The Mockumentary: History of a Deception

Perception, Image Consciousness, and Narrative Engagement

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This article aims to investigate the documentary film image through the lens of phenomenological image theory. Specifically, it seeks to explore the genre of mockumentary, reflecting on the reasons behind the deception that lead the consciousness to believe that what it is seeing has really happened. In the phenomenological literature, the theme of deception has often been addressed through the case of hyperrealistic wax statues, which exemplify the typical perceptual misunderstanding of mistaking an image for a flesh-and-blood person. In contrast to the wax figures model, I argue that there is no perceptual deception in mockumentaries. On the contrary: mockumentaries work precisely because they do not attempt to deceive perception. Rather, the idea I propose is to interpret the deception of the mockumentary in terms of a narrative engagement of perception.

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Introduction

The phenomenological theory of the image[1] has historically been employed to describe filmic consciousness, as evidenced by the numerous contributions positioned at the intersection of cinema and philosophy[2]. However, the rigorous and systematic application of phenomenology to the study of cinema is a relatively late development in film studies[3]. Despite the challenges encountered in pairing film and phenomenology[4], this dialogue has reached a further stage of elaboration as phenomenology has come into contact with the vast and complex constellation of *visual studies*[5]. This field of inquiry emphasizes the historical-cultural context to which an image belongs, determining not only its origin but also the ways in which an image can be produced and perceived by a consciousness. In this contemporary media landscape, particularly within the context of Film Studies,

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[1] E. Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstseins, Erinnerung. Zur Phänomenologie der anschaulichen Vergegenwärtigungen. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1898-1925),* Husserliana Band XXIII, hrsg. von E. Marbach, Nijhoff, Den Haag, 1980, English translation by J. Brough, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)*, Springer, Dordrecht 2005.

[2] A classic treatment of cinematic representation from the thought of Edmund Husserl can be found in the text by Allan Casebier, who in *Film and Phenomenology* takes care to outline the differences of the phenomenological approach with respect to André Bazin's film theory, the post-structuralist synthesis of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Barthesian textual analysis and Metzian cine-semiotics. See A. Casebier, *Film and Phenomenology: Towards a Realist Theory of Cinematic Representation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991.

[3] H. R. Sepp, L. Embree (eds.), *Handbook of Phenomenological Aesthetics*, Springer 2010, p. 111. See the analysis on 'Film' by Elena del Río, pp. 111-118, which mentions Vivian Sobchack's groundbreaking book *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, which precisely highlighted the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology for the main aesthetic and theoretical aspects of film experience. The French philosopher himself traced the filiation between cinema and phenomenology in a famous lecture in 1945, sealing the kinship of phenomenological analysis with cinematic representation, since «if we now consider film as an object to be perceived, we can apply everything we have just said about perception in general to the perception of film» (M. Merleau-Ponty, *Il cinema e la nuova psicologia*, in *Senso e non senso*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1962, p. 76).

[4] Cfr. C. Ferencz-Flatz, J. Hanich, *What is Film Phenomenology?*, in "Studia Phaenomenologica", 16 (2016), pp. 11-61.

[5] See A. Pinotti, A. Somaini, *Cultura Visuale. Immagini, sguardi, media, dispositivi*, Einaudi, Torino 2016.

phenomenology has had to confront new objects of study and descriptive modalities that were unforeseen in the framework of classical analyses. A significant example of this is represented by documentary consciousness, an area in which the phenomenology of the image is engaging, producing reflections that take into account both the status of the documentary[6] image and the attitude with which consciousness approaches it. One aspect that has not yet received adequate treatment, but which deserves further investigation, concerns a specific category of documentaries: the so-called mockumentary. Clearly, it is not my intention to analyze the case of the mockumentary by statically applying phenomenological arguments to describe phenomena to which Husserl had no access – whether due to his lack of attention to the media context in which he was immersed, or simply because such media had not yet been fully developed in their technological potential. Rather, I intend to make use of the tools developed by the phenomenology of the image, particularly those found in Husserl's later manuscripts[7], to demonstrate their value in engaging with the contemporary debate on the status of visual representation[8]. The case of the mockumentary thus opens up the opportunity to develop new descriptive methods for new objects, mobilizing Husserl's theory of the image toward new fields of inquiry[9].

The 'Threefold' Structure of Image Consciousness

In this context, I intend to first outline the essential elements of a phenomenological theory of the image, exemplifying it through the case of filmic consciousness. From this discussion, the initial contours of a strictly phenomenological analysis of the documentary cinematic image will emerge, and finally, that of the mockumentary. On the basis of these elements, the problem if deception, which is the issue of this article, will be addressed.

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[6] M. Wahlberg, *Documentary Time. Film and Phenomenology*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2008. See also the third part of C. Rozzoni, *Nell'immagine. Realtà, fantasia, esperienza estetica*, Le Monnier, Firenze 2017, pp. 97-134.

[7] See the works of Christian Ferencz-Flatz present in *Sehen als-ob. Husserl's Bildlehre zwischen Ästhetik und Pragmatik*, Traugott Bautz, Nordhausen 2016. See *Gibt es perzeptive Phantasie? Als-ob- Bewusstsein, Widerstreit und Neutralität in Husserl Aufzeichnungen zur Bildbetrachtung*, in Id., pp. 34-57, and for the part more closely concerned with filmic consciousness: *Filmbewusstsein und Zuschauer im Bild. Ein Husserlscher Ansatz zum Kinematographen*, in Id., pp. 58-82, p. 60.

[8] N. De Warren., *Tamino's Eyes, Pamina's Gaze: Husserl's Phenomenology of Image-Consciousness Refashioned,* in Ierna, H. Jacobs, F. Mattens (eds.), *Philosophy, Phenomenology, Sciences. Essay in Commemoration of Edmund Husserl*, Springer, Dordrecht 2010.

[9] This direction of work was outlined by C. Rozzoni, *Cinema Consciousness: Elements of a Husserlian Approach to Film Image*, in "Studia Phaenomenologica", XVI (2016), pp. 295-324.

In the third part of the *Göttingen lectures* of 1904/05 – entitled *Hauptstücke aus der Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis*[10] – Husserl introduces his well-known tripartition regarding the structure of image consciousness [*Bildbewusstsein*]. Unlike perceptual consciousness, which refers to presentative acts that give us objects in the flesh, Husserl speaks of image consciousness to refer to the consciousness that is directed toward a precise class of objects within the perceptual field, which we commonly call images, namely, physical ones. These are public and intersubjective images (paintings, photographs, etc.). An image that can be cut, burned, or even manipulated if composed of pixels. Specifically, image consciousness is defined by a tripartite structure: material support [*Bildding*], iconic object [*Bildobjekt*], and iconic subject [*Bildsujet*][11].

The people tasked with transporting a work of art from one museum to another are primarily moving an object, a canvas (material support), which is an object subject to the same physical laws as all entities in my room; from this canvas emerges the face of a person (the iconic object), which in turn refers to a hypothetical real person (the iconic subject)[12]. According to this analysis, the question of the ontological status of images seems to concern the iconic object in particular. Indeed, the material support made of paper, canvas, or any material that constitutes a graphic interface is a 'physical thing' [*Bildding*] that can be perceived and said to exist – precisely because it is an object that is part of the perceptual flow we recognize as belonging to our real environment. The iconic subject (the represented one), for its part, may be said to exist, or to exist in some cases and not in others (nonetheless, it cannot be said to be present). The iconic object, on the other hand, is «something appearing that has never existed and never will exist and, of course, is not taken by us for even a moment as something real»[13].

If we take filmic consciousness as an example, we can describe this situation by saying that, ultimately, no one would ever think of calling the police while witnessing a crime unfolding in a crime series or a horror film. In the words of Lambert Wiesing, we are faced with an *artificial presence* [*artifizielle Präsenz*][14]. In this case, we have a fiction that is constituted from perceptions without applying a belief thesis to the latter; it is a conscious illusion from the very first moment we sit in the theater, in the cinema, on the

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[10] E. Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstseins, Erinnerung*, cit., pp.1-116.
[11] Ivi, p. 21.
[12] Ivi, p. 30.
[13] Ivi, p. 21.
[14] L. Wiesing, *Artifizielle Präsenz. Studien zur Philosophie des Bildes*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2005, p. 32.

sofa at home. It is undeniable that, on the one hand, we can say we see a crime (iconic subject) in the cinematic image representing it, but on the other hand, this vision is not the same vision I would experience if I were to witness a *real* crime. Watching the screen, we do not experience a presentation [*Gegenwärtigung*] of a crime in the flesh, but a re-presentation [*Vergegenwärtigung*] of it – the crime is re-presented on the screen and not truly present in the cinema with us.

However, even though the question of existence seems neutralized at the level of the iconic object – since the iconic object by its very nature is a «nothing» [*ein Nichts*][15], a «nullity», neither existent nor non-existent – we must ask what our attitude is toward the iconic subject in such experiences, because image consciousness does not necessarily imply a consciousness of unreality regarding the iconic subject, which, in fact, may be understood as existent, non-existent, or even *quasi*-existent[16]. Therefore, for the phenomenology of the image, it becomes crucial to understand why what we see *engages* us, and it always *engages* us in a rather ambiguous way: on the one hand, we know it is not real, that is, not a real crime, and we are thus shielded from everything that happens, while on the other hand, this staging captivates us, sometimes even to the point where we may shed tears for those subjects who, as such, are never mere fictions [*Fikta*].

Filmic Consciousness vs. Documentary Consciousness

The ambiguity that characterizes our relationship with filmic images becomes more complicated when we consider the case in which we know that what we are about to see is a documentary, for example, one in which the photographic nature of the image could serve as a testimony to the fact that – as Roland Barthes says – the person or thing appearing on the iconic surface was really present at that point in history[17]. In this context, even though what we actually see are only images and not people or things in the flesh, we are led to believe in the existence of what we see according to the manner in which it

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[15] E. Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstseins, Erinnerung*, cit., p. 50.

[16] See for example the third part of C. Rozzoni, *Nell'immagine*, cit.

[17] R. Barthes, *Camera lucida. Reflections on Photography* (1980)*,* trans. by R. Howard, Hill and Wang, New York 1982. «Here are some Polish soldiers resting in a field; nothing extraordinary, except this, which no realist painting would give me, that *they were there;* what I see is not a memory, an imagination, a reconstitution, a piece of Maya, such as art lavishes upon us, but reality in a past state: at once the past and the real» (p. 82).

is presented to us[18]. However, it should be noted that nothing in the image itself can ground our belief on its own. The recognition of the image always presupposes some knowledge about it. We know that an image can be manipulated or falsified, thus inducing our sense of reality through cleverly engineered deception[19]. AI systems that generate images remind us of this once again, but even photographs, even those that manifest in all their documentary power, always acquire a certain 'authority' within a specific context, a horizon of meaning that supports our attitude towards them and makes them function in a certain way, that is, with the mark of belief. Similarly, a documentary that seeks to tell, for example, the story of the Kosovo War through the massacres that took place in the border areas of those territories cannot be considered a faithful representation of reality[20]. It is always us, immersed in our network of encyclopedic knowledge, who have good reasons to believe that what we are seeing really happened. Therefore, strictly speaking, the documentary cannot be treated as a consciousness of reality; rather, this kind of belief is more about the consciousness of *liveness*[21], because in the documentary, there is already a kind of *break* with reality that brings something back to me *post hoc*, i.e., after it has happened. It is a bit like when a person tells me an anecdote; even if I know that the anecdote is true, I can be involved as if it were a fictional story, because,

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[18] Rozzoni develops these problems by focusing on the interaction between iconic presentification and belief, as in the case of images that Husserl calls «impressional». C. Rozzoni, *Am I Truly Feeling This? Quasi-Emotions and Quasi-Values in Cinematic Experience*, in T. Breyer, M. Cavallaro, R. Y. Sandoval (eds.), *Phenomenology of Phantasy and Emotion*, Wbc Academic, Darmstadt 2022, pp. 185-186.

[19] Ivi, p. 186. «Nevertheless, it must be stressed that nothing in the image itself seems able to ground our belief on its own. "Impressional images" are not eo ipso trustworthy. Recognition of the image always seems to presuppose a certain knowledge about it». On these issues widely known in the literature I lean on Rozzoni's good reconstructions.

[20] See A. Aprà, *Documentario*, in *Enciclopedia del Cinema*, vol. II, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma 2003. Upon closer examination, it is evident that the documentary is by no means exempt from manipulation. In fact, the very act of framing reality already entails an intrinsic modification of it, since the moment we select a certain portion of space, we necessarily exclude another, thereby operating an intentional act that conveys our interpretation of the phenomenal world. In addition to this, a further alteration occurs when we resort to post-production operations, such as voice-over or mixing, as well as with the use of digital technology. Which has once and for all challenged the idea of the photographic image as an exact reproduction of reality, making it possible to add elements that were not present at the time of filming within the frame.

[21] In such cases one speaks in phenomenology of recollection of the present [*Gegenwartserinnerung*]. We are dealing to all intents and purposes with a presentification, the salient feature of which is summed up in a kind of wandering within [*Hineinwandern*] the horizon of the present, through which we would be given the possibility of seeing scenes and situations that we would be able to grasp with a presenting act if we were there, in front of it. In this sense, the world of the recollection of the present is evidently the same as that of the presentation, only from another place. «*Die Welt der Gegenwartserinnerung ist offenbar dieselbe wie die der Präsentation, nur von einem anderen Orte aus*» (E. Fink, *Vergegenwärtigung und Bild. Beiträge zur Phänomenologie der Unwirklichkeit* (1930), in Id., *Studien zur Phänomenologie 1930-1939*, Phaenomenologica XXI, Nijhoff, Den Haag 1966, p. 45).

simply put, the stories of other people are for us primarily stories before they are part of reality. Nonetheless, in the case where there are no reconstructions in the documentary (because sometimes they are explicitly indicated), and I see the facts as they are supposed to have happened or as they are now, even if it is made clear that the events date back to another historical period, the point is that in this case, reality itself is involved, and it is not fiction made *ad hoc* – as it could be in a fictional film based on real elements. Between these two cases (a documentary and a fictional film based on real elements) there is actually only a difference in degree rather than in status, because even in the documentary, events are not seen in real-time, and indeed, this almost never happens – as we have just seen. It is true that I know it is reality, but it is a bit like watching a theatrical representation based on real events, so if, for example, I go to the theater to see a play that wants to tell me about the Kosovo War massacre, I am still watching a theatrical representation, even if I might think to myself that these events really happened. That is, it is still a theatrical representation. In this sense, a documentary is not very far from a film based on real events: the involvement is the same, precisely because even there, the positionality does not make me lean towards the fact that in one case, I am faced with reality, and in the other, I am not. Rather, it is a reconstruction of a different kind, I am facing another way of telling stories, in one case more attentive to informative content, whereas in films, it is not always necessary to explain what is happening, it is enough to show it: *show, don't tell*.

> Documentary film speaks about situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situ- ations, and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a way of seeing the historical world directly rather than into a fictional allegory[22].

Drawing on Nichols' definition, documentaries are driven by the ambition to bring a perspective on reality, whether it is a past reality or a portion of reality situated in another part of the present – in the case of live shooting with documentary purposes[23]. Unlike the documentary, the mockumentary works precisely in the opposite direction, i.e., the

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[22] B. Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2010, p. 14.
[23] If, on the other hand, it was a narrative with a time index pointing towards the future, it would no longer be a documentary film by definition, but a fictional story only very well documented that aims, for example, to raise public awareness of the use of nuclear energy and its possible harmful outcomes for planet earth

mockumentary seeks to deceive, to make fun of the viewer by using documentary strategies. The word itself signals this, born from a blend of the English words (to) mock (simulate, make fun of, but also imitate and rehearse) and documentary (documentary film)[24]. The broader reference to the mockumentary comes from Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, who offered the following definition: «[o]ur definition of mock-documentary is specifically limited to fictional texts; those which make a partial or concerted effort to appropriate documentary codes and conventions in order to represent a fictional subject»[25]. It is worth emphasizing from the outset that these works do not start with the intent to defraud the viewer by passing off the fake as real; rather, they appropriate documentary aesthetics for playful purposes, providing the viewer with only subtle clues that they are playing with documentary codes[26]. In addition to accounting for the fact that there are different types of mockumentary, which to varying degrees and with different strategies attempt to deceive the viewer, a phenomenological analysis should aim to clarify what kind of deception[27] we are talking about when consciousness experiences an audiovisual content of this nature.

The Case of Wax Statues Between Perception and Image Consciousness

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[24] C. Formenti, *Il Mockumentary. La fiction si maschera da documentario*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2013, p. 23. For a discussion in the German-speaking area, see the definition offered by the Kiel University's Lexikon der Filmbegrif https://filmlexikon.uni-kiel.de/doku.php/m:mockumentary-5125. See also L. Boccia, L. Ricciardi, *Tra realtà e finzione. Il Mockumentary. Nascita e sviluppo di un fenomeno cinematografico*, Weird Book, Roma 2015. See also the work by C. J. Miller (ed.), *Too Bold for the Box Office. The Mockumentary from Big Screen to Small*, The Scarecrow Press, Lanham/Toronto/Plymouth 2012.

[25] J. Roscoe, C. Hight, *Faking it. Mock-documentary and the subversion of factuality*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2001, p. 2.

[26] C. Formenti, *Il Mockumentary*, cit., p. 24. There are different typologies of mockumentaries that showcase a different degree of appropriation of documentary aesthetics, narrative structures and modes of representation.

[27] I recognize that from the point of view of a theory of mockumentary the term deception is extremely ambiguous, because a mockumentary as is pointed out in Hight and Roscoe or in Formenti, unlike a fake documentary, is not intended to deceive its viewers in the strict sense of the word, since it always contains clues to its fiction (although in some cases the viewer must be particularly attentive and/or media literate to detect them). As the *encyclopaedic* and *reading* aspects cannot be taken into account within a phenomenological theory (of the image) – because we cannot refer to the literacy of the user to say that this is not perceptual deception; that is, it is not enough for us to say *we know* it works this way – I use the term deception precisely because my intervention is within the phenomenological framework, and in this context we refer to this expression. The case of the Mockumentary serves me to layer this problem of deception and introduce the idea of a *narrative engagement of perception*.

In phenomenological literature, the theme of deception has been addressed from different perspectives and by multiple authors[28]. Particularly relevant within the framework of this contribution is the work of Pietro Conte[29], who has accurately highlighted this issue starting from Husserl's case of hyper-realistic wax statues, i.e., statues that are, by definition, extremely similar to what they are supposed to represent, namely human beings. In this sense, they also form the basis of the typical perceptual misunderstanding, which consists of perceiving a hyper-realistic statue *as-if-it-were* a man, that is, perceiving something as something else. The resemblance should indeed indicate that something is but at the same time is not that thing, meaning it makes a subtle deviation because it only needs to resemble what it represents. When this resemblance is taken to the extreme, we are inclined to mistake one thing for another, in this case, a statue for a person in the flesh.

> Where does the wax end, and where does the flesh it intends to reproduce begin? Where does the physical thing [*Bildding*] end, and where does the iconic object begin [*Bildobjekt*]? The first is so similar to the second that it tends to identify with it. In this direction, a fundamental feature of image consciousness, the 'contrast', is denied: the difference between the material support and the iconic object vanishes, resulting in it no longer being possible to affirm that an image appears through a thing, as the image and the thing have now become superimposed. [The wax statue], however, does not merely deny the difference between the physical thing and the iconic object – it also seeks to deny the difference between the iconic object and the iconic subject[30].

Wax statues, treated in this case according to the tripartite structure model of image consciousness, give rise to this constant oscillation between perceptual consciousness and image consciousness (imaginative consciousness), as «[the wax figure] [w]ith its real clothes, hair, and so on, indeed, even with movements artificially mimicked by means of mechanical devices, the wax figure so closely resembles the natural human being that the perceptual consciousness momentarily prevails again and again»[31]. The excess of resemblance that the wax figure implements with what it is supposed to represent forces the consciousness to oscillate from an image apprehension to a perceptual apprehension.

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[28] For a survey of the different senses of deception as well as the phenomena of illusion and hallucination within the phenomenological field of work, see the analyses of A. Cimino, *The Sense of Deception: Illusion and Hallucination as Nullified, Invalid Perception*, in "Husserl Studies", 35/1 (2019), pp. 27-49, Springer, Cham 2018. See also S. Overgaard, *Perceptual error, conjunctivism, and Husserl*, in "Husserl Studies", 34 (2018), pp. 25-45.

[29] P. Conte, *In carne e cera. Estetica e fenomenologia dell'iperrealismo*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2014.

[30] Ivi, p. 17 (my translation).

[31] E. Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewusstseins, Erinnerung*, cit., p. 43.

«If we suddenly become conscious of the deception, image consciousness makes its appearance. But image consciousness does not succeed in lasting in such cases»[32]. In other words, the form and size of wax figures allow an object to appear with a form and size similar to those that might be found in a corresponding perceptual appearance, showing the aspect of a man in general. Here we see a difficulty in Husserl's thought in understanding which mode of consciousness we are dealing with because of the excess of resemblance – whether it is, in other words, image consciousness or perceptual consciousness, the perceptual field that delivers objectuality in flesh and blood to which we grant belief or the imaginative one that delivers objectuality in the mode of as-if, that is, fictions [*Fikta*].

The problem is not so much related to the fact that wax statues seek to annul the difference between iconic object and iconic subject, that is, to erase the dimension of reference, because simply put, I don't need to know that the statue refers to someone real to see what I see. The reference always remains within the realm of encyclopedic knowledge: the perception is deceived regardless of whether those attributes, which resemble a person, actually refer to an existing person. The entire painful point of this issue lies in the intention that drives the creators of wax statues to annul the contrast between perceptual space and iconic space. What happens at the level of consciousness is that I simply continue to perceive the same hyletic contents, no longer perceived as a lady in flesh and blood, who, for example, winks at me from the stairs of the Panopticon in Berlin, but rather as a wax figure[33]. Thus, it is the perception that has been deceived. It is at this level that the deception caused by hyper-realistic statues plays out – a case that, by this point in the analysis, can rightfully be categorized under the species of a perceptual deception, involving a doxic modification of consciousness in the mode of negation[34]. Based on these analyses, let us now ask ourselves whether the model of wax figures can be applied to the mockumentary. In other words: is the mockumentary susceptible to being treated as the cinematic version of wax statues?

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[32] Ibid.

[33] «I now perceive the same object, no longer apprehended as a lady but as wax figure» (A. Cimino, *The Sense of Deception*, cit., p. 18).

[34] For a detailed analysis of these issues, I refer to chapters 1 and 2 of the volume of N. Liangkang, *Seinsglaube in der Phänomenologie Edmund Husserls*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1999. See also T. Poljanšek, *Seeing Ghosts. Apperception, Accordance and the Mode of Living Presence in Perception*, in T. Breyer, M. Cavallaro, R. Y. Sandoval (eds.), *Phenomenology of Phantasy and Emotion*, cit., pp. 145-180.

The Mockumentary: A Cinematic Version of Wax Statues?

On March 26, 2012, the Swiss Defense Minister, Ueli Maurer, declared during a press conference in Biasca: «The annexation of Lombardy would not cause us any problems. Lombardy represents about 90% of all trade with our country». The Swiss Federal Councillor's statement seems like a provocation, but the following day, two of the main representatives of the Northern League, Roberto Maroni and Matteo Salvini, picked up the idea and promoted a petition to make Lombardy part of the Swiss Confederation. Thousands of signatures were collected in just a few hours. A coincidence? In reality, one of the greatest political maneuvers of the post-war period might lie behind these two seemingly unnoticed events: the annexation of Lombardy to Switzerland. *Operazione Lombardia* (2012)[35] is the film in which director Fulvio Bernasconi stages the historical negotiations to annex Lombardy to Switzerland. This is an example of a mockumentary which, using the same techniques as a documentary, attempts to convince the audience of the truth of what is depicted and, based on this conviction, creates a narrative that enjoys the authority of real facts. The operation consists precisely of passing off these carefully edited video clips as a report in order to tell a fictitious story, and the game is to make the viewer believe that what they are watching actually happened – at least until the fiction widely prevails over reality, that is, until the whole cannot be shielded from the onset of a comedic dimension.

But in what sense is the consciousness a victim of deception when watching *Operazione Lombardia*? Is it perhaps a deception similar to that caused by wax statues? I will first try to argue in what sense, from a phenomenological point of view, we cannot speak of perceptual deception in the case of a mockumentary in the same way we are deceived when faced with hyper-realistic wax figures. Only after that will I go on to outline the reasons for the deception.

Since we are dealing with an image, we can analyze the case of the mockumentary by adopting a phenomenological theory of the image, i.e., by referring to the model of tripartite consciousness. The material support [*Bildding*], in this case, is exemplified by any interface that allows us to watch the mockumentary (PC, tablet, television, or

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[35] It is the mockumentary directed by Fulvio Bernasconi. See the following link: *Operazione Lombardia*. *Operazione Lombardia* goes in the direction of the hoax. See in this respect C. Formenti, *Sbarchi alieni tra piante di spaghetti: l'hoax come specchio del realismo*, in "Ágalma", 29 (2015), pp. 73-82.

smartphone), that is, devices subject to the same laws of physics as all the entities we say are present in flesh and blood in the perceptual field. Through this interface (material support), we are given the ability to see scenes and situations that are not present in the same sense as objects of flesh and blood: in this case, we see political figures discussing the annexation of Lombardy to Switzerland (iconic object). These same characters, in turn, refer to the (hypothetical) real politicians who secretly carried out the negotiations (iconic subject). In the case of a mockumentary, we are dealing with an image, but clearly not in the same sense as wax figures, which were only apprehended as images when perception no longer recognized them as flesh and blood people. When watching a mockumentary, we are aware from the very first moment that it is a cinematic representation in images, and it does not require that perception be deceived first for the mockumentary to be an image-based representation. In the case of a mockumentary, there is no oscillation between perceptual consciousness and imaginative consciousness, nor does there need to be this tension between the two acts, because in the mockumentary the perceptual level must remain consistent throughout the experience of the work, or else it would fall back into a fictional film based on real events. But if the deception is not perceptual, what kind of deception are we dealing with?

The Reasons for Deception

Let us further elaborate on what was just written, namely that in a mockumentary, the perceptual level remains consistent throughout the experience, a consideration that might initially seem in stark contrast to the analyses developed earlier. Rather than talking about perceptual deception, I propose addressing the case of the mockumentary in terms of a perception that is engaged in the viewing experience. Consciousness, not only when approaching an image but also in everyday perception, is inclined to engage with what is perceived, entering into a certain participatory mode[36] – just as it does when approaching a painting or any interface that offers the opportunity to enter a story. This capacity to engage with what is perceived exists at every level of perception, especially in the absence

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[36] I believe that Lambert Wiesing's words can be interpreted in this direction when he develops the idea of a pause of participation that involves the viewer in front of the image. Cf. L. Wiesing, *Pause of Participation. On the Function of Artificial Presence*, in "Research in Phenomenology", 41/2, pp. 238-252. However, rather than insisting on the idea of a pause, which risks calling into question a kind of suspension of perceptual consciousness, I prefer to speak of a narrative involvement of perception that signals continuity with the perceptual act.

of a framework. The framework merely provides an additional opportunity to set our perception in a participatory mode, but it is a mode that is always already based on perceptual consciousness directed toward the world. Just as when we see a spider emerging from cracks in the wall, we are similarly enchanted by tall grass swaying in a particularly choreographed manner by the wind.

This perceptual engagement is heightened when consciousness is confronted with specific classes of images (paintings, photographs, theatrical performances, television images, film images) that, precisely because they are *art*efact, detach from everyday perception, signaling to consciousness that from that moment on, the image must be followed with a certain *narrative engagement*[37]. After all, it is the prerogative of every art form, to varying degrees, to involve the spectator, drawing them in by offering an interesting story to follow. From this phenomenological perspective, I propose understanding the deception produced by the mockumentary in terms of a perception engaged in the narrative framework intentionally constructed by the authors.

Thus, not only are we not deceived in the same way wax statues deceive us, but more radically, it does not make sense to speak of perceptual deception in the case of a mockumentary. *In fact, the opposite is true: it is precisely because there is no perceptual deception that the mockumentary works.* This kind of representation seeks to avoid deceiving us to the greatest extent, offering scenes and situations as if we were living them firsthand in our real lives. *Operazione Lombardia* is effective precisely because, for more than an hour, it manages to 'trap' the viewer in a story that possesses all the hallmarks of reality – serious topics and credible testimonies. Only in the second half is the deception revealed: the investigation is the result of an artifice, a montage of clips, economic considerations, and political fantasy. The first part of the mockumentary, however, is constructed in such a way as to offer us contexts that closely resemble our

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[37] I developed this idea in my doctoral thesis, which was submitted on February 28, 2022, and defended on July 11, 2022, at IULM University in Milan. In this work, I specifically interpreted the Husserlian concept of *perzeptive Phantasie*, as presented in his later manuscripts, through the lens of a *narrative attitude* of perception. In coining this concept, I was interested in introducing an aspect that had not yet been addressed in any scholarly work until the end of 2021, demonstrating logically why, in the most phenomenologically sophisticated thinking, we can at some point refer to a narrative attitude of perceptual consciousness. The thesis, titled *Al di là della coscienza d'immagine. Fenomenologia della fantasia e del mondo iconico*, is now in the process of being published by Mimesis in the *Quaderni di Visual and Media Studies* series. The publication is expected to be released in early 2025.
The value of this idea has found confirmation in Rozzoni's recent book *The Phenomenological Image. A Husserlian Inquiry into Reality, Phantasy, and Aesthetic Experience*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2023, pp. 4, 6.

reality. Unlike a fictional film, in this case, my belief is constantly confirmed by a narrative that becomes more compelling thanks to statements and interviews with public Italian figures, people who are part of my world, my history, and whom I *recognize* as such.

It is evident that my perception is not engaged merely because I recognize those politicians as figures from my real world. Just as in the case of wax figures, perception was not deceived because a particular man referred to a real person, in the same way, in the mockumentary, I do not need to know that what I see refers to existing people and things from the real world in order to engage with the narrative and believe in what I am watching[38]. From the perspective of an image theory, there is no collapse of the iconic subject into the iconic object because the mockumentary (like the documentary) shows me exactly what it is in the way that it is. In the mockumentary, what deceives us is not hyperrealism, which belongs to representative arts like wax sculpture, but realism itself. This type of realism, characteristic of a presentational art form like the mockumentary, makes us perceive scenes and situations as extremely "natural", aided by the fact that the images themselves are real. Therefore, the deception of the mockumentary is not perceptual but rather an intellectual deception, supported and guided by a narrative involvement that locks perception within a conceptual framework.

To support the thesis that the mockumentary's deception lies in the fact that it does not seek to deceive us perceptually but offers us a story that, in principle, adheres as closely as possible to our reality, numerous diegetic elements can be cited that aim to reinforce the idea that we are still perceiving reality. In this case, I refer to the mockumentary *The Blair Witch Project*[39], which introduces narrative strategies that reinforce the viewer's belief. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) is a horror[40] mockumentary that follows the handheld camera footage of three young explorers who venture into a forest after hearing a local legend about the Blair Witch, only to encounter her for real. In this context, the

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[38] This additional constraint that is tightened with my reality may in fact turn out to be a double-edged sword: of the utmost importance at first to acclimatise me to the vision, harmless, if not penalising, at a later stage, if the historical, psychological contours of the characters are not adequately developed. In other words, during the enjoyment, my attention will be particularly focused on the scenes portraying characters I already know, because I already possess a whole series of preconceptions about them, which if not fully respected can immediately unmask the deception.

[39] An analysis of this mockumentary is offered in C. Formenti, *Il Mockumentary*, cit., pp. 127-138.

[40] It is no coincidence that many mockumentaries are in the horror genre. However, they are not limited to this category. One need only think of mockumentary comedy. Cf. R. Wallace, *Mockumentary Comedy. Performing Authenticity*, Palgrave McMillan, London 2018.

technique of *found footage*[41] is employed, where at the beginning of the film, it is openly stated[42] that this footage was found in the forest, and with this, the authors aim to convince the viewer that what they are about to see really happened, as it was even captured on camera by the young explorers. In this case, a subjective narrative is chosen, where the point of view adopted is that of the victims, whose sensations of terror are visually conveyed through shaky, poorly lit shots, accompanied by diegetic sound consisting of heavy breathing and agonized screams[43]. The first-person shooting technique conveys the idea of participation even on an emotional level, as in this case, the viewer is led to adopt the perspective of the protagonists through the subjective camera work. The first-person technique captures the dynamic interaction with the world directly, portraying the image of subjects capable of experiencing perceptual, practical, and emotional reality in an *authentic* and *uninterrupted* way[44]. In the context of first-person framing, the subject is constantly redefined through movement in space, shaping the image of a dynamic agent engaged in a continuous narrative negotiation of the self. This technique proves congenial for the mockumentary because it enhances the illusion of reality and direct involvement, making the narrative construction more believable and allowing the viewer to identify directly with the lived experience.

To make the idea of experiencing reality firsthand even more compelling through the use of first-person shots, some mockumentaries, in their most radical form, challenge the boundaries between image and referent by suspending the narrative framework through direct attacks on the camera. As Oliver Fahle has noted, physical attacks on the camera, the main expressive instance of documenting, are a phenomenon known in journalistic contexts as well, for instance, when journalists filming are assaulted. However, in these

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[41] For an analysis of the found footage technique see L. Boccia, L. Ricciardi, *Mockumentary & found footage. Nascita e sviluppo di un fenomeno cinematografico*, Weird Book, Roma, 2018. See C. Formenti, *Precarious Camera Gazes and Their Articulated Mode of Operation in Horror Mockumentaries*, in "Horror Studies", 11/1 (2020), pp. 9-23.

[42] In this case, the paratextual components contribute to constructing the narrative frame within which to place the story. For an analysis of the mockumentary that takes paratexts into account, one can refer to the work of Caroline Lano, who explored mockumentaries by considering contexts, institutional and paratextual devices as (discursively negotiated) elements that can serve as attestations of credibility (C. Lano, *Die Inszenierung des Verdachts – überlegungen zu den Funktionen von TV-mockumentaries*, Ibidem Press, Stuttgart 2011).

[43] C. Formenti, *Il Mockumentary*, cit., p. 131.

[44] This idea can be found in E. Eugeni, *First Person Shot. New Forms of Subjectivity between Cinema and Intermedia Networks*, "Anàlisi", 2012, pp. 19-31. By the same author see also *Il First person shot come forma simbolica. I dispositivi della soggettività nel panorama postcinematografico*, in "Reti, Saperi, Linguaggi", 2/2 (2013), pp. 19-23.

cases, the interruption only concerns the act of recording and does not call into question the fundamental principle of truth. In mockumentaries, on the other hand, such an attack aims to destabilize the very concept of representational truth, further reinforcing the ambiguity between reality and fiction[45] – a conceptual pair that proves too rigid to capture the multiplicity of artistic experiences that, by their own admission, operate in these border zones. The phenomenology of the image, from this perspective, not only provides useful tools for analyzing the mockumentary genre, overcoming the schematic opposition between reality and fiction but also allows us to describe the mockumentary's ability to engage perception in a coherent narrative. This narrative does not exhaust itself in parody and critique, as the mockumentary does not merely imitate the codes and aesthetics of the documentary; instead, it interrogates the broader premises underlying any knowledge that derives its power from the presence that images deliver to us[46]. By doing so – challenging the very project of truth that animates the documentary from within – the mockumentary paradoxically ends up providing the basis for developing a more precise and future definition of the documentary image itself[47].

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[45] O. Fahle, *Mockumentary – eine Theorie*, in F. Balke, O. Fahle, A. Urban (Hrsgg.), *Durchbrokene Ordnungen. Das Dokumentarische der Gegenwart*, Transcript, Bielefeld 2020, pp. 83-102. «*Mockumentaries jedoch greifen in ihrer radikalen Form jede Ordnung von Bild und Referent an, indem sie mit der Attacke auf die Kamera den Ordnungsrahmen selbst außer Kraft setzen. Der physische Angriff auf die zentrale Äußerungsinstanz des Dokumentierens ist zwar auch aus journalistischen Zusammenhängen bekannt, etwa wenn filmende Journalisten attackiert werden, aber damit wird nur der Aufnahmeakt unterbrochen oder beendet, nicht die grundlegende Frage nach der Wahrheit angegriffen*». (p. 93).
[46] Ivi, p. 99.
[47] Cfr. C. Formenti, *Il Mockumentary*, cit., p. 21.