

# Documentary Film Criticism Out of the Shadow

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In a 1948 essay called “Reality and Its Shadow,” Emmanuel Lévinas described the relationship between the artwork and its viewer with stunning richness and clarity. Though Lévinas was writing about art in general, his remarkable and troubling essay has a particularly appropriate application to cinema.

Art, according to Lévinas, carries the viewing subject out of the real world and into a state of passive and irresponsible “anonymity” in which the viewer enjoys an exotic, unreal world. Not only does the artwork suspend the viewer’s relationship to reality, but it makes the people it depicts appear double, showing them at the same time both as themselves and as their own likenesses. By its nature, art reveals the distance that internally divides every human being into self and caricature.

Lévinas’s argument can be applied to documentary films no less than to fiction films and works in other art forms. Documentary films, however artless in style, reveal people in the light of art, living a shadow-life which is not real life and which is still more than mere image, because the link between the photograph and the real person is a necessary and not a symbolic one. Within this half-world, actually living people become shadowy figures and lose the privileges of otherness that we bestow on the real people we encounter. And even though many documentaries address viewers as responsible subjects and citizens, the default position of the doc-

umentary viewer is the same as for every film, one of passive and uninvolved appreciation or boredom.

Lévinas’s argument in “Reality and Its Shadow” ends by taking a perhaps surprising turn. If art separates us from the world, criticism, for Lévinas, restores the world to us and us to the world. If the artwork is mute, standing before us in an unalterable and imperious form, criticism enables it to speak “in the language which makes us leave our dreams” (to quote another essay by Lévinas, “The Transcendence of Words”). If the artwork is complete, criticism exposes the fragmentary and self-contradictory condition of every work.

Much has been written about the responsibilities of the documentary filmmaker. Very little seems to have been written about the responsibilities of the critic of documentary films, which are complementary to those of the filmmaker. The critic must unfinish the work, argue for and against it, and explore the possibilities it offers for a dialogue with viewers. The critic should also analyze the roles of all three players in the film — viewer, filmmaker, and person depicted on-screen — and acknowledge that all three are endowed with a subjectivity that the conditions of both filmmaking and film spectatorship threaten to obscure or even annihilate. In so doing, criticism can restore all three of them to the common reality that the presence of the camera and the screen have broken.

## ■ Yamagata Film Critics’ Workshop

This project aims to encourage thinking, writing, and reading about film, using documentaries as an entry point, while offering immersion in the live atmosphere of an international film festival. Participants will receive guidance from professional film critics and write their own articles, which will be presented publicly.

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