Documentary Film and International Relations: Images, Regimes of Visibility and the Creative Treatment of Global Actuality*

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Abstract: Reflecting developments in the global information and media age as well as intra-disciplinary dynamics, International Relations (IR) is taking a stronger interest in non-textual practices and representations. In particular, the study of images and visual representations has become a more integrated and accepted part of research and teaching in IR. The genre of documentary film has, however, received virtually no attention, which is striking given the last decade’s explosion of docs revolving around questions of central importance to the discipline. Arguing that IR needs to take documentary film-making seriously as a political medium of representation, this article develops theoretical and analytical tools that enable scholars in IR to study documentary films as politically important claims to (parts of) truth and reality. These tools are relevant for research as well as teaching within the discipline. First, we introduce a theoretical vocabulary around the concept of ‘regimes of visibility’ that helps us understand documentary as an act of interpretation constitutive of our perceptible reality. Secondly, we provide a classification of three central such regimes and their prevalent forms of politics (disclosure, exposition, and destabilization). The value of this analytical framework is illustrated through a reading of recent documentary films about global politics.

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Introduction

Within the discipline of International Relations (IR), the last three decades have witnessed a stronger interest in a range of practices and cultural representations that speak of or to international politics in forms that transgress the conventional preference for words in print. Whether conceived as competent performances by practitioners, communication by institutions or authorities, or cultural products more generally, the apparently non-political or non-academic text, artifact or practice have become a steadily more integrated and accepted part of IR’s agenda (e.g. Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Drezner, 2011; Neumann and Nexon, 2006). Visual representations, in particular, have moved centre stage, reflecting a pervasive sense that we live in a visual age; we are inundated with images that increasingly interact with or take the place of words in our attempts to make sense of international politics. A range of studies have explored how visual images such as media footage, editorial cartoons, photography and not least fiction feature films are woven into the fabric of international politics. ‘Increasingly’, Der Derian (2010:183) notes, ‘the world is comprehended and acted upon not through speech-acts but word-pictures.’

It is striking, however, that the genre of documentary film-making has virtually escaped the attention of IR scholars. While the discipline has witnessed valuable discussions about the pedagogical merits and challenges of teaching international politics
with films,\(^1\) in this literature the documentary genre is mainly treated on par with fiction films. A similar tendency is characteristic of most research on (still and moving) images and international politics. The neglect of the documentary genre is particularly striking, given that the last decade has witnessed an explosion of highly profiled documentary films whose content matter directly revolves around questions of central importance to the discipline. The most famous, of course, is Michael Moore’s controversial *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), only the second documentary to win at the prestigious Cannes film festival. But there are a string of other documentaries on international politics that have also enjoyed critical appraisal and commercial success, including *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *The Fog of War* (2003), *Inside Job* (2010), *Countdown to Zero* (2010), and *Restrepo* (2010). Most recently, *Kony2012* – a documentary produced by an American NGO about the warlord Joseph Kony – went viral and received 100 million hits in six days. That there is a potential in documentaries for efficiently communicating ideas is further demonstrated by the fact that some prominent IR scholars have recently turned to documentary filmmaking.\(^2\)

This article calls for a deeper engagement with the political potential of documentary films. So far, IR theorists have focused on the visual as an ontological-political condition with its own specificity defined in terms of immediacy, circulation and ambiguity (Hansen, 2011). Because of these characteristics, visual images cannot be expected to convey a self-evident message to audiences. The interpretation of images largely depends on the historical and cultural contexts in which they are shown and interpreted (see also Vuori, 

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\(^1\) From a long list, see e.g. Gregg (1998), Kuzma and Haney (2001), Weber (2001), Webber (2005), Simpson and Kaussler (2009), and Kain (2010).

\(^2\) James Der Derian, Cynthia Weber and Michael Klare are among the scholars that have produced or communicated their ideas on film.
2011). Although it certainly is the case that pictures are ambivalent in their meaning, the dominant focus on interpretative contexts has been somewhat inattentive to the image itself as an act of interpretation and to the effects this might have on their reception. Images do not only require interpretation; they are already acts of interpretation. They affect responsiveness and take part in the active structuration of reality. Complementing studies on the relation between image and audience, this article unpacks the genre of documentary with the objective of interrogating the documentary as an interpretative act or staging apparatus that preconditions and defines our field of perceptibility. To this end, the article introduces the idea of ‘regimes of visibility’, by which we mean the creative arrangement of sensorial perceptions (speech, sounds, music, visuals), which have a structuring effect upon reality. In short, we argue that the focus on images and audience reception should be expanded to include regimes of visibility which direct our attention to the interpretative work involved in the production of documentary. The theoretical and analytical tools developed in this article thus enable a deeper understanding and appreciation of documentary films as politically important claims to (parts of) truth and reality. In our visual age, in which the popularity of the documentary format is increasingly popular and ambiguous, this ability is important for all students of our subject.

We proceed in three steps. The next section offers an introduction to documentary films and briefly examines documentary film as an interpretative act that structures reality. The third section draws on insights from Film and Media Studies (FMS) and introduces the notion of ‘regimes of visibility’ by which we refer to different ways of arranging sense perceptions (saying and showing) to render the (already) observable visible. Claiming that these regimes are tied to different types of politics, sections four to six offer a brief analysis
of documentary as (i) politics of disclosure, (ii) politics of exposition and (iii) politics of destabilization.

**Documentary Film as an Interpretative Act**

Documentary film is a devilishly difficult phenomenon to define, something amply reflected in recurrent discussions in FMS. One scholar argues that ‘a watertight definition of documentary is effectively impossible – many people have tried to provide one and they all become unstuck, often because a film comes along which breaks the rules while clearly remaining documentary’ (Chanan, 2007: 5). Etymologically, the term documentary has its roots in the document as the recording of events. The term also carries affinities with the Latin verb *docere*, meaning ‘to teach’. Touching upon these different meanings, the *Oxford English Dictionary* points out that since the nineteenth century documentary has included broader connotations about evidence, instruction and authenticity. As a genre of film-making, its roots have been dated back to the recording of real life events in the nineteenth century such as the classic short film *Workers Leaving the Lumières Factory* (1895) and to famous film-makers in the 1920s and 1930s such as Robert Flaherty, Dziga Vertov and John Grierson (e.g., Aufderheide, 2007; Chanan, 2007). Clearly, the tradition of documentary film-making is to a large degree a contemporary construct projected back into history, but a characteristic feature of the genre is its use of film as a reality-shaping claim to truth. According to Bill Nichols (1991: 3), a prominent analyst of the documentary genre, ‘documentary film has a kinship with those other non-fictional systems that together make up what we may call the discourses on sobriety, including science, economics, politics, and so on.’ And yet, the difficulty of catching the essence of the documentary film
is persistent. It appears born out of a tortured process in which the purpose of presenting the actual is balanced against the recognition of the manipulation with which film and photography have been associated since (at least) the 1920s. So while documentary films often portend to portray “truth” or provide access to reality, they are made up of endless layers of decisions and techniques that distort and twist the non-filmic as well as the lenses. For example, Flaherty’s Nanook of the North (1922) claimed to chronicle Inuit life; yet Flaherty instructed his subjects to behave in ways that did not correspond to their everyday reality but served the film’s narrative of nature’s innocence. Today, only the crudest of positivists would maintain that images of reality truthfully represent that reality. Thus, Nichols also wants us to see documentary ‘not as a special use of the film medium that affords a “privileged” view of reality, but as a genre’ (Nichols, 1985: 259). We move somewhat closer to a working definition, therefore, if we begin from the ‘insistence on authenticity’ in documentary film (Kahana, 2008: 23). In others words, documentary films can be distinguished by their attempt to lay claim to (parts of) reality; what Jill Godmilow, director of the critically acclaimed documentary Far from Poland (1984), captures in the phrase ‘films of edification’ (Godmilow and Shapiro, 1997: 81).

John Grierson’s classic definition of documentary as the ‘creative treatment of actuality’ (Grierson, 1933: 8) is, therefore, still a useful anti-dote to naïve realism. On the other hand, while there are blurred boundaries between fiction and documentary films (Shapiro, 2009: 77), refusing to distinguish between them would give us little analytical leverage in understanding the political power of documentary – for their creators and
audiences alike. In short, ignoring the claims to reality or truth implied in (most) documentaries and declaring it to be fiction in sheep’s clothing is taking a sound argument too far. Although the relation between documentary and reality is complex at best, documentary nonetheless operates at a distinct epistemic-political level with different claims about its relationship to the real than those present in fiction features. A documentary’s authority, and political effectiveness, derives from its claim to merely record or depict reality (even if in fact it does not) – hence the viral outcry against *Kony2012* for its willful manipulation of the facts for political or ideological purposes. At the same time, documentary makers are themselves often explicit about the fact that they do not just record a pre-filmic reality but actively seek to make the already observable perceptible in a particular way and for political purposes. Therefore, analyzing the epistemological contract between genre and audience cannot stand apart from an understanding of the interpretative work that has gone into the documentary itself. In ascertaining the meaning and effects of documentary films, one needs not only to study the context in which it was conceived, produced and transmitted and with what effects, but also ask what is outside or beyond the film’s frame as well as how cinematic techniques (e.g. sounds, pacing, cuts, interspersed images, narrative structure) reinforce (or work against) the message(s) of the film.

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3 Tellingly, the genre of fiction that insists on authenticity is referred to as ‘mockumentary’. Genre mash-ups are prevalent in contemporary culture; in feature films, TV-productions and advertising. For a good discussion of some of these issues, see Torchin (2008).

4 Like other cultural products, documentaries are made in a variety of national, institutional and social contexts. Similarly, technologies, outlets and circulations vary widely. Such contextual and structural factors are relevant to our argument about the meaning and importance of documentary films, but a general account is beyond the scope of this article.
The suggestion to distinguish visual genres based on the type of responses they seek to solicit from their audiences can be read as an important reminder to take seriously the modus operandi and conventions through which a genre operates (Hansen, 2011). Yet the focus often remains more on audience reception than on the interpretative work that has gone into the images themselves. A critical interrogation of the genre’s unspoken assumptions that help the film get its message(s) across cannot, however, be decided at the level of genre. As Barnouw (1993) suggests, documentaries have served the function of prophet, explorer, reporter, painter, advocate, bugler, prosecutor, poet, chronicler, promoter, observer, catalyst and guerilla. Indeed, film studies have long operated with a range of sub-genres that convey particular variation of these forms of expressionist tendencies (e.g. Nichols, 2001: 138; Renov, 1993: 21-36). To engage the political import of visual images, it is necessary to gauge the relation between the film-maker, camera and scene through which documentaries interpret and render reality perceptible. Politics is explicitly formulated and enacted through the camera’s frame. Although this framing does not determine audience responses, it is crucial to understand that documentaries (as well as other forms of representation such as literature, painting and poetics) can be political without advocating an explicitly political message. In this sense, ‘to be political … is not a question of advancing an ideological position, militating for a cause or campaigning for anything, it isn’t even necessary to mention politics – because what the documentary can do is to call public attention to its subjects and concerns sometimes just by bringing them to light’ (Chanan, 2007: 16). Jacques Rancière (2009) suggests that the political moment of aesthetic expressions is defined less by their political message than by their capacity to invent a scene where spoken words become audible, objects visible and subjects
recognized. This might be going a tad too far, but what can be heard, seen and recognized by audiences depends to a large degree on the dramaturgical framing of the film.

**Regimes of Visibility and the Politics of Documentary**

Documentaries need to be unpacked as acts of interpretation that frame reality and structure our field of perception. The politics embedded in the genre is its framing of reality, a particular way of seeing, that often is taken to be authentic. Not all documentaries fit this description, but most of those that do not derive their narrative and political force from playing precisely upon the ambiguity between representation and reality. This is also the import of Carl Platinga’s insightful theory of documentary, one of the most convincing in contemporary FMS. According to Platinga, most documentary films combine two forms of representation; saying and showing:

[T]he typical documentary film [should] be conceived of as an asserted veridical representation, that is, as an extended treatment of a subject in one of the moving image media, most often in narrative, rhetorical, categorical, or associative form, in which the film’s makers openly signal their intention that the audience (1) take an attitude of belief toward relevant propositional content (the “saying” part), (2) take the images, sounds, and combinations thereof as reliable sources for the formation of beliefs about the film’s subject and, in some cases, (3) take relevant shots, recorded sounds, and/or scenes as phenomenological approximations of the look, sound, and/or some other sense or feel of the pro-filmic event (the “showing” part) (Platinga, 2005: 114-115).
In films, seeing interacts with the other human senses to create a certain image of reality. That an image need not be equated with visual representation is well-known in IR theory, where Kenneth Waltz famously introduced the term in order to render the problem of war intelligible and visible through pictures in mind. He did so because direct observation is impossible: ‘[O]ne cannot “see” international politics directly, no matter how hard one looks’ (Waltz, 1959: ix). Instead of thinking of the image as (purely) visual, we propose the concept of ‘visibility’ as a more appropriate term for capturing the ways in which reality is made perceptible to our senses. Although the concept of visibility is still tied to ‘seeing’, it also encompasses the arrangement of visual as well as non-visual perceptions by focusing on ‘how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and unseeing therein’ (Foster, 1988: 2). This characterization implies that while the documentary often lays claim to truth or reality, it is also edited and produced with intentions, messages and effects on (a) particular audience(s) in mind.

Historically, saying and showing have been combined in various ways to support distinct political purposes. In the Soviet Union, Vertov thought documentary film the most appropriate medium for the promotion of a communist revolution. By showing the ‘unstaged’ and ‘unrehearsed’ life that escaped other ways of seeing (theatre, painting, photograph and the human eye), he considered the camera I/eye to present a vantage point that could create new perceptions of the world. The documentary played an equally political role in democracies. Grierson (1966 [1946]) claimed, for example, that documentaries could help mobilize citizens in social and democratic processes by providing insight into larger social structures that would otherwise escape the individual. World War II in particular helped solidify the genre a tool of propaganda (which was not always a pejorative term), education and advocacy, and for some observers it harbored unlimited
possibilities for ‘educating millions of people in knowing one another and thereby helping to shape a peaceful, cooperative world’ (Pratzner, 1947: 398). Such beliefs are still prevalent. Although skeptical of positing uncomplicated relations between democracy and documentary, Kahana (2008: 319) still stresses the potential of documentary as ‘a practice of knowledge unto itself’ that can play a vital role in (American) democracy. Documentaries can enrich the public sphere by virtue of their ability to transgress the borders between officialdom and the citizenry and their respective languages. Clearly one can question such ‘republican’ visions of the documentary – not least since film and television have also been some of history’s great forces in the production of political apathy, lethargy and misinformation. Still, documentaries are potentially important for political mobilization or enlightenment as well as for the, often indirect, structuring of beliefs among its audiences (although such effects are notoriously unpredictable). Indeed, the founding fathers (and many current protagonists of the genre) thought of documentary as a way of revitalizing crisis-ridden societies by providing information, advocacy and reflection.

Much of the political force of documentary thus relies on its capacity to structure the field of perceptible reality. Although audiences need not accept these framings, documentary is an act of interpretation with significant political implications. Based on engagements with the genre in FMS, it is possible to distinguish three regimes of visibility, i.e. three analytically distinct ways of rendering reality perceptible, intelligible and actionable. Each of these regimes combines ‘saying’ and ‘showing’ in different ways, which in turn correspond to different forms of politics. The first regime combines saying and showing in an attempt to reveal the truth. In this optic, documentary is not simply ‘a method which describes only the surface values of a subject’ but ‘the method which more
explosively reveals the reality of it’ (Grierson, 1966 [1946]: 22-3). This regime of visibility is closely tied to a *politics of disclosure* and operates with reality as double-layered: a surface reality, which exists of appearances that can be glanced; and a deeper reality of truth that requires narrative excavation (see also Boon, 2008: 42). By contrast, the second regime is more observational (showing) than argumentative (saying). Recording reality as it unfolds, this regime does not seek to mobilize the spectator (too) directly; rather, the filmmaker tries to make her- or himself disappear, to become a fly on the wall, and ‘calls on the viewer to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done’ (Nichols, 2001: 111). This regime is closely linked to a *politics of exposition*: instead of looking for truth beneath reality, truth is read off surface reality. The third and final regime of visibility is characterized by doubt, irony and a certain self-reflexivity. Compared to disclosure (which favors saying over showing) and exposition (which privileges showing over saying), this final regime assembles saying and showing in ambiguous ways in order to stimulate reflection. As such, this regime is best considered as supporting a *politics of destabilization* that, by undermining taken-for-granted notions, unearths or produces several (often contrasting) ‘truths’ or ‘realities’.

**Documentary as a Global Politics of Disclosure**

The commitment to reveal the deeper truth makes documentary films explicitly political, if only because it deploys a way of seeing that seeks to make the world visible in different ways. Coming closest to Nichols’ description of the genre as a discourse of sobriety, this regime arranges images into an argumentative structure – a practice Nichols (2001: 169) has dubbed evidentiary editing. Moreover, a narrating voice that originates from somewhere outside the projected images (also known as the voice of God) often provides
authority and guides the audience to the reality below appearances. This conviction has informed documentary films like *Why We Fight* (1942-1945) and more recent productions like *Operation Enduring Freedom* (2002). With the waning of government monopolies on truth, many recent films have turned on propaganda and public diplomacy as the harbingers of social truths. To take just one example, Eugene Jaracki’s tellingly titled *Why We Fight* (2005) seeks to expose official ‘lies’ and uncover what war ‘really’ is about: the military-industrial-political complex and its quest for profit. What is common to these films is the aspiration to enlighten the public by making visible the larger social and collective reality that frames the lives of citizens and the functioning of society.

In this pursuit, documentaries have themselves become more overtly political – a development also empowered by the explicitly subjective and political reorientation of “The New Documentary Wave” (Chanan, 2007; Higgins, 2005: 23). Increasingly, documentary films about (international) politics play a pivotal role in opinion formation and grassroot mobilization (see e.g. Musser, 2009: 200). Two recent documentaries – *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *Countdown to Zero* (2010) – have been particularly successful in mobilizing support for climate change and nuclear weapons proliferation as security issues of planetary dimensions. The continuities between the films are hardly surprising since both are produced by Lawrence Bender and Jeff Skoll of Participant Media. Particularly, Skoll – the first president of Ebay – casts his philanthropy in a vision of *Humanity 2.0* in which his global media company ‘focuses on the public interest … our mission is to produce entertainment that creates and inspires social change’.\(^5\) Moreover, these productions are interesting both as attempts to politicize or securitize particular issues and as political manifestations of moneyed and often cosmopolitan elite: a quick tour at

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takepart.com – the digital division of Participant Media – demonstrates just how openly and well coordinated this campaign for ‘grassroot’ political influence is: visitors can find information about ‘our film campaigns’ and take action (or be assisted in this) in ‘30 ways in 30 days’.

According to economists, there is some evidence of an ‘Al Gore Effect’ on attitudes towards environmental policy initiatives, an effect credited in large part to An Inconvenient Truth (e.g. Jacobsen, 2011). Clearly, Gore being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 contributed to the special status of the film and by extension of the documentary form. IR ought not, therefore, to ignore the documentary as political and awareness campaign.

The responsiveness of audiences are preconditioned by An Inconvenient Truth’s frame, its combination of saying and showing, which in itself has structuring effects upon perceptible reality. In an insightful analysis Cynthia Weber has argued that to present the argument about climate change – that is, that global warming as well as the solutions to the problem are anthropogenic – using the documentary film form is ‘an incredibly smart move’, since in contrast to fiction films An Inconvenient Truth is harder to ‘dismiss as over-the-top’ (Weber, 2010: 198). While the message and form of the film as well as Al Gore’s green credentials have been subject to criticism (see e.g. Mellor, 2009), the point is that the documentary form accords the film a status in the public sphere and gives it a different leverage in contributing to public policy debates. The film provides a gallant portrait of Gore as a virtuous, if privileged yet tortured, American citizen and intellectual that is in marked contrast to Gore’s image as a tiresome and distant politician that could legitimately be chided for having invented the internet. The simultaneous build-up of Gore’s character and authority is underscored by Gore’s role as both narrator and subject (see also

Moreover, the dramatic footage and scores that accompany the slideshow around which the film revolves and the mocking tone in which climate skeptics are described (by Gore) leave the film’s audience in little doubt that Gore speaks from an authoritative position. Indeed, less than 10 minutes into the film Gore underlines the truth of his message by quoting Mark Twain to the effect that: ‘What gets us into trouble is not what we don’t know. It’s what we know for sure that just ain’t so’. The clever use of modern, global imagery and historical references are creatively combined to endorse climate change as a planetary security problem. Satellite images of the entire planet function as ‘emphasizers’ and transition points in Gore’s narrative, underlining the severity and novelty of the problem.

*Countdown to Zero* is equally clear about its political ambition to contribute to the global reduction of nuclear weapons to zero. It builds its authority and claim to truth on a clever mixture of interviews with prominent expert-cum-politicians and on voxpops with ‘global’ citizens. The visual material is essentially structured around John F. Kennedy’s three scenarios, outlined in his speech to the 1961 UN General Assembly: ‘Every man, woman, and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment, by accident, or miscalculation, or by madness’. The film opens with the theme of nuclear terrorism and the insufficiently protected arsenals of highly enriched uranium (*madness*). The second part of the film is about the dangers of nuclear accidents since the invention of the bomb (‘low-probability events happen all the time’ as Scott Sagan phrases it), while the third part deals with the dangers of miscalculation. Set to dramatic music and a variety of footage that communicates madness and danger, including explosions of nuclear bombs, scenes from *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), aerial images of cities, as well as real and mock surveillance
footage of large numbers of people gathered in squares, stadiums and train stations, *Countdown to Zero* cleverly exploits this imagery in support of its narrative.

In both *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Countdown to Zero*, there is an implicit admission of the enormity of the tasks the films have set themselves. The Herculean ambition is, however, both the strength and the weakness of the politics of disclosure: while seeking to revolutionize world views and create a new global consciousness, the format of the films imposes restrictions particularly in relation to the amount of complexity and detail that can inform their political messages. As Weber has remarked, *An Inconvenient Truth* presses its argument at a very general level. ‘Nowhere are we hit over the head’ with the specific, boring, and demanding (if not revolutionary) policy recommendations that Gore’s longstanding utterances on the subject has also involved (Weber, 2010: 203). Instead, Gore draws on conventional myths about international politics in his call for action. At one point, for example, he likens global warming to the rise of Nazism in the interwar years. Clearly conceived as a strategy for mobilizing public opinion behind the issue of climate change, a famous quote by Churchill about the need to counter evil is presented for the audience(s): ‘The era of procrastination, of half-measures, of soothing and baffling expedients, of delays, is coming to its close. In its place we are entering a period of consequences’. In *Countdown to Zero* broad slogans are also more easily communicated than specific, complex policy proposals. The effectiveness of the film as a political argument depends on the negotiation of two contentious issues. On the one hand, given the downright *reasonableness* of the argument for nuclear disarmament, the film fails to directly engage the essential intransigence of the political context that has so far rendered the argument ineffective. On the other hand, the film precariously balances a view of nuclear weapons that is primarily Western (if not American) in its portrayal of particularly the threat of
nuclear terrorism and the need for a universal and revolutionary cosmopolitan culture. This means that the film opens up gaps between nuclear haves and have-nots as well as between the reality and feasibility of US-Russia disarmament agreements. Ignoring difficult and technical questions about the potential design of verification systems, fuel banks and the political enigma of getting from, say, 100 to zero nuclear weapons, the film instead deploys a metaphor of the mechanic and unstoppable clock (i.e. countdown). While explicitly global in orientation, the credits are set to a dynamic and inspiring song by Pearl Jam entitled “The Fixer”, which underlines the film’s explicit but overwhelmingly local, American call for political action: write your senator, donate money and time, buy copies of the film, and go to the accompanying campaign website. There will be no countdown unless you wind the clock.

**Documentary as a Global Politics of Exposition**

The second regime privileges showing over saying. Yet, it would be naïve to suggest that this observational regime represents a form of showing without saying. Even in the absence of voice-overs, music or interviews, the result is always more than just ‘reality-as-it-appears’, since the end product is the result of editorial choices made before, during and after filming. Exposition is a political act of interpretation: ‘There isn’t any cinéma vérité. It’s necessarily a lie, from the moment the director intervenes – or it isn’t cinema at all’ (Franju, quoted in Minh-ha, 1993: 97). Moreover, privileging showing over saying runs the risks of uncritically reproducing, rather than penetrating, reality: proximity comes at the expense of a wider social and political context that remains unseen and therefore unexplored (Aufderheide, 2007: 51-5). Still, the shift towards a more observational regime in documentary film in the 1960s was a highly political move driven by suspicion of the
scripted, narrated and composed nature of documentary film. It nicely dovetailed with the wider struggle against authority at top-down claims about reality at the time by bringing to light, literally as much as metaphorically, multiple and often more ‘grounded’ realities that until then had remained hidden from view.\(^7\) As such, the politics of exposition can share the political and emancipatory objectives of the first regime, even if it is less explicit about the politics underpinning it.

In the field of global politics, the modality has recently been employed in films on trials of former dictators such as *Saving Saddam* (2008) and, more widely, in portrayals of war like *Iraq in Fragments* (2006) and *Enemies of Happiness* (2006) that show a world absent from dominant media representations of the war on terror (Kara, 2009). The foregrounding of everyday life and the struggles of ordinary people – women, families, members of the insurgence or workers – itself constitutes a political act, because it serves to decrease distance to the other and may therefore contribute to a more cosmopolitan culture of intercultural dialogue (Bondebjerg, 2009). The most popular films on global issues, however, have foregrounded the experience of modern soldiering. *Armadillo* (2009) and *Restrepo* (2010) are arguably the most widely circulated and best-known, recent films that have placed war under the microscope. *Restrepo*, jointly directed by Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington (who died in 2011, while reporting from Libya), is a feature-length documentary that chronicles the deployment of a US platoon in the Korengal Valley, Northeastern Afghanistan over the course of 15 months. The film has received wide critical acclaim; it won the Sundance Grand Jury Prize, and the film was nominated for an Academy Award for best non-fiction feature film. Although *Restrepo* failed to ‘take the

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\(^7\) This development was assisted by the proliferation of new technologies and editing techniques, which in turn (and paradoxically) has produced a more complex arrangement of saying and showing (Chanan, 2007: 172).
little gold man home’, it succeeded in ‘taking the war to the red carpet and connecting people to what is happening in Afghanistan’ (Hetherington cited in Doggart, 2011). Restrepo was also part of a larger body of work, including Junger’s book War (2010) and Hetherington’s photographs for Vanity Fair, one of which was awarded the 2007 World Press Photo of the Year. Armadillo has a similar set-up as Restrepo, as film director Janus Metz closely follows a platoon of Danish soldiers in the Afghanistan province of Helmand for a period of 6 months. Like the outpost ‘Restrepo’, camp ‘Armadillo’ is located close to enemy positions in an attempt to bring law and security to the local area. Receiving the Critics’ Week Grand Prix at the Cannes film festival in 2010 and achieving more than 100,000 Danish theatre-tickets, international circulation and close to a quarter of the Danish adult population for the shorter TV-version, Armadillo is a highly successful film.

In the absence of a clear guiding narrative, the spectator plays an active role in interpreting the visual material. James Der Derian (2010: 181) has rightfully argued that ‘cinematic aestheticisation of violence can glorify as well as vilify war, depending on how the spectator identifies with the protagonist and the investigator with the informant.’ But it is well worth examining how the observational modality of these films makes war visible (and what remains invisible). For although audience responses can differ widely, the creative arrangement of showing and saying in both films actively forces an interpretative frame for warfare. Restrepo is marketed as an entirely observational film free from political agendas.⁸ The reality and experiences of soldiering, explain the directors, ‘are important to understand, regardless of one’s political beliefs. Beliefs are a way to avoid looking at reality. This is reality.’ By spending time with the soldiers, the camera I/eye is said to

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convey an unmediated reality of war as it unfolds on the frontline: ‘This is war, full stop. The conclusions are up to you.’

*Armadillo*, too, attempts to provide an authentic picture of soldiers’ lives. However, it also breaks with some *cinéma vérité* conventions and appears reflexive about the ways in which the film not only mediates but also creates reality. It does not proclaim to show ‘war, full stop’, but subtly inserts a narrative through cinematic techniques, including the use of re-enactments, the dramatic use of music, the climatic build-up to a deadly battle in one of the final scenes and the temporal editing of statements made by soldiers. Director Metz is well aware of the fact that deviations from the observational mode are ‘easily politicized into not being real documentary or a fictionalized version of reality’ but justifies their use because they help capture *the real essence* of events. Editing (in) reality is fraught with difficulty, however, particularly because the objective of the chosen aesthetic form is to capture, to make tangible, the experience of war as closely as possible: ‘Representing violence – the impossibility of it – is a complex issue. Experience of war is unreal and surreal, already informed by mediated experiences of Hollywood films and computer games.’* Armadillo* seeks precisely to bring out this mediated, surreal nature of war. Thus, at one point in the film the soldiers are shown playing a combat video game. As the camera slowly continues to zoom in on the TV-screen, the film suddenly cuts to a real battle scene, which has a similar aesthetic feel to that gleaned from the video game. Moreover, the film contains audiovisual references to shared understandings of Western war, and in particular a war-wary trope about the US experience in Vietnam. These include iconic images of

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helicopters taking off or the shot of a soldier, who, after stumbling in a pool of water, murmurs ‘Welcome to Nam’.

Restrepo and Armadillo demonstrate the possibilities and shortcomings of a politics of exposition. Both films manage to shed light on a world that remains largely invisible in news reporting, where war and combat often follow technico-military scripts that depend upon satellite images or (animated) studio re-enactments well removed from experiences on the ground. The extensive use of embedded journalists has done little to alter this picture. As the military tightly controls the news flow, images of actual combat are rare and pictures of killed or injured soldiers are prohibited (Kennedy, 2008; Griffin, 2004). By contrast, Restrepo and Armadillo paint a picture of war as a confusing and highly emotional affair where military protocols, bodies and hearts are persistently broken (in one scene in Armadillo, a soldier explains he was out for six hours collecting body parts of a dead colleague) and civilians, including women and children, die as a result of poor (if complex) decisions on the ground. Moreover, the films show that efforts to make progress on the human terrain, the winning of the hearts and minds of the local population, are incredibly difficult, that local trust is hard-won and easily lost, when military efforts result in the killing of family and the destruction of livestock, property and crops.

Although the films are explicitly marketed as apolitical, the reality shown can spur larger and broader critical reflections about war. The avowed apolitical nature of the expository regime, its appeal to simply reflect reality out there, is in itself a fundamental catalyst of critical reflection, as the micro-universe of soldiers raise macro-level questions about politics and the nature of war. This strategy, however, is not without problems and comes with uncertain pay-offs. Besides the obvious fact that the reception is outside the control of the film-makers, the explicit focus on the lives and experiences of (Western)
soldiers excludes a range of questions about the larger social and political context in which they operate. Since zooming is a way of choosing, it will always imply a loss of perspective (see also Butler, 2010: xiii). For instance, the ‘other’ remains conspicuously absent in Restrepo and Armadillo. The motivations, ambitions, struggles and understandings of the local population remain invisible – and hence unintelligible to the audience. It is almost as if the enemy, seen from a distance through binnacles or the barrel of a gun, does not exist for reasons other than target practice. If war indeed is pre-mediated by video games and fictitious renderings of violence, audiences may well still be drawn to the adrenalin rush experienced in authentic combat. The choice not to draw conclusions or to entrust the ‘other’ to the screen may lead parts of the films’ audiences to revel in the aestheticization of war rather than questioning its nature or purpose. The marketing strategy behind Armadillo and Restrepo further reinforces this ambivalence: on the one hand, the films are presented as documentaries; on the other, they are promoted as war films that are just as exciting and action-packed as fiction features – only more real.

Nonetheless, the films can also be seen to convey a message about war’s meaninglessness. Tim Hetherington explains the political import of Restrepo’s expositional regime by pointing to some of the political questions that arise in the (recorded) intimacy achieved between soldiers and film-makers: ‘How did the villagers die? Were the soldiers responsible? Is that what we are putting our young men through?’ (Kamber, 2010). Similarly, Armadillo’s director Metz’ commitment to show war as

11 One of the soldiers in Armadillo compares war to a football match, the real thing that cannot be likened to experiences gained during training and exercise.
mediated and surreal is inspired by a ‘heart of darkness narrative’ – captured not only by the references to Vietnam but also by the camera shot of a wounded Danish soldier whose wide open eyes (possibly induced by emergency treatment) vividly express the horror of war. Although this narrative – if picked up by audiences – may ameliorate the risk that the aestheticization of war becomes a celebration of war, it still raises some difficult questions about the status of the documentary as evidence of reality. Indeed, ‘the heart of darkness’ narrative, just as the experiences of war that are captured, is pre-mediated: by the account of war presented in *Apocalypse Now*, which is a filmic rendition of Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness*, which in turn is a fictionalized account of Conrad’s experience in King Leopold’s Congo. And so on. The politics of exposition is a particular framing that effectively delimits the ontological field and the representation of reality.

**Documentary as a Global Politics of Destabilization**

As one of its central elements, the final regime of visibility exploits contradiction. Characterized by the objective of destabilizing the familiar and accepted, either by drawing in the unfamiliar or by making the familiar look strange or unacceptable, this regime denies that truth can be glanced from the screen (exposition) or unambiguously extracted from surface reality (disclosure). In this regime of visibility, a certain disjuncture or dissemblance often exists between the sayable and the visual. The arrangement of the visual material or the underlying musical score often resists narrative complicity with the spoken account by experts or interviewees. A key characteristic of the politics of destabilization is that it subjects the framing through which reality is rendered perceptible to critical scrutiny: ‘What this means is that we come to interpret the interpretation that has been imposed upon us’ (Butler, 2007: 952).
In global politics, such strategies have been used in attempts to expose truth claims made by political opponents – a technique deployed, for example, in The Atomic Café (1982) and Radio Bikini (1988) through the use and twisting of filmic material on nuclear weapons produced by the American government during the 1950s and 1960s. The objective is to see the world – unfamiliar or familiar (if only parochially so) – in ways that facilitate and render visible different political imaginaries. For example, in the recent feature The Ambassador (2011), director Mads Brügger turns undercover diplomat in an effort to dissect and question contemporary diplomatic practices in central Africa. By deploying a potpourri of documentary modalities, by mixing officialdom and diplomatic culture with theatre and comedy, and by letting barely-hidden personal greed and prejudices govern his mock diplomacy in a country marked by corruption and lawlessness, the audience is left wondering not only what diplomacy can be but also what it really is.

The politics of destabilization often raises fundamental metaphysical questions of being, existence, truth and reality. By confronting basic assumptions about the ways in which evidence is treated, manufactured and rendered authoritative, films by American director Errol Morris are as much theoretical comments on the ways in which certain histories are produced as visual renditions of history in their own right (Fossen, 2011; Sylvest, forthcoming). The Fog of War (2003), Morris’ impressive, Oscar-winning portrait of Robert McNamara, can be seen as an interpretative act that questions established and authorized truths of global politics. It is a visual rumination on war, ethics and foreign policy that deploys an arsenal of disruptive cinematic techniques to destabilize and problematize McNamara’s foreign policy lessons (Shapiro, 2009: 64-88). The destabilization of social conventions and common sense understandings more generally is also the objective of Chris Smith’s Collapse (2009). Clearly inspired by Morris’ cinematic
style of interviewing, the film consists of a long interview with Michael Ruppert, a former Los Angeles police officer turned independent reporter, who claims that civilization’s dependence on non-renewable resources, particularly oil, will inevitably lead to its collapse. Here, too, saying and showing are disjuncted so that Ruppert’s narrative is both supported and undermined by the director, who uses cinematic techniques to create a feel or experience that Ruppert’s version of the truth is at once plausible and problematic. For example, the documentary establishes Ruppert’s expert status and enhances his credibility through the use of animated reenactments, including ‘objective’ materials such as graphs and figures that visually support his line of argument. And yet, many of Ruppert’s truth claims are undermined by the setting of the film in a dark and empty warehouse which raises suspicion that we may not be speaking to an expert as much as a conspiracy theorist far removed from conventional sites of public authority. Moreover, Ruppert’s character is constantly juxtaposed to his narrative. Ruppert talks about the end of civilization, but is chain-smoking throughout the film – a questionable survival strategy by any standard. At another juncture, after Ruppert has spoken authoritatively of ways to profit from civilizational collapse, we learn that he has been unable to pay rent and risks eviction (see also Nelson, 2009). And yet, the audience is left wondering about the nature of expert knowledge and the political imaginaries underpinning them. How come no expert saw the financial crisis coming, when a quirky, former police officer could? And if oil is the ever-decreasing commodity that drives our civilization, why do experts and politicians not explore ways of being in the world that do not conform to the infinite growth model of neoliberalism?

Morris’ Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), which focuses on the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and the infamous pictures taken by American soldiers, probably is the film
that most explicitly seeks to destabilize the field of perceptive reality. *SOP* asks *how it is possible* that the story of ‘a few bad apples’ could be told in spite of overwhelming evidence that many of these practices were part of a larger culture in the armed forces that could be traced back to the center of American government. For Morris, this requires a critical scrutiny of the interpretation forced upon us by the photographs. In spite of their privileged epistemological status as truthful, these pictures both reveal and conceal what actually happened. In pursuing this objective, Morris deploys the reflexive regime of visibility and its unconventional composition of ‘saying’ and ‘showing’. Instead of starting from a narrative plot or assumption and deploying visual material to drive this point home, he enters history through the photographs. Thus, the film begins and ends with pictures of the photographs as if to underline the ways in which ‘Abu Ghraib’ has been framed by the pictures. Similarly, the film’s credit line shows photographs from Abu Ghraib as snapshots slowly receding into a black background, further adding to the idea that photographs may reveal the truth just as much as hide it by not showing what happens outside its temporal and spatial framing.

The photos, Morris argues, of smiling soldiers with their thumbs up give the impression that torture is inflicted for their own enjoyment. And although the smiling indeed is one of the photos’ most disturbing features (Neroni, 2009), Morris uses a range of visual techniques, including reenactments based on information from the private letters of one of the soldiers written at the time, to look outside the frame and connect the dots between the pictures. The letters, in which the soldier Sabrina Harman explains her reasons for taking pictures as forensic, become pieces of evidence that render our understanding of the picture-taking as sadistic more nuanced or complex. The ambivalence surrounding the

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meaning of the photographs is also brought out by the use of slow motion footage (used to enact still pictures), or shots of a soldier who, looking at pictures of himself on a teleprompter, moves his head to the left and right, as if he wants to look behind or beyond the picture.

*SOP* thus fills some blank spaces between available photographic ‘islands’ and presents us with a fuller picture of life at Abu Ghraib. In doing so, Morris not only shows that many of the scenes in fact constituted authorized US policy, where soldiers were following or interpreting orders from above, but also gives a more complex account of how different individuals behave under such structural constraints. *SOP* becomes a study of human nature, free will and choice and the ways in which people respond to such situations. Morris certainly does not mean to suggest that enjoyment plays no role at all, but his film makes clear that the perpetrators were driven by a host of motives including love, fear, stress, the need for women to appear tough in a male-dominated context, as well as the desires to collect evidence about wrongdoing. As Harman explains in one of her letters, to get away with taking pictures, she had to smile. By making the frame part of the interpretation, documentary can turn into a politics of destabilization that constitutes a different way of seeing. It shows what is constituted outside the frame and deploys a range of techniques that problematize the otherwise non-thematized background assumptions through which perceptible reality is structured and made real. Prying open the restrictions that normally govern our ways of perceiving reality is a necessary precondition for imagining social change and political transformation. In this case, Morris undermines the taken-for-granted story that torture was restricted to a few bad apples, and relates it to US military doctrine and culture. Again, it is unclear to what extent a politics of destabilization resonates with audiences. Although some of these films have been exposed to a wide
audience, such films lack political strategies for mobilization and opinion formation. Despite their problematization of taken-for-granted notions, it is not always clear how their destabilization of conventions are (to be) translated back into collective action.

**Conclusion**

Documentaries make claims about reality and are increasingly used in ideological struggles and popular mobilization. If we live in a visual culture, we also live in the age of documentary. In the interaction between documentary film-makers and audiences, metaphysical commitments, cultural values and distinct political projects are continuously, if sometimes silently, negotiated. The documentary films that we have focused on in this article deal ostensibly with war, climate change, nuclear weapons, and the like, yet they advertently or inadvertently raise a host of other issues about the nature of truth, reality, justice and compassion. In tune with the recent turn towards practices in IR, documentaries about international politics can be seen as significant discursive-material practices of knowledge production and consumption. For these reasons, IR as a discipline can benefit from engaging the genre of documentary film-making in a reflective manner – in research as well as teaching. Indeed, as we have argued, by casually treating the genre as one among other cultural artifacts, the discipline risks cutting itself off from understanding the significance and complexity of the visual culture that encroaches on informed debates about global politics. Clearly, documentaries require interpretation, but we have stressed how they are also acts of interpretation in themselves; they offer ways of seeing, of rendering international politics visible, that can reinforce, challenge, disrupt or simply bring to light other practices (such as deterrence, international finance and warfare) as well as those underlying metaphysical commitments we use to attach meaning to these practices and
representations. Against this background, we introduced “regimes of visibility” as a useful concept for capturing the ways in which different documentaries make reality perceptible to our senses through the combination of visual imagery and other sensory effects. Through short sketches of some pertinent documentary films related to (the study of) international politics, we have identified three forms of politics embedded in the genre – disclosure, exposition and destabilization. Table 1 provides a summary and illustration using contemporary documentary films.

Table 1. Illustrated overview of regimes of visibility and documentary politics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regime of visibility</th>
<th>Saying over showing</th>
<th>Showing over saying</th>
<th>Showing contradicts saying</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modality</td>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>Reality</td>
<td>Doubt/Irony/Ambiguity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Disclosure</td>
<td>Exposition</td>
<td>Destabilization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The challenges and opportunities that the documentary genre presents for scholars of IR are perhaps best captured by focusing on its capacity and functions as a medium. The medium conveys and transmits but not without friction, noise, distortion and exclusion. The flood of documentary films about international politics is one, if arguably one of the more significant, effects of a broader trend where steadily increasing amounts of information and interpretations of a wide range of themes in international politics are visualized and circulated in the public sphere by a host of different actors, from individuals and glocal campaigns to states, NGOs, international organizations and rogues. IR needs tools with which to analyze these communicative acts, their meaning, politics and (un)intended
effects. The documentary is special, we have argued, by virtue of its laying claim to or destabilizing truth or reality. Yet, the theoretical vocabulary and analytical tools we have provided in this article have a critical purchase that reaches beyond the genre of documentary. For in attuning ourselves to how the world is made visible, we gain broader insights into other regimes that structure our access to the world.

References


