

Ethical Documentary: A Historical Perspective

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When speaking about ethics in documentary filmmaking, we should first ask whether they can be distinguished from ethics in fictional cinema. Do ethics depend on format? On genre? On the practice of production? What are the actual differences between documentary and fictional filmmaking that could imply different rules of ethics? Do they have to do with shooting ordinary people versus professional actors? Or are they affected by our assumptions regarding the relationship between reality and its cinematic representation? In order to answer these questions, I would like to go back to Jean-Luc Godard's outline of the blurring boundaries between documentary and fiction in reference to modern cinema:

"Reportage is interesting only when placed in a fictional context, but fiction is interesting only if it is validated by a documentary context. The Nouvelle Vague, in fact, may be defined in part by this new relationship between fiction and reality. ⁱ Godard's observation is relevant to the discussion of ethical issues because it enhances the complex relationship between illusion and reality in documentary and fiction alike. However, the connection between ethics and reality dates further back, to the period of Italian neo-realism when Cesare Zavattini introduced the term "cinema of encounter"ⁱⁱ in his quest for ethical cinema. Since then, the concept of ethics has taken on a dominant role in the discourse and practice of filmmaking. According to Zavattini, ethical cinema was a necessary and inevitable consequence of the horrors of World War II. Italian neo-realism was the first cinematic school in the history of the field that fully transformed cinema's point of departure from the aesthetic to the ethical. In his formative essay "A Thesis on Neo-Realism" (1952), Zavattini points out the ethical principles of neo-realism:

"Reality seems deprived of all interest as long as we cannot succeed in surmounting and overcoming our **moral**² and intellectual sloth. [...] This powerful desire of the cinema to see and to analyse, this hunger for reality, for truth, is a kind of **concrete homage to other people**, that is, to all who exist. [...] This is what I call the "**cinema of encounter.**" This method of working should lead logically to two results: first, from an **ethical point of view**, directors would leave the studio in search of direct contact with reality. [...] This awareness and contact must be direct. A hungry man, a downtrodden man, must be shown as he is. [...] A story should never be constructed in which the hungry and the oppressed merely appear, for then everything changes, becomes less effective, and far **less moral**".

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² The Bold font is mine (a.p.) in order to emphasize that Zavattini main concern is an ethical issue rather than esthetical one.

Zavattini here defines the ethical thinking as well as the humanistic and cinematic approach behind the neo-realist revolution that transformed the practice of fictional cinema while looking for solutions from within the practice of documentary filmmaking. "Cinema of encounter" took films away from the studios to the streets and replaced professional actors with real people, "men whose professional aptitudes have to do with the profession of being men."ⁱⁱⁱ They were filmed without makeup or artificial apparatuses such as filters and special soft lenses. The sequence shot, which enabled the flux of life, was preferred over the manipulative montage. In 1952, after six years of neo-realism characterized by the new cinema of De Sica, Rossellini, and Visconti, who were "attracted by the truth, by the reality which touches us and which we want to know and understand directly and thoroughly,"^{iv} Zavattini realized the ethical catch inherent in neo-realism. His insight is expressed in the script he wrote for Luchino Visconti's 1952 film, *Bellissima*. *Bellissima* follows Maddalena Cecconi (Anna Magnani), an obsessive, ambitious mother, in her quest for the "American Dream" for her daughter, Maria (Tina Apicella) by pushing her to become a famous movie star.

The mother believes that her child's success will release them from the poverty to which they are doomed because of their social status. In order to fulfill this fantasy, she breaks both family and social taboos. She lies to her husband and deploys her own sexuality to manipulate the studio assistant director. She uses her daughter and enables her exploitation by the studio's crew. Her humiliation reaches its peak as she hides in the projection room with her daughter in her arms, peeping through the glass at the crew watching the screen tests. She realizes that they are having fun watching the ridiculous efforts of the candidates to impress them while auditioning. She understands that the crew regards the emotions and vulnerabilities of the girls as an object of entertainment and exploitation. She realizes the enormous price she and her daughter are paying, and decides to relinquish her dream. *Bellissima* is a reflexive film that questions the ethics of neo-realism. One of its most significant achievements, and one that ultimately exposed its ethical failure, was the blurring of the boundary between actor and character.

Maria Cecconi, the fictional movie character, is actually Tina Apicella, the girl who plays her. One can interpret *Bellissima* as documenting the screen tests and preparations that Apicella went through in order to take part in the film. By portraying its own making, *Bellissima* affords viewers a glimpse into the process of making neo-realistic films. The manipulations that Apicella/Cecconi endure echo those of Enzo Staiola, the child in the iconic film *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), whose screenplay was also written by Zavattini. Using semiological discourse, the girl Tina Apicella in the role of the character Maria Cecconi is a sign (what is photographed) that is identical to the signifier (the actress), which in turn is identical to the signified (the character). This is exactly the characteristic of any photographed object in the film. Thus, the semiological approach is a formal examination that exposes the unethical result of objectifying the non-actress. The constant movement between fiction and documentation creates the central dramatic tension of *Bellissima*.

The film challenges the ethical behavior of the mother, the director, and the crew, as the mother is both exploiting her daughter and being exploited by the assistant director. *Bellissima* indicates that "cinema of encounter," a concept that was originally born out of ethical concerns, resulted in inherent structured ethical difficulties. These difficulties are enhanced when using non-actors due to their special look or physiognomy for artistic purposes.

Visconti's casting in *Bellissima* is especially meaningful: besides the girl and the additional non-actors, in accordance with the ideology of neo-realism, the mother, the leading actress of the film, is Anna Magnani, a popular Italian movie star. The center of gravity moves from the child, a non-professional actress whose essence has to do with "the profession of being authentic child," to the traditional movie star. The film creates a symbolic role exchange: the mother "inherits" the daughter; the movie star pushes once more the non-professional actress away from the screen. This is the inverse of what occurred in neo-realist revolutionary films of 1946. Visconti declares the death of neo-realism exactly at the point where it began: the mother refuses to sign the studio's contract just when her dream comes true. This is equivalent to Visconti's statement that ends the era of non-professional actors. Visconti shoots the disillusionment scene in a charged and symbolic fashion that emphasizes its ethical dimensions. The mother, Maddalena Cecconi, enters her house, carrying Maria, her daughter, in her arms in the *pietà* posture, as Maria, Jesus' mother, carried her son down from the cross. At this moment, the names of the mother and daughter, together with the *pietà*-like *mise-en-scène*, gives the scene an ideological and ethical validity.

The innocent child is rescued from the "neo-realist Cross" and, at the last minute, returns to her family. After reaching ethical bankruptcy, its own *raison d'être*, neo-realism is finally sealed for good. The work with non-professional actors is doomed to ethical paradoxes that neo-realists did not intend. Visconti led his colleagues in the film industry and the audience to the conclusion that they must revise their understanding of reality and its cinematic representation and work with professional actors. It is interesting to note that Zavattini wrote his important "Thesis on Neo-Realism" after he wrote *Bellissima's* screenplay. The thesis is neither a manifest that defines the neo-realist movement in its breakthrough, nor is it a suggested roadmap. Rather, it is a backward-facing summary of neo-realism and a desperate last call for the impossible act of turning it back to its origin. This becomes clear as Zavattini ends his thesis by calling on his neo-realist colleagues to maintain their new path. His final lines are an antithesis to the final conclusion of *Bellissima*:

"But the men of the Italian cinema, in order to continue to search for and to conserve their own style and inspiration, having once courageously set ajar the doors of reality and truth, must now open them wide."^v But this impassioned call did not get a positive response. The era of Italian neo-realism ended with *Bellissima*, a film in which Zavattini took an important role as a screenwriter. The significant achievements of Zavattini, Visconti, Rossellini, and De Sica deeply affected cinematic utterance, changed its mode of representation throughout the world, and shaped modern cinema. Professional actors became organic parts of the new modern cinema, and the use of non-actors remained a powerful alternative for specific cases.

The spirit of Italian neo-realism—focused on the human being, combined with compassion toward poverty and injustice, and looking for an appropriate cinematic expression—became the heritage of many filmmakers in the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1970s, these ethical dilemmas led the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski to abandon documentary cinema altogether in favor of explicitly fictional films. Kieslowski's cinematic evolution echoes the ethical issues arising from Visconti's *Bellissima*, most notably the implications of filming non-actors as opposed to professional actors.

An observation of the early documentary films of Krzysztof Kieślowski since 1968 reveals the deep influence of Italian neo-realism on his film language and on the humanistic spirit in his cinema. After a few years of making unique documentary cinema, Kieślowski turned to films that dealt with controversial ethical issues arising in documentary practice. In *Slate/Klapy*,^{vi} a 5-minute documentary that Kieślowski made in 1976, just before he turned to long feature films, he confronts the structural ethical issue of documentary film, which strives to observe human beings. The film is a constructed montage of people talking and moving in the frame, as the slate, which has declared before the start of shooting "action," remains in the scene, so that the viewer sees the actual rushes or the process of making the film. As in the case of *Bellissima*, a fictional film that documents its own making, *Slate* is a documentary that documents its own process and makes it a fiction. The slate, representing the film apparatus, plays the most dominant role in this short documentary. It is a recurring theme that exists in every frame, constantly enhancing the presence of the documenting medium.

Thus, Kieślowski emphasizes that innocent, pure observation is impossible in reality. The very operation of the recorded camera expropriates the documented autonomy and authenticity. The act of observation intervenes with the words and actions of the filmed subjects, which transforms them into aesthetic objects. They lose their vitality and human nature in the presence of the observing eye and the document apparatus. Kieślowski made both documentary and fiction feature films until 1982. His output reveals a tension between seeking a solution for his ethical concerns in his fiction films and accentuating the fictional dimensions in his documentaries. In his short documentary *Talking Heads* (1980, 13 minutes), Kieślowski interviewed nearly a hundred people ranging from a toddler to a one-hundred-year-old woman.

All of them answered three questions: How old are you? Who are you? What do you desire most? By chronologically progressing from the first interviewee, the toddler, who doesn't answer the questions verbally, to the last and oldest interviewee, the short film creates a cinematic space-time of a century's length. Kieślowski interviewed real people, whom he selected out of his curiosity to explore them as "men whose professional aptitudes have to do with the profession of being men."^{vii} The three questions he asked them are the three basic questions that every actor asks himself when he portrays a character: Who am I? What is my motivation? What is my desire that drives my action? In an inverse approach to the one that Zavattini and his neo-realist colleagues took, in this reflexive documentary film Kieślowski returns to the departure point of neo-realism, which examines the boundaries between actor and the character he portrays.

Moreover, these questions echo the question "Are you happy?" that Marcelin Loidan repeatedly asked in *Chronicle of a Summer: Paris 1960* (*Chronique d'un été: Paris 1960*). Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* was a pioneering documentary that defined *cinéma vérité*. Greatly influenced by Italian neo-realism, the directors responded by creating an entirely new film practice: a documentary that wasn't simply content to observe human beings, but also strived to listen to them and hear their voices. Kieślowski followed in the footsteps of Rouch and Morin in his desire to explore the nature of human beings and to give a central place to their voices. However, he dismissed the possibility of getting a meaningful and honest answer that reflects the existential condition of a human being in asking a general question such as "Are you happy?" Rather, his short documentary implies that one is required to use questions taken from the dramatic practice that enables actors to understand the characters they embody.

In his short documentary *Railway Station*^{viii} (1980, 13 minutes), Kieślowski films the passersby and workers at a railway station, *prima facie*, without any apparent interesting drama taking place. This seems to be the ultimate demonstration of Zavattini's concept of "cinema of encounter." Kieślowski creates here a "direct contact with reality, goes out to his city, observes people and learns how to look at them." Once in a while the railway station's security camera is seen revolving as any other regular object in the station. The security camera is signified as different by a specific musical theme. Toward the end of the film, at the 10:30-minute point, the camera focuses on a couple bidding each other farewell before the train departs. Here the film's tone changes, with non-diegetic music introducing threat and dramatic tension.

The transition from the ambiance and natural background noise of the station to the manipulative non-diegetic music coincides with an extreme close-up of the highly positioned revolving station security camera. From this moment on, the passersby are shot only from high camera angles, and there are exchanges of POV shots between subjects' faces and the security camera. The shooting draws attention to the fact that the camera is not simply a "fly on the wall," the departure point of some later variations of *cinéma vérité*, but rather creates an active dialogue with the focus of its observations. The audience becomes aware that a pure naïve observation is impossible. After emphasizing the power of the gaze that the security camera holds over the people it observes, the film reveals a man in the control room in front of eight screens, scanning the entire train station. What begins as a compassionate, innocent observation motivated by pure curiosity and interest in human behavior in the daily life at the train station turns out to be surveillance, "Big Brother"-style. Kieślowski challenges the assumption that there is a difference between a documentary filmmaker such as Rouch observing human beings in order to explore their behavior, and the security person that invades their privacy without their awareness and permission.

In the context of Poland at the end of the communist era, perhaps there is also a comparison with the state that penetrates and dominates the lives of its citizens. The reflexive meaning of this interpretation is that the documentary camera dominates and invades its subjects' lives in the same way that totalitarian regimes invade the lives of their citizens. In these films, which mark Kieślowski's transition from documentary filmmaking to fiction cinema, he deals with the ethical difficulty inherent in documentary cinema: the gaze as an objectifying mechanism.

In 1987–1988, Kieślowski collaborated with Krzysztof Piesiewicz on their monumental TV series *Decalogue*, a project that raised complex philosophical questions about the relationship between ethics, morality, theology, law, and cinema. Kieślowski met Piesiewicz in court in 1982, at the height of the Solidarity protests. Piesiewicz, a counsel for political defendants, was among the first to eagerly collaborate with Kieślowski after discovering that the camera deterred judges from rendering arbitrary verdicts and imposing heavy sentences. He used the cinematic gaze in his struggle against the capriciousness of the regime. Later, even when Kieślowski did not intend to film in court, he helped Piesiewicz by appearing in court with a dummy camera to deter the judges. Thus, the potential power of the camera became an ideological and ethical weapon in their hands.

This experience might have vividly revealed to Kieślowski that the documentary camera enables an ethical act only when it is off. By using the dummy camera, Kieślowski appears to have experienced the cliché about the power of the camera as a “machine gun” (shooting machine). While confronting the tyrannical power of the state, the use of such a weapon is an ethical necessity, whereas using it to observe people with whom one wishes to engage in a dialogue defines a power relationship that precludes pure observation and a genuine dialogue. According to Kieślowski: “When I made documentaries I gradually realized that what interests me the most was actually impossible to grasp by the documentary camera. Inappropriate, in fact, to shoot it.... What is most interesting is the person’s privacy, his intimacy [...] one is not allowed to put there a documentary camera.... It is not just interfering with intimacy, it is trading with intimacy. [...] You cannot push a documentary camera between two people in love.... Love, after all, means just two people together. The camera makes the third. This contradicts Love.... I did a film called *first love* and I set up a camera everywhere that they loved each other.... I looked at them. The girl was 16, just before giving birth. I observed her during the pregnancy as the baby grew inside her, until finally it was born. [...] I realized that the documentary camera is a dangerous tool. It can change the nature and essence of love.”^{ix}

Kieślowski here refreshes the ethical issue by introducing an alternative key concept: “intimacy.” The ethical failure of the documentary camera is inherent in its failure to document intimacy. Observation of intimacy erases the object and purpose of observation. The camera has an inherently destructive and dangerous power. Kieślowski converts the discussion of ethics, which is abstract in nature, into a discussion of intimacy, which is more concrete. If the point of departure of neo-realism was essentially ethical, Kieślowski suggests a concrete point of departure looking for intimacy. Thus, we are facing a vicious circle of insoluble issue. The neo-realists, in their quest for direct contact with reality, abandoned the classic Hollywood cinema in favor of a “cinema of encounter.” The same reasons led Visconti to abandon the neo-realistic approach and develop a rather stylized and artificial fictional cinema. Two decades later, Kieślowski avoided artificial fiction by focusing on documentary cinema in his desire to observe and investigate human behavior.

His experience led him to conclusions similar to those of Visconti, and he soon abandoned documentary filmmaking. Rooted in documentary practice, his cinema is inspired by neo-realistic filmmakers, but it is also fully aware of the limitations and false pretenses of these practices. They could not satisfactorily answer ethical dilemmas stemming from the very act of observation. Moreover, the neo-realistic and documentary practices pose ethical issues that did not exist in classical fiction films. These practices intensify those ethical problems through the claim of not settling for “escapist crowd pleasing entertainment” and, rather, attempting to observe people and penetrate their internal souls. Agnieszka Piotrowska^x analyzes Kieślowski’s feature *Camera Buff* (1979) in detail, describing his concerns with ethical issues arising in documentary filmmaking in his fictional cinema. It is clear that a reexamination of Kieślowski’s late films, especially the *Decalogue*, from the perspective of the relationship between fiction and documentary filmmaking or in light of the influence of Italian neo-realism on these films, sheds new light on ethics and cinema, but is beyond the scope of this discussion.

In conclusion, the question we opened with—Is there a “documentary ethics” distinguishable from “cinematic ethics”?—leads us back to the question of whether a “documentary ethics” is even possible. Perhaps we should ask this more complex question:

How can a documentary film be ethical? Paraphrasing Kieślowski's statement on ethical issues in documentary filmmaking, I ask a broader question, namely: How can cinema without intimacy—and indeed, which essentially negates intimacy—be ethical?

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ⁱ Jean-Luc Godard, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, December 1962, in: James Monaco, 1976, *The New Wave* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 103.

ⁱⁱ Cesare Zavattini, "A Thesis on Neo-Realism," in: *Springtime in Italy*, 1978 [1952], translated and edited by David Overbey (Hamden, CT: Archon Books), p. 67–78.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 75.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p. 69.

^v *Ibid*, p. 77.

^{vi} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oR5I3udbxOU>

^{vii} *Ibid*, p. 75.

^{viii} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eebAIRIMopM>

^{ix} Kieślowski in a documentary by Anderes Voigt, 1995.

^x Piotroaska, Agnieszka, 2012, *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film*, Ph.D. thesis, Birkbeck College, University of London, pp. 104–109, 225–230.