelle, coll. Histoire, mémoire et patrimoine, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Rainer Rother, *Leni Riefenstahl*, Translated by Martin H. Bott, London & New York, Continuum, 2002, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Leni Riefenstahl, *Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir*, New York, Picador, 1987.

Rother ambiguously opposes the person to the persona construed from “a vague conception of her work rather than close analysis of it”<sup>30</sup> and concludes that she was victimized for stylizing the Nazi propaganda to “seduce her audience”<sup>31</sup>. One may believe that Rother is indeed seduced by the power of the image whereas other critics question the ethics of decisions made at a time when other filmmakers chose exile. German filmmaker Sylvana Abbrescia-Rath contends that Riefenstahl was deeply imbued in Nazi ideology when making the film that symbolized the Great Germany that Hitler dreamed of<sup>32</sup>, whereas Müller and Rother portray an ambitious woman who seized the opportunity of an artistic career. Müller’s documentary shows that the filmmaker is mesmerized by the woman’s performance of herself; try as he might to question her collusion with the Nazis by appealing to her sense of responsibility as an artist, he manages neither to subdue the power of the images from *Triumph of the Will* which he includes as archive footage nor to question the veracity of her statements<sup>33</sup>. Leni Riefenstahl actively participates in the construction of her biography in a film that fails to challenge the narrative she has crafted of her life. While other biographers have characterized her as an unscrupulous, opportunistic woman – “Fame, money, and power enticed her into accepting the devil’s bargain; there was nothing in her scanty furnished soul to make her resist”<sup>34</sup>, writes Algis Valiunas, Müller seems to condone her search for recognition by portraying her as a victim of history.

Hannah Arendt wrote that “[i]n the darkest of times we have a right to expect some illumination, And that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that we given them on earth [...]”<sup>35</sup>. Such an endeavor undergirds Spike Lee’s portrayal of Jim Brown, who became a paradoxical icon in American

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>32</sup> Diane Chauvelot, *La Passion de l’image, Leni Riefenstahl, entre le beau et le bien*, Paris, Les Éditions de Janus, 2000, p. 132.

<sup>33</sup> She claims she hates Goebbels whereas his letters show otherwise and brutally retorts to Müller when annoyed by his questions.

<sup>34</sup> Algis Valiunas, «Aryan Sister», in Charles R. Kesler and John B. Kienker (eds.), *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness, Ten Years of the Claremont Review of Books*, Plymouth UK, Rowman & Littlefield, 2013, p. 445.

<sup>35</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, Florida, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968, p. ix.

society, illustrating contradictory reactions to race, success, and scandal. Jim Brown's life as an African American cultural icon illustrates the ups and downs of a public career for an ex-athlete: while his talent at playing football drew admiration and opened up for him a second professional career in Hollywood, Brown was a vulnerable target to the rumors and accusations that questioned his morality and sexuality. Spike Lee dwells on the accusations which repeatedly tainted the athlete's reputation—including a rape case in 1965, an assault and battery charge in 1966, driving without a licence in the early 1960s and other misdemeanors which caused the FBI to collect and compile records and data on him<sup>36</sup>. Embedded footage shows that media headlines influenced public perception by erasing all the positive deeds he had accomplished as a committed celebrity. Brown was presented as a woman abuser, whose achievements either as an athlete or a social activist were simply forgotten. Lee includes television footage to retrace how Brown's arrest was broadcast into breaking news: presenters emphasized the descent of the star from his iconic status to the level of street crime by recalling incidents that marred his past [01:30:00]. They used a photograph that resembled a police mug shot, thus visually expressing negative views and shaping biased public opinions on a man whose version of the story had not yet been heard. Brown was framed as a criminal in the news; Lee demonstrates that the media exploited Jim Brown's criminal record to make it fit into a pre-existing ideological framework. The media focus on the assault and battery charges reactivated primal fear of black male sexuality, echoing the treatment of the O. J Simpson case which had provided a race spectacle for weeks on end after his ex-wife Nicole Brown and her friend Ronald Goldman were found dead on June 12, 1994. Through his portrayal of Jim Brown, Lee offers a racial analysis of the "black athlete" narrative, pointing to the ideological framework that undergirds the treatment of race on television and in American society. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu contends that the value of biographical study resides in its power to reflect the social forces at play; in other words, biography should illuminate a life trajectory through an analysis of the public and the personal as expressive of the social forces at play<sup>37</sup>. This perspective pervades Lee's biographical films, which also translate his political commitment.

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<sup>36</sup> Mike Freeman, *Jim Brown, The Fierce Life of an American Hero*, New York, HarperCollins, 2006, p. 146-147, 165, 204.

<sup>37</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, «L'illusion biographique», *Actes RSS 62/63*, juin 1986, p. 69-72.

Shola Lynch also gives free rein to Angela Davis by remaining out of sight. Editing permits her to reinforce the contrast between the woman's peaceful tone of voice and the violence depicted in the archival documents, highlighting the web of accusations stacked against her at a time when she was viewed as a communist traitor. Mary Ellen Snodgrass points out the discrepancy between her portrayal in the media and the image that her autobiography constructs: "Although depicted in the media as a radical hard-liner, she is adept at passion and humour"<sup>38</sup>. Lynch captures similar traits, filming Davis speaking about the past without ever giving in to anger. Davis became a symbol of the "youth revolution" combining Black rebellion and anti-war movements, causing her to receive death threats when teaching at UCLA in 1970. Her serenity stands out as she looks back at the events that led her to stand trial for attempted kidnapping, murder and conspiracy. Davis recalls her whereabouts as a "fugitive" tracked down by the police and the FBI from Florida to New York for allegedly providing the guns used by the prisoners involved in the takeover of Marin County courthouse. Accused of having registered the weapons used by the prisoners for their insurrection, Davis was indicted for the Marin County courthouse assault that caused the deaths of four people—including Jonathan Jackson, two prisoners, and a hostage on August 7, 1970. The documentary enhances her integrity by showing that Davis continues to fight for the same narrative, which Shola Lynch presents as the only truth.

Some biographers do not shy away from judging the acts of their subjects. Reviewing Deborah Shapley's biography of Robert McNamara, historian Douglas Brinkley summarizes the man's career in bleak terms:

The McNamara story is one of tragedy, for a dedicated public servant and for America, fueled by our frustration that a man of such promise chose, out of a misguided sense of mission, not to tell the American people what he knew about the dim prospects for victory in the Vietnam War when it might have made a difference. [...] As Shapley puts it, "he chose to deceive the American people by hiding the bad news while raising troop levels to 400,000, then 500,000, when he could have resigned, told the 'truth' and stopped American involvement."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature*, New York, Facts on File, 2014, p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> Douglas Brinkley, "The Stain of Vietnam: Robert McNamara, Redemption Denied", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer, 1993), p. 190.

Shapley suggests that McNamara could have chosen a different path of action, which McNamara eschews by refusing to give an answer to Morris's final question: 'After you left Johnson's administration, why didn't you speak out against the war?'. This ending ironically evokes the limits of the biographer to plumb the past through the memories of his subject, highlighting the limits of the film to capture more than the subject is willing to divulge. Mike Wayne considers that Errol Morris actually showcases a very narcissistic character with limited self-critical capability:

While it [the documentary] might seem to offer McNamara a commanding platform on which to provide a self-legitimizing account of his role in the Vietnam War, it also subjects his account to microscopic scrutiny, where we find various hints and clues (often in little details and throw-away remarks) that suggest that here is a profoundly narcissistic man with extremely limited powers of self-introspection and amazing detachment from all the death and destruction he was involved in propagating.<sup>40</sup>

While Bill Nichols deems that Morris lacks a moral centre from which to evaluate his subject's narrative ('I felt that you had retreated behind your interrotron and forfeited the moral ground to your subjects'<sup>41</sup>), I would argue that the film fails as a biographical attempt because it links neither the private and the public, nor does it relate the individual and the collective.

## CONCLUSION

The characters chosen in the films presented in this essay tend to demonstrate that truth may not define one's life. While Riefenstahl has shrouded herself in denial over her contribution to growing Nazi power, McNamara has retreated into a silence that allows him to downplay his responsibilities in the deaths caused during the Vietnam War. Jim Brown clearly remains a performer in front of Spike Lee's camera, whereas Angela Davis pursues her militant commitments by enlightening the present through the past.

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<sup>40</sup> Mike Wayne, «Documentary as Critical and Creative Research», in Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong (eds.), *Rethinking Documentary, New Perspectives, New Practices*, Maidenhead, Berkshire, Open University Press, 2010 [2008], p. 86.

<sup>41</sup> Bill Nicholls, *Speaking Truths with Film, op. cit.*, p. 187.



While biographers remain concerned with biographical truth, we may argue that no single code of ethics prevails as regards the moral stance to be adopted in documentary filmmaking. Bill Nichols accused Morris of complacent sympathy in the face of McNamara and other interviewees: “You show a remarkable willingness to let your subjects describe and defend themselves in whatever way they wish, without prodding or challenge”<sup>42</sup>. While fictional sequences permit filmmakers to suggest alternative truths in documentaries that make the presence of a narrator-filmmaker visible through editing techniques and *mise-en-scène* effects that convey a reflexive dimension, the aural and visual presence of their interviewees interferes with a narrative they cannot completely reorganize without running the risk of being accused of manipulating the facts—an attack which has repeatedly been levelled against Michael Moore<sup>43</sup>. Documentaries look beyond biographical truths to images that provide a backdrop for one’s personal choices, enlightening a subject’s life through his/her position as a “social actor”.

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew Bernstein, *Michael Moore: Filmmaker, Newsmaker, Cultural Icon*, Michigan, The University of Michigan Press, 2010.

*Qui manquerait une porte ?* Ainsi parlait Aristote de la vérité pour dire qu'elle est immanquable, alors que paradoxalement il est impossible de l'atteindre absolument. Ces études ont en commun de partir pragmatiquement du constat que le principal obstacle à une théorie de la biographie comme genre littéraire distinct est le préjugé moderne que tout est fiction, ou à tout le moins que toute écriture en relève nécessairement. Sitôt cette vérité énoncée, on voit bien que c'est une évidence et que pourtant elle est fausse. Ce paradoxe, qui est aussi celui du menteur, ouvre une brèche où s'engouffre comme un courant d'air la possibilité d'un regain de l'expérience esthétique littéraire. En effet, la biographie nous interpelle autrement que la fiction parce qu'elle est véridiction, parce qu'elle est volonté de dire vrai. En cela, elle est comme la vie une bataille toujours perdue d'avance, mais où se livrent parfois de beaux combats.