OBSCENE INTIMACIES:
POSTMODERN PORTRAITURE IN
DOCUMENTARY FILM AND TELEVISION

by

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Abstract

The past several decades have witnessed a steadily increasing output of documentaries which aim to explore the intimate lives of individual subjects. Although there has been no official scholarly study delineating these films as a documentary sub-genre, they have been variously termed portrait or biographical documentaries, and they are a persistent feature of both documentary film production and non-fiction television programming. This project aims to situate these films and television programs within broader cultural shifts that have occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century, including an upsurge in the ubiquity of images, distrust in the photographic medium’s ability to access the real, and dismantling of taste hierarchies. All of these changes fit under the broad paradigm of postmodern theory and culture, a societal condition that continues to evidence itself in the current age. Despite postmodernism’s proclamation that social relationships and individualism have collapsed, contemporary portraiture documentaries still aim to facilitate a sense of connection between viewer and subject. Postmodernism intersects here with what Richard Sennett has called the “intimate society,” which is characterized by a societal impetus toward personal revelation and emotional expression.

I posit that portraiture documentaries represent the collision and working through of these two competing cultural features. Following an overview of the scholarship relevant to my research in Chapter One, Chapter Two will discuss two films by the documentary filmmaker Nick Broomfield, *Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam* (1995) and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003). Often maligned in both critical and scholarly circles for failing to interrogate ideology in any meaningful way, I argue that his work operates on a reflexive level to suggest that images fail us when attempting to extract the intimate truth of the individual. In Chapter
Three I discuss two examples of reality television series that focus on the lives of individuals, Errol Morris’s *First Person* (IFC, 2000-2001) and *Intervention* (A&E, 2005 - ), which demonstrate the persistent need to render the subject in visual terms and make the viewer witness to the most intimate and personal aspects of their lives.
Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Angela Walsh. An early version of Chapter Two was presented at the Film Studies Association of Canada’s annual conference in June of 2015.
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Introduction

“We have become so accustomed to our illusions that we mistake them for reality. We demand them. And we demand that there be always more of them, bigger and better and more vivid. They are the world of our making: the world of the image.”


Although Boorstin wrote the above quote in 1961, he could easily be referring to the year 2015. Now, perhaps more than any other time in history, we are offered a countless number of ways to produce and consume images, both moving and still. To demonstrate how this phenomenon works in the present, I offer two recent examples. In Pakistan, a New York based street photographer takes a portrait of a human rights activist who is fighting to end indentured servitude in her country and posts it on his immensely popular Instagram account. The photo is seen by over three million followers.¹ On the same site, a member of a famous Hollywood family and reality television star posts a photo of herself looking in a mirror, a type of picture termed a “mirror selfie.” The photo reaches the over 30 million followers she has on Instagram.² Although these two photographs register vastly different meanings, they both occupy the same amount of digital space, and maintain a similar degree of public visibility on social media sites. The discrepancy between these two images, the former conveying a sense of political and social import and the latter reflecting narcissistic frivolity, is sutured by websites through which an engagement with the world can be achieved by solely visual terms. These websites facilitate

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¹ I’m referring here to *Humans of New York*, the photo blog by Brandon Stanton. The blog began in 2010 as a collection of portraits and interviews with everyday New Yorkers who Stanton approached on the street. *Humans of New York* has become an international phenomenon, attracting millions of followers on social media and spawning imitations throughout the world.

² Here I refer to the Instagram page of Kylie Jenner, daughter of Caitlin and Kris Jenner and step sister of Kim, Kourtney and Khloe Kardashian. Jenner first gained public visibility with the reality show *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (E!, 2007-), and has used social media to amplify her celebrity status.
social communication through images, providing the means by which we understand one another. What cultural changes have occurred in the previous decades to bring us into a scenario where the image is conflated with the real, the referent and the subject imploding into a single visual object? Has this change come about as a sudden rupture, or can we find incremental evidence of the ensuing optical spectacle? And, perhaps most importantly, how does this bear on the way we understand and relate to each other as human subjects?

In this thesis, I propose that the aforementioned cultural changes, the gradual shift to a society where the production and consumption of images is used as a way to access the real, are reflected by trends that have been occurring in non-fiction film and television production over the past thirty years. Evidence of this shift can first be seen in the tabloid documentaries of the late eighties and nineties, films which are characterized by a high degree of self-reflexivity and attention to often sensational and populist material. Reality television is a genealogical descendant of the tabloid documentary, a form that further effaces the line between reality and representation and exhibits an even greater appeal to entertainment and exploitation. I argue that this shift is best understood as the outcome of a widespread postmodern cultural vicissitude, characterized by the need to frame every instance of public and private life in visual terms and a bombardment imagistic signs and optical stimulants. Additionally, postmodernism’s figuration of culture posits the dissolution of boundaries between true and false, representation and reality, sobriety and frivolity. The influence of postmodernism has made the documentary project increasingly suspect by drawing attention of the various representational influences that come to bear on non-fiction images.

Chapter One will include a description of my methodology and the theoretical underpinning of this thesis. My approach is influenced by three main scholarly streams: firstly,
studies in documentary film and reality television, secondly, postmodernism and thirdly, texts concerning the sociology of public life. Documentary film scholarship contains a vast number of texts, and thus I narrow my summary to focus on a few key thinkers such as Bill Nichols, Stella Bruzzi and Dai Vaughan. The indexical and shifting relationship that documentary films have to reality complicates notions of authentic revelation and troubles the notion that intimacy can be expressed through non-fiction filmmaking. Bill Nichols states that both fiction and documentary films are “burdened by excess” (*Representing* 141), information which cannot be directly incorporated into the film’s narrative. In documentary film, specifically, this excess is the persistence of history which “always stands outside the text” (*Representing* 142). In other words, documentary films cannot incorporate the totalizing effect of history on the societies and subjects that they represent. Thus documentary representation will, out of necessity, be particular. Indeed, an all-encompassing view of reality is impossible for any medium. Nichols argues that this holds true for biographical representations, because “Aspects of the person elude the frame within which he or she is placed” (*Representing* 145). While trends in documentary film production over the past thirty years attest to the growing impetus for public displays of one’s inner self, they also acknowledge the persistent excess inevitable in any filmic representation. They are at once a reflection of an increasingly intimate society and a denial of the ability of the filmed image to facilitate closeness between spectator and subject.

I will place these debates over the status of documentary within a postmodern context, one that is both scholarly and cultural, and which posed a challenge to the status of realist documentary in the latter decades of the twentieth century. As with documentary scholarship, there are a seemingly endless number of texts that fall under the category of postmodern. I will therefore be focusing on the two key thinkers who best inform my study, Boorstin and Jean
Baudrillard. Both of these scholars present startlingly prescient arguments in their work, accurately predicting the cultural and social changes that were to come with the increasing proliferation of images through technological means. Their discussions of how images function in contemporary society exerted a major impact on the corpus of postmodern scholarship. In *The Image*, first published in 1961, Boorstin argues that images have replaced our sense of reality, a shift he attributes to the public’s increased expectation of “novelty in the world” (13). Boorstin’s arguments were later advanced by Baudrillard, who also saw images as a central feature of contemporary society. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard argues that a system of images, processed through digital and televisual means, have replaced “industrial production and political economy as the organizing principle of society” (Kellner, 61). Baudrillard’s theories of simulacra, signs which replace their referent, and hyperreality, a scenario where simulacra proliferate to the point where they erase the underlying reality, though highly controversial, have commonly been used to explore the function of media and images in a postmodern context.

This emphasis on the visual iteration of the subject coincides with historical changes that have occurred over the past thirty years that have led to a more intimate, confessional society. In *The Fall of Public Man* (1974), Richard Sennett argues that the twentieth century demonstrated a move toward increasing personal closeness and emotive admission in everyday relations, resulting in a blurring of the split between public and private. He observed the increasing need for our everyday dealings to feel authentic, making what were once impersonal dealings personal, and a belief that “disclosure of oneself to others is a moral good in itself, no matter what the conditions which surround this disclosure” (222). Writing in the 1970s, Sennett cautioned that the privileging of intimacy would lead to a stalemate in public relations. The need to involve intimacy in every aspect of one’s life results in what Sennett terms “dead public
space” (12). Sennett’s claims seem particularly prescient nearly forty years on, given the near constant display of the intimate self through social media. In the intervening years between Sennett’s argument and the proliferation of social media, documentary filmmakers took up the mandate of the confessional society by seeking in-depth and intimate access to the lives of public figures. To varying degrees, these films represent the state of the intimate society and how this both facilitates and challenges authentic representation.

In Chapter 2, I take the portraiture documentaries of British filmmaker Nick Broomfield as my prime object of study, arguing that they reflect many of these postmodern cultural tendencies. Although Broomfield began his career making cinéma-vérité style documentaries such as *Soldier Girls* (1981) and *Chicken Ranch* (1983), he is most commonly associated with the self-reflexive mode of documentary filmmaking which proliferated in the 1990s. Broomfield has commonly been associated with a group of filmmakers who, like Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock, foreground the filmmaking process itself as a central component of the documentary narrative (Starowicz 44). The trajectory of Broomfield’s career followed a change in the nature of documentary production, marked by an increasing suspicion of visual documentation of reality and a loss of faith in the ability of filmmakers to give a faithful account of the real world. Broomfield’s shift toward a self-reflexive approach also coincided with a narrowing of his subject matter from larger groups to a focus on one or two particular individuals. Characterizing Broomfield’s films are his repeated attempts to gain access to the central subject(s) he is purporting to investigate. John Dovey argues that Broomfield’s techniques of reflexivity frame him as a “klutz, a failure who makes mistakes and denies any mastery of the communicative process” (27). Dovey criticizes Broomfield for failing to deliver a meaningful examination of his subjects. Similarly, Stella Bruzzi suggests that Broomfield’s films
“prove unsatisfying because any serious intent behind the films is lost altogether” (212). For Bruzzi and Dovey, Broomfield’s films are frivolous exercises that indulge the director’s own narcissistic agenda.

However, I argue that it is precisely because of Broomfield’s apparent “failures,” and his futile circling of the subject, that enable his films to provide an illuminating example of the problematics related to intimacy and access in documentary film. For the bulk of the film, Broomfield orbits around his subject without ever successfully transgressing the thresholds which bar them from the public eye. The interviews he conducts only allow the viewer to glean fragments of information, pieces which never quite cohere into a complete picture of the subject being explored. In Broomfield’s films, the subject itself is the “burden of excess,” existing just outside the grasp of the documentary narrative. This sentiment is echoed by Madam Alex, one of Broomfield’s subjects in Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam (1996), when she says: “You want to find out what you can reveal about Hollywood. Hollywood doesn’t want to be revealed.” Broomfield’s failure to secure a satisfying revelation indicates a broader failure to truly cross the thresholds that separate filmmaker and subject.

This failure to truly access the subject is coupled by Broomfield’s use of a fragmented piecemeal visual style, which recalls Frederic Jameson’s articulation of the schizophrenic aesthetic of postmodernism as a series of “isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence” (119). Both stylistically and structurally, his films convey a postmodern ethos, a highly reflexive approach to the medium that brings attention to its status as a media text, expressing a denial of the aim to truthful representation. Broomfield’s oeuvre can also be situated within an emergent “tabloid culture” which Kevin Glynn describes as a “hypertrophic mediatization” (46) whereby all images of a
particular subject “become part of a single simulacrum, within which it becomes virtually impossible to neatly disentangle the various levels of representation involved” (46). In order to demonstrate these tendencies in Broomfield’s work, and to help rehabilitate his status as a documentary auteur, I offer close readings of Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam and Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer (2003), two single subject portrait documentaries that demonstrate how the truth of the subject has disappeared behind visual simulacra.

In Chapter Three I discuss the way that this trend is evidenced on television, analysing two reality television series that focus on the intimate lives of individual subjects. Errol Morris’s First Person (IFC, 2000-2001), a documentary television series that profiles the lives of a number of unusual individuals, has been persistently overlooked in the deluge of scholarship on the documentary auteur. However, I find the series to be an instructive example not only of Morris’s overall directorial project, but of the single subject narratives that proliferated on television through the 2000s and 2010s. Morris films interviews using his trademark Interrotron device, necessitating that the subject stare directly into the camera. Presented in close-up, the face comes to act as a simulacra, an image that effaces the ‘real’ of the subjects in question. First Person reflects on the increasing need to translate communicative intimacy into visual terms. The idea of the visual as a way to access the intimate psychology of another individual is extended by the television series Intervention (A&E, 2005 - ). The series profiles individuals with severe and life-threatening addictions and behavioral disorders, ranging from substance dependency to bulimia and anorexia. Intervention attempts to channel the societal problem of addiction through a particular individual story, and makes the viewer witness to the trauma and suffering of the subject in question. As with First Person, the individual’s pain must be rendered in visual terms to allow the viewer to empathize with the narrative of their life and their ensuing
addiction.

The films and television series I discuss in this thesis are just a few examples of what I take to be broad ranging cultural trends, persistent evidence of which can be seen in the images we consume digitally, televisually and cinematically. Biographical and portrait documentaries still proliferate, many with a revelatory impulse which see documentary’s unique potential to expose that which would otherwise remain enigmatic and confounding. I posit that Broomfield’s films, *First Person* and *Intervention* anticipate and reflect an increasing preoccupation with gaining access to the intimate lives of public figures through visual means, a fascination which has reached a tipping point in the past decade. The most obvious contemporary manifestation of this preoccupation is celebrity and tabloid culture, with many media and internet entities devoted to sensationalising – and in some instances fabricating – the lives of famous individuals. However, this impetus is no longer solely the domain of the famous and renowned, but has seeped into the masses, becoming an almost unavoidable feature of contemporary life. What Baudrillard called the “implosion” of the social whereby we are unable to “separate reality from its statistical, simulative project” (*Selected Writings* 210) is a process that has been hastened via the internet, exemplified by habitually archiving visual evidence of one’s personal activity on social media sites like Facebook and Instagram, video blogs (vlogs) chronicling everyday life and the confessional outpourings of Tumblr posts.

Sennett’s claim that “Masses of people are concerned with their single-life histories and particular emotions as never before; this concern has proved to be a trap rather than a liberation” (5) is one that reads as eerily clairvoyant when considering the way in which social dealings are managed in the current day. Yet, the paradox of this contemporary desire for intimate revelations is that it is at once readily available, and yet entirely unobtainable. The greater degree of visual
exposure, the greater the potential of the truth to escape amidst an array of imploding simulacra. Baudrillard suggests that contemporary obscenity lies in over-exposure, in having everything revealed to us through visual means. What was once the obscenity of sexual desire has become the “promiscuity that reigns over the communication networks” (131) whereby “the entire universe comes to unfold arbitrarily on your domestic screen” (130). It is my contention here that the documentary films and reality television shows offer a chance to unpack these obscene intimacies that have so enmeshed themselves in our present.
Chapter 1: Documentary in a postmodern context

“We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning”


In the above quote, Baudrillard speaks of an accelerated society, a culture saturated with a constant barrage of mental stimuli generated by media industries. These images and words circulate untethered to reality and missing their meaningful core. Baudrillard’s theorizations have become central tenets of postmodern philosophy, speaking to the general sense of dislocation, fragmentation and instability characteristic of the movement. This increasing cynicism over the status of images bears heavily on those who still wish to see a meaningful connection between visual entities of both fictional and non-fictional origin. In this context, is a project that attempts to assess what images ‘say’ about the world rendered futile? In an accelerated media landscape, do images, particularly documentary images, fail to live up to their intended purpose?

Much of the scholarship related to visual culture, and documentary in particular, see it at an uneasy crossroads somewhere between Baudrillard’s nihilism and the meaningful potential of images. My methodology, which will be described in the following chapter, is a trifocal approach comprised of scholarship from several different research areas, intended to facilitate an understanding of how images position the individual human subject in portrait and biographical documentaries and reality television series. It is my aim here to lay the groundwork for my project by drawing theoretical links among and between these three seemingly disparate areas of study: documentary, postmodernism and the sociology of public and private life. Given the shifting and porous nature of these concepts, any study which attempts to wrestle with them is, by necessity, incomplete. Therefore, I will be focusing on the scholarship most relevant to the central concerns of my project.
1.1 Dealing with documentary

The sheer breadth of documentary scholarship makes it impossible to offer a comprehensive summary of all that has been written on the form. I will be narrowing my focus to look at the thinker who provide a particularly rich theoretical basis from which to approach non-fiction film. There are several questions which have persistently been at the heart of the scholarly debates on the status of documentary. Many of these are concerned with the fundamental project of documentary, which endeavors to represent the real. However, the paradox of this aim is that, because of the inherently subjective nature of filmmaking, the goal of truthful representation is impossibly utopian. The question then becomes, what do we do with the knowledge we receive from documentary? How do we deal with the images it provides us of the world?

Perhaps the most regularly cited analysis of documentary is Bill Nichols’ *Representing Reality* (1991). Nichols’ four modes of documentary filmmaking – which he later expanded on in *Blurred Boundaries* (1994) – are frequently referenced as a method of studying the historical and rhetorical changes throughout the history of documentary filmmaking. However, of more interest to me here is how Nichols attempts to legitimate the documentary as a form distinct from fiction, and the reasons he gives for why the form warrants attention and examination. Nichols argues that, similar to fiction film, documentary film is the product of ideology and discursive formations. He sees it as documentary’s role to both “describe and interpret the world” and to participate in the “construction of social reality” (10), and stresses the social and ideological constructions that come in to play deserve as much consideration for documentary film as they do for fiction film.

In *Representing Reality*, Nichols states that both fiction and documentary films are “burdened by excess” (141), excess in this case meaning information which cannot be directly
incorporated into the film’s narrative. In documentary film, specifically, this excess is the persistence of history which “always stands outside the text” (142). In other words, documentary films cannot provide an absolute and perfect rendering of the worlds they claim to represent. Historical circumstances will always bear on the production and interpretation of documentary films, but a film’s attempt to document that history will, out of necessity, be particular. This also applies to journalistic photography, because “Every photograph bears witness to an excess that eludes it: that of time itself as the necessary precondition for history and historical understanding” (143). Indeed, an all-encompassing view of reality is impossible for any medium. Nichols argues that this holds as true for biographical representations because “Aspects of the person elude the frame within which he or she is placed” (145). He suggests that the documentary’s denial or “hemorrhaging” of this excess falsely simplifies complex issues. Thus the best way, it seems, to deal with this excess is to acknowledge it, to acknowledge that it is an “impossibility” to achieve “perfect congruence between text and history” (143). Representation never entirely explains the existence of an event, place or person, and to deny this is to deny the true complexity and ambiguity of lived experience.

The foregrounding of subjectivity is seen to be at odds with the impetus of documentary film to represent the world “as it is.” The overt use of filmic techniques to affect a sense of subjective experience can, in Nichols’ words, “jeopardize its [the film’s] credibility” (30). How, then, do we account for the inherently subjective nature of a filmed instance? Nichols develops the neologism “axiographics” in order to account for how the filmmakers’ own beliefs are seen in the documentary narrative. The “axiographic space” of documentary is the “presence (and absence) of the filmmaker in the image, in off-screen space, in the acoustic folds of voice-on and voice-off, in titles and graphics constitutes an ethics, and a politics, of considerable importance
to the viewer” (77). In other words, what the viewer perceives in the documentary film are the remnants of filmic construction. Nichols relates the idea of axiographics to questions of ethical representation, specifically to the representation of death in nonfiction narratives. He describes a number of different “gazes” that the camera can adopt in relation to its subject: the accidental gaze, the helpless gaze, the endangered gaze and the clinical or professional gaze. The type of gaze that the filmmaker takes in relation to his or her subject bears on the ethical representation of the subject. Just as Mulvey’s male gaze reflects the unconscious patriarchal structuring of cinema, so too do the axiographics reveal the particular ideologies of the filmmaker.

Nichols also deals with questions of directorial subjectivity through his much cited four “modes” of documentary production, which have now become a standard model for approaching the different rhetorical strategies in non-fiction film. Following the same sort of evolutionary approach to documentary that other scholars have applied to film genres more broadly, Nichols bases the modes on the various historical changes in documentary over the course of the twentieth century. These modes chart the increasing self-consciousness and visible intervention of the filmmaker in the frame. In the first two modes, expository and observational, the filmmaker remains largely invisible, their presence hidden in the service of providing unmediated truth. In the interactive mode, the filmmaker is more visible as the narrative is structured on a series of interactions between the subject and the filmmaker. In the final mode, reflexive, the filmmaker’s presence is both observed and commented on. There is a greater awareness overall of the role of the filmmaker in the film and how his or her subjectivities work to structure the narrative. Reflexive documentaries question the ethical problems with representation, and interrogates the best avenue for the authentic filmed conveyance of the subject, be it person, place or event. The reflexive mode destabilizes a straightforward
representation of historical events and questions the “problematics of representation” by featuring contradictory perspectives.

With its emphasis on authorial subjectivity and resistance to straightforward truth claims, the reflexive mode of documentary can be viewed in the broader context of postmodern influences on culture. By “postmodern influences” I refer to both the tendency to view film and, to a greater extent, television as a product of the oversaturation of mediated images and the filmmaker’s increasing recognition of scepticism in line with postmodern thought. The influence of postmodern scepticism on documentary cinema, and televised media more broadly, factors in more evidently in Blurred Boundaries, Nichols’ subsequent book on non-fiction media.

Broadening his focus beyond documentary film to include news media and reality television, Nichols discusses the increasing blurring of the line between reality and fiction, the image and its “referent.” The societal attitude toward knowledge and truth, as demonstrated by television, media news and documentary films amounts to what Nichols calls a “shift of epistemological proportions” characterized by “incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds and their subjective constructions” (1).

What began as a project to legitimize and characterize documentary as a form in Representing Reality, is continued in Blurred Boundaries with a greater emphasis on the subjective displacements of documentary knowledge. Nichols considers a range of topics from the legal impact of the footage showing the beating of Rodney King, and how these images were framed in the ensuing trial which resulted in a “not-guilty” verdict, to how reality television shows such as Cops and America’s Most Wanted have “eviscerated an already suspect documentary tradition”(45). He offers an addition to his four modes of documentary filmmaking with the inclusion of the “performative mode”. Exemplified by films such as Marlon Riggs’s
Tongues Untied (1989) and Our Marilyn (Brenda Longfellow, 1988), these films edge documentary ever closer to the realm of fiction by “[putting] the referential aspect of the message in brackets, under suspension” (96-97) and by emphasizing the “expressive, stylized, subjective, and evocative” (98). The performative mode further extends the reflexive mode’s reference to subjectivity by placing emphasis on the localized and specific perspective of the subject and utilizing the creative aspects of filmmaking.

Despite these various challenges to the particular nature of documentary, Nichols remains positive about its importance as a historical record. However, he suggests that this capturing of reality needs to come with provisional questions about the ideological basis and indexical legitimacy of the form, particularly as it becomes conflated with reality television. In fact, Nichols sees trends like the performative documentary as less a challenge to the form’s legitimacy than as “innovations” which advance the form. As he says in the concluding chapter of Blurred Boundaries: “Realism alone will not suffice. A border zone beyond the territory of classic realism requires exploration. The moment when realism spoke with the clarion voice of truth is “no longer our own”” (119). He stresses the need for continual re-working and re-imagining of what it means to represent history and the lived world authentically.

Although it has been perhaps the most widely referenced for both scholarly and instructional purposes, Nichols’ scholarly model has not been wholly accepted by other writers on documentary. Perhaps the most notable of these voices is Stella Bruzzi, who in New Documentary, criticizes Nichols and other documentary theorists (Renov, Winston) for holding documentary to the impossible standard of having to entirely extricate itself from fiction. Too often, Bruzzi suggests, have fiction and non-fiction forms been seen as opposite ends of a polarity. For Nichols and others, the challenge of legitimation for documentary is in providing a
crystalized image of the real. This has led to an inherent suspicion of documentary forms for failing to live up to the impossible ideal of the real. Bruzzi counters this by asserting that “documentary will never be reality nor will it erase or invalidate that reality by being representational” (6).

As a corrective to these polarizing models, she develops her own performance based approach to documentary that, distinct from Nichols’ performative mode, follows the work of Judith Butler and sees documentary as a “dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential” (6). In other words, the subjective dimensions inherent in representation do not render the entire project of documentary a futile one. In following Butler, Bruzzi suggests that documentaries, particularly self-conscious and reflexive documentaries, “both describe and perform the act of filmmaking” (186). Films which bring attention to the construction and manipulation of the filmmaking process reveal that “film itself is necessarily performative because it is given meaning by the interaction between performance and reality” (186). In doing so, films by Nick Broomfield, Errol Morris and other contemporary documentary filmmakers, point to the impossibility of a truly authentic depiction of reality.

Bruzzi concurs with Dai Vaughan’s audience-based approach to the documentary text, as a “mode of response” (58). She quotes his dictum that “What makes a film “documentary” is how we look at it” (84; quoted in Bruzzi, 7). Vaughan aligns documentary with poetry as a form which requires engagement, both within what is seen in the final product and our knowledge of pro-filmic elements at play. He suggests that the viewer reads documentary “language” in order to differentiate between the fictional and factual elements of each filmic text. However, one finds similar suggestions for response-based approaches to documentary in Nichol’s work. He suggests that how ‘real’ a documentary text feels is “a guarantee born of our own complicity
with the text” (*Representing* 151) and that our belief in the authenticity of the documentary image is one which we “tender more to faith than reason” (*Representing* 153).

Additionally, in reading Bruzzi alongside Nichols, I find that there are a number of theoretical consistencies at play in both of their arguments on the status of documentary. Bruzzi does not fully account for Nichols’ emphasis on documentary’s shifting dialectic relationship to the real, and our responsibility as viewers to continually interrogate the status of the documentary image. Early in *Representing Reality*, for example, Nichols offers three ways to define documentary: from the perspectives of the audience, the text and the filmmaker. These three components are in constant negotiation over the documentary’s claim to the real, and they all contribute to the definition of documentary as a mode of filmic practice. Despite the prescriptive nature of Nichols’ documentary family tree, he suggests throughout both *Representing Reality* and *Blurred Boundaries* that documentary texts need to continually be re-examined and productively questioned, as an “active and continuous struggle” to make meaning of history and the lived world (147).

The documentary image, then, is one that is never stable. Why study documentary in the first place? Why, then, do we use documentaries as evidentiary texts? Perhaps the documentary project then becomes how it confronts us with the ability of images to deceive us. This is an argument put forward in Errol Morris’s *Believing is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography* (2011), in which the documentary filmmaker deconstructs a number of iconic images – such as Roger Fenton’s photos of the Crimean War or the images leaked from the Abu Ghraib detention centre showing the apparent torture of war prisoners – and investigates their relative authenticity and the potential manipulations and stagings involved in the creation of these images. He discovers throughout that the documentary image, and the truth it claims to
provide, is never stable but in continual negotiation with the spectator’s discerning eye. However, Morris’s interrogation of these images, particularly when placed in the context of his films, points to the persistent curiosity on the part of the audience. This is a curiosity that we expect documentaries, whether authentically or not, to satiate. Hence, documentary images and films are ones which both provoke a desire for knowledge and reveal the ability of images to deceive us. The tension between a needing to know and the impossibility of the achievement of pure knowledge is where documentary aligns itself with postmodern discourse popularized in academic circles in the latter half of the twentieth-century. We can place this de-stabilization of documentary narratives in the broader context of postmodern trends in contemporary cultures.

1.2 Postmodernism in a cultural and historical context

The reflexive turn to documentary can be situated within the broader postmodern discourse that began to take shape during the mid to latter half of the twentieth century. If, as John Dovey says, “Modernist debates about documentary moving image media which have centred on the form’s indexical relationship to the real now need to be displaced by a clear-eyed consideration of the position that they occupy within a postmodern cultural ecology” (7) then it is instructive to consider how documentary images engage with broader postmodern concerns. Indeed, postmodernism has been one of the more influential and ubiquitous schools of thought to emerge in the latter half of the twentieth-century, and this influence is evident not only in academia, but in visual art, television and music. It helped to transform our perception of culture, at both a local and global level, and this has in turn been reflected in documentary films and images. Postmodernism does not conceive of the world as a whole, but as disparate and constantly shifting fragments. If epistemological concerns are no longer central to discussion of documentary – that is, if we now accept that documentary cannot give an objective articulation
of reality – then we must question what purpose documentary serves in a postmodern culture. This summary will, hopefully, help to frame the cultural conditions which generated and influenced the contemporary portrait documentary.

As with documentary scholarship, the term postmodernism incorporates an enormous number of texts and thinkers. The intentionally ambiguous and elusive definition of postmodernism – or what Fredric Jameson calls its “constitutive impurity” (xii) – makes its exact origins difficult to trace. As Christopher Butler says, the thinkers associated with postmodern thought are “certain of its uncertainty” (2). Many of the philosophers associated with postmodernism and its sister school of thought, post-structuralism – including, but not limited to, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes and Jean-Francois Lyotard, descended from a French philosophical tradition and wrote their most distinctly postmodern works in the latter half of the twentieth century. They were also inspired by a “broadly Marxist paradigm” (7) which opposed the values born out of industrial capitalism and bourgeois conceptions of the world. Stuart Hall points to five preceding schools of thought which had an impact on postmodernist thought: Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, structural linguistics, Foucauldian theories of disciplinary power and feminism. These schools of thought, argues Hall, had a “deeply unsettling effect,” particularly on notions of identity and the Cartesian unified subject.

The elusiveness of the definition of post-modernism goes along with a difficulty in determining its historical emergence. This genealogy includes how the postmodern era is extracted from the modern era, and how each school of thought is defined in distinct terms. Some measure of agreement exists that postmodernism succeeded modernism, rejecting modernism’s beliefs in, among other things, stabilizing narratives, originality, artistic and authorial vision and the ability of art to effectively represent the world. However, maintained within this discussion
are varying accounts as to the precise date of postmodernism’s emergence, and whether or not it marks the end of modernism or a simultaneously occurring movement. For Butler, postmodern theory emerged in the late 1960’s and early 70’s, in response to trends of disunity and intentional opacity in visual art. Similarly, David Harvey dates the postmodern age to the beginning of the 1970s. However, the text that many attribute to a pioneering definition of postmodernism, Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, which famously associated the movement with the destabilization of grand historical narratives, was not first written until 1979. Furthermore, evidence of postmodern culture did not begin to appear in film until the 1980s and 1990s with David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* (1986) and Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Any precise definition of postmodernism is complicated by the various applications of the term “modern,” which both refers to a system of thought associated with Enlightenment philosophers and the modernist art period associated with abstraction, minimalism and the avant-garde. In order to deal with these semantic and temporal concerns, some writers, including Butler and John Hill, attempt to distinguish among philosophical, political, cultural and artistic strains of postmodern theory. Broadly speaking, evidence of a postmodern culture predates the appearance of postmodern thought (and the corpus of postmodern texts to which most writers refer) by a couple of decades.

For a number of scholars, the ascent of postmodernism coincided with the increasing proliferation of new media technologies and communications. Hill identifies two ways in which the increase of media technologies marks a shift away from the modern era: firstly, the acceleration of information reception contributed to the “compression of time and space” influencing the forces of globalization; and secondly, the conflation of media images and reality

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3 *Pulp Fiction* and *Blue Velvet* are regularly referred to as exemplary postmodern films, containing elements of pastiche, empty nostalgic citation and fragmentary, non-linear narratives.
Hill notes that television, with its inherently fragmentary and dislocating structure, and not film, is often cited as the postmodern technology *par excellence*. This interest in the way media communications construct our reality, and thus serve to conceal the capitalist mode of production at work, is most evident in the work of Jean Baudrillard and Daniel J. Boorstin. Both of these writers were influenced by the work of Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, who is widely associated with a new critical attention to the way media communication technologies shape and alter our lives. I now turn to the works of Boorstin and Baudrillard, focusing on how they typified the role of images in postmodern culture. Specifically Boorstin, and later Baudrillard, pioneered notions of the pseudo-event and hyppereality, which can reductively be described as instances where images eclipse reality. I introduce these notions here in order to further align postmodern discourse with documentary scholarship, including a number of key contemporary sources on documentary.

### 1.3 The world of the image

Boorstin is a historian most commonly associated with the politically conservative Consensus School of history which downplayed class struggle as a central fixture of American life.\(^4\) This association would appear to make him diametrically opposed to the strong idea of a Marxist influence on postmodernism, and the belief that consumer capitalism is a fundamental fixture of postmodern culture. However, while Boorstin’s politically angled writing in the latter half of his career does not typify postmodern thought, his characterization of pseudo-events and the impact of media technologies in *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*,

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\(^4\) For a more in-depth description of the Consensus school of history see Levine – *Bad Old Days: Myth of the 1950s* (81-82). As Levine describes, the consensus school “minimized not only the present but past social conflicts in American history, arguing that there had been very little class conflict and that any struggle of ideas had taken place within an acceptance of bourgeois standards and liberal political ideas” (82).
influenced a number of subsequent postmodern works. Writing in the early part of the 1960s, Boorstin’s opinions on celebrity culture, news media and travel are remarkably prescient in retrospect. The crux of his argument is that our “extravagant expectations” of “what the world holds” and “Of our power to shape the world” have led to an increase in the staging of artificial events for the purposes of reportage and publication. He argues that, whereas previously the intent of news institutions was to deliver information about the world, a shift occurred whereby news is valued primarily for its ability to entertain. Due to this shift, factual reportage is replaced by illusions, reality replaced by images. For Boorstin, we live in “the world of our making: the world of the image” (6).

This expectation to be entertained, to find “novelty in the world” (7) – a need engendered by media institutions – motivated the advent of what Boorstin terms “pseudo-events.” Pseudo-events are events that are conceptualized and staged precisely for the purpose of being reported on. They serve no primary purpose other than to attract publicity and media attention. In order to illustrate a pseudo-event, Boorstin uses an example from Edward Bernay’s Crystalizing Public Opinion (1923) in which the owners of a hotel staged a party for the purposes of attracting publicity to their hotel. An interview, a conversation staged in order to be reported on – is another example of a pseudo-event. Boorstin argues that while pseudo-events are endemic to American history and culture, he cites what he terms the Graphic Revolution – “Man’s ability to make, preserve, transmit, and disseminate precise images” (13) - as the major historical occurrence inciting a proliferation of pseudo-events into the 20th century. The ‘Graphic Revolution’ accelerated the rate at which information was circulated, leading to the compression of time and space indicative of postmodern culture.

Boorstin’s caveat is that pseudo-events are not complete fictions, nor are they
propaganda. They are manufactured events, but ones that do actually occur. However, there is a disconnect between the events themselves and the way these events are characterized by the media. Pseudo-events are carefully planned and constructed occurrences made to appear spontaneous and thus the pseudo-event’s “relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous” (11). This is also how pseudo-events are distinct from propaganda, the former being an “ambiguous truth” and the latter an “appealing falsehood” (35). Propaganda has us put faith in another individual’s beliefs, whereas pseudo-events are the production of “synthetic facts.” In other words, while pseudo-events are real occurrences their motivation is manufactured. Journalists are not creating complete falsehoods, but creating the circumstances which set an event in motion. News organizations no longer discover the thing to be reported on, they create it.

Boorstin applies a similar logic to celebrities or what he terms “human pseudo-events”, otherwise known as celebrities. Here he distinguishes between the heroes, or great men, of the past and contemporary celebrities. Just as media institutions manufacture events to be reported on, so, too, do they fashion individuals in the image of celebrities. The Graphic Revolution enabled the news media, print publications and spectators to “fabricate fame” (48). As Boorstin states repeatedly, “The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness” (57). Whereas heroes were individuals known for their exceptional achievements and inherent ‘greatness’ whose legendary status only increases with the passage of time, celebrities are those famous individuals who fleetingly occupy the spotlight by the virtue of their eccentric personalities. Celebrities are created by the publicity machine – gossip magazines, newspapers and television – to occupy the spotlight for a brief period of time before they are replaced by another manufactured celebrity. Each succeeding celebrity is molded to fit the contemporary
cultural landscape, and “because they are made to order, can be made to please, comfort, fascinate, and flatter us” (74). Just as pseudo-events fulfill our ‘exaggerated expectations’ of the amount of novelty in the world, the celebrities are “fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness” (58).

While not explicitly referred to as a postmodern text, Boorstin precipitated many of the ideas that were to typify postmodern thought. Throughout The Image, Boorstin demonstrates a decidedly negative outlook toward the media landscape of the early 1960s. Phenomena like the pseudo-event and the manufactured celebrity have contributed to a loss of depth. For Boorstin, we are no longer motivated to seek the real truth, the factual basis of reality, or to adulate the great accomplishments of noble individuals. Instead, we are spurred by an insatiable appetite for entertainment and ‘novelty’ through superficiality. What results is a culture of emptiness, a culture deprived of its foundational core that is lulled into complacency by a series of manufactured events and images. In a culture of pseudo-events – in the ‘world of the image’ – visual entities have no stable referent. The images which surround us represent a world that is continually shifting and apt to be displaced at any moment. Boorstin’s theories begin to signal a shift away from modernism’s faith that art could represent reality, to an increasing suspicion of images and the world they represent. What the Graphic Revolution facilitated was the ability of images and information to bombard us to the point where they become indistinguishable from reality. Boorstin’s theorizations on the way that technology and media communications affect culture and human consciousness were later echoed by Lyotard and Derrida. However, the most evident impact of The Image is on the work of Jean Baudrillard who would later characterize this state of affairs as a ‘hyperreality.’

Baudrillard has become somewhat of a cult academic, with many writers being
particularly attracted to the concepts of simulation and hyperreality. However, as is often the case with neologisms that become part of the academic nomenclature, the term has been regularly misused. Baudrillard first introduced the term hyperreal in Simulations and Simulacrum, which was first published in 1981. It describes the overtaking of reality by illusory images, to the point where the replication is indistinguishable from the real thing. It extends Boorstin’s concept of the pseudo-event to the point where the events are no longer ‘pseudo’, but events in and of themselves. A Baudrillard says, it is the transition from “signs that dissimulate something” to “signs that dissimulate that there is nothing” (6). The postmodern project, for Baudrillard, “is the immense process of the destruction of meaning” (161) offering immensely nihilistic prospects.

To illustrate the concept of hyperreality, Baudrillard employs a number of seemingly disparate examples including Disneyland and Watergate. Most instructive for my purposes here is his brief discussion of Apocalypse Now (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). Baudrillard argues that the film is an example of the hyperreal because the circumstances of the film’s production, in an attempt to re-create the war in Vietnam as accurately as possible, had a similar environmental, financial and technological impact as the actual war. As a result, the war-as-spectacle and the Vietnam War itself are indistinguishable – “the war became film, the film becomes war, the two are joined by their common hemorrhage into technology” (59). Furthermore, because the production of the film was a controlled circumstance, Coppola was able to create an image of war that is, in fact, superior to the real thing. Apocalypse Now is a vision of the war as a “psychotropic dream” (59), an epic spectacle of the technological strength and capabilities of America. With the production of Apocalypse Now Coppola demonstrated a “Cinematographic power equal and superior to that of the industrial and military complexes, equal or superior to
that of the Pentagon and of governments” (60). Both the film and the war are examples of the hyperreal because they both operated as assertions of the technological and military prowess.

Baudrillard also takes a brief sojourn into documentary with his discussion of *An American Family*, a 1971 US documentary which is widely considered to be the first precursor to reality television. The documentary was filmed in the tradition of cinéma-vérité, the camera acting as a fly-on-the-wall while chronicling the day-to-day life of the Louds, a suburban upper-middle class family from Santa Barbara. Richard Lane suggests that the film raises “issues of surveillance, media pressure and the notion of the observer affecting the observed” (97). Here, Baudrillard contends that the documentary, because of its non-intrusive style, negated the “distance between spectacle and spectator” (Lane 98). The documentary is another example of hyperreality because it collapses the difference between the real and the false, observer and observed. The image of the Louds becomes indistinguishable from our own reality. As Lane says, this example figures the hyperreal as an “extreme close-up and an extreme long-distance photograph at the same time. That is to say there is no longer a third, normative position of realistic perspective. The notion of total involvement or immersion combined with alienating detachment is also perceived, according to Baudrillard, in such television subgenres as pornography” (98). *An American Family* illustrates that the space between what the viewer witnesses on the screen and the actuality being recorded has collapsed. It exemplifies a complete enmeshment with the images the viewer consumes.

Throughout his work, but in *Simulations and Simulacra* in particular, Baudrillard paints a dour picture of our contemporary cultural condition, one where every utterance and image has lost its meaning. Information circulates in the media without any signification, leading to “total entropy” (81). A hyperreal world is one in which “truth has not been destroyed. It has been
made irrelevant” (151). For all of the support his work has attracted, there are a small but vocal number who view his theories as unnecessarily nihilistic. Baudrillard has, rightly I think, been accused of catastrophizing in his writing and making hyperbolic claims in place of carefully considered analysis. These criticisms are summed up nicely by Mark Poster in his introduction to an anthology of Baudrillard’s most important texts:

He fails to define his major terms, such as the code; his writing style is hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking sustained, systematic analysis when it is appropriate; he totalizes his insights, refusing to qualify or delimit his claims. He writes about particular experiences, television images, as if nothing else in society mattered, extrapolating a bleak view of the world form that limited base. (7)

Poster echoes many of the same criticisms and expressions of frustrations that have emerged since Baudrillard ascended to the ranks of star intellectual.

Nichols, for one, refuses to join Baudrillard in his “nihilistic sandbox” (Representing 7), perhaps unsurprising considering that much of Baudrillard’s work renders the entire project of documentary – and documentary scholarship – negligible. He opposes Baudrillard’s “condemnation of simulations and simulacra” and the suggestion that they are “immoral” (6). Nichols maintains that documentary representations have social, political and historical significance, and that “the difference between an image and what it refers to continues to be a difference that makes a difference” (7). Nichols’ contention can be situated within broader refutations of postmodernism’s denial of the physical reality of the world, that occurrences do have a material manifestation. Butler articulates the flaw with postmodern discourse when he says that to accept Baudrillard’s notion of the hyperreal is to say that that we “ate, drank, and slept on and with mere signifiers” (114). Baudrillard can be rightly criticized for failing to
engage with the very real ideological concerns experienced by marginalized groups, ones which can’t easily be attributed to the play of simulacrum.⁵ Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner have noted that “To many his analysis is literally out of this world. It is closer to the conventions of sci-fi than those of sociology” (xi).

However, Rojek and Turner also defend Baudrillard’s persistent appeal, positing that “perhaps more than any other contemporary writer he confronts the exhaustion of many of the guiding assumptions and beliefs that held critical thought together in the post-war period” (xvi). Despite these criticisms and considering the vast influence and visibility of his work, Baudrillard’s theories must be contended with, particularly when considering how images function in postmodern society. In his article “The Ecstasy of Communication” Baudrillard describes a hyperreal world in which media hasten the dissolution of the public and private divide whereby “this opposition is effaced in a sort of obscenity where the most intimate processes of our life become the virtual feeding ground of the media” (“Ecstasy” 56; emphasis in orig). To the extent that the oversaturation of images has caused the line between public and private to dissolve, postmodern theory has predicted the rise of reality television and an increasing trend in documentary to explore the most personal aspects of a subject’s life.

However, this impetus to uncover the personal lives of individuals in an attempt to find out their authentic selves is in constant conflict with the Baudrillardian notion that authenticity is just another simulation. What results in this collision between postmodern scepticism – and in some cases paranoia – over the status of the image and the striving for intimacy in documentary is a

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⁵ Baudrillard has drawn a heavy degree of criticism from feminist scholars for his attack on the feminist movement in Seduction (1990). Here he argues that the feminist movement mistakenly sees participation in the workforce as the key to female liberation, a process that results in an abandonment of the seductive powers which would allow her “mastery of the symbolic universe” (8). For a more in-depth analysis on Baudrillard’s theories of the feminine see Sadie Plant’s “Baudrillard’s Woman: The Eve of seduction” in Forget Baudrillard and Victoria Grace’s attempt to rehabilitate the feminist perspective of Baudrillard in Baudrillard’s Challenge: A feminist reading (2000).
picture of a fragmented and constantly shifting subject. It is central to my argument that we see this collision most clearly in portrait and biographical documentaries, which play out the tension between a want to know and the impossibility of that aim.

1.4 The postmodern subject in the intimate society

In order to bridge a connection between postmodern theory and the impetus toward intimate revelation in documentary, I will now attempt to position the postmodern subject in the context of another important historical development which occurred during the latter half of the twentieth century – the rise of the intimate society. In *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett launches a polemic against what he views as the increasing infringement of the intimate, private sphere into public life. For Sennett, it is not just that the borders between private and public have been blurred, but that the private has overtaken the public to the point where “the world outside, the impersonal world seems to fail us, seems to be stale and empty” (5). The intimate society places a greater cultural currency on the disclosure of the self than on communicative discretion. For Sennett, this creates a culture of personality whereby: “Masses of people are concerned with their single-life histories and particular emotions as never before; this concern has proved to be a trap rather than a liberation” (5). This expectation of intimacy is a trap because it has made society more narcissistic, more inwardly driven. Citizens of the intimate society only care to involve themselves in affairs which allow them to express their feelings. This has the greatest impact on personal relations, which are only pursued on the basis that we can relate to one another. This also leads to the homogenization of social groups, when we can only engage with someone on the basis that they reflect our own deepest selves.

While Sennett seems to be disparaging a cultural scenario which sounds quite similar to a neoliberal preoccupation with the individual, he puts more emphasis on the way in which social
interactions, both in the political and cultural realms, are structured less around action than feeling. For Sennett, this encroaching intimacy has a negative, and borderline disastrous effect on the nature of public life. He compares the 20th century valuation of intimacy to the relative reserve with which public affairs were conducted in previous historical periods, namely cosmopolitan centres of the 18th century. Having a certain amount of distance from other social actors in public life enables productive dealings which allow for the separation of actor and action. This is reversed in an intimate society where the “disclosure of oneself to others is a moral good in itself, no matter what the conditions which surround this disclosure” (222).

Sennett posits that in contemporary society, or what was contemporary circa 1973, authenticity is equated with moral goodness. Furthermore, when intimate relations are favoured over productive action, it leads to the abandonment of public life. Impersonal relations are avoided in favor of more authentic close relations. The privileging of intimacy manifests as a cult of personality, whereby the personal qualities or charisma of a public figure supersede their qualifications or abilities. Sennett terms this a culture of ‘gemeinschaft’, and its implications can be seen in political and artistic realms.

Similar to Baudrillard and Boorstin, Sennett sees electronic technology as exacerbating cultural phenomena. He says that “Electronic communication is one means by which the very idea of public life has been put to an end” (282); media facilitates virtual communication from

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6 Sennett does refer to a “politics of personality” (237) that favors the charismatic and effusive leaders and a “belief in the artist as an extraordinary, electrifying personality” (289). However, instead of seeing these as a consequence of a culture of individualism, Sennett argues that it is a result of the changing organization of public life, whereby social actors create a “new kind of sociability, based on the sharing of their feelings” (296).

7 For a specific example of the way a culture of gemeinschaft affects public relations, see “Community Becomes Uncivilized” in The Fall of Public Man. Here Sennett argues that the privileging of intimacy has led to a resistance of difference, resulting in the increasing ghettoization of American communities along ethnic and racial lines. In particular he points to the Forest Hills, Queens’ housing dispute of the mid-1960s which saw the community’s predominately Jewish citizenry lobby against the building of low-income housing project which was primarily intended to serve black families.
the intimate sphere making public interactions which take place in physical reality less desirable and less necessary. However, the proliferation of media technologies are not solely responsible for this vacancy in public life, for they simple exaggerate processes and satiate deep-seated “cultural impulses that formed over the whole of the last century and a half to withdraw from social interaction in order to know and feel more as a person”(282- 283). Television and radio (the kind of media technologies that proliferated at the time Sennett was writing) are, by nature, a one-way communication; they communicate to us but we cannot respond. The increasing use of “passive” technologies “intensify the idea of a disembodied spectator, a passive witness” (283). calls Although we are privy to more information, and are allowed access to a greater number of images, our face-to-face interaction decreases as a result. An additional consequence of this is that, because television facilitates intimacy in the absence of real world interaction, focus exists on the personality of those communicating in order to facilitate an intimate connection with the spectator. In the intimate society, our response is triggered by those to whom we feel a personal connection, thereby shifting the focus from what is said to the individual saying it.

Sennett’s argument is that the increased need for intimate connection in all of our daily dealings has resulted in a growing vacancy in public life. For individual subjects in this society, and for public figures in particular, there is an increased pressure to develop a distinct and charismatic persona as the basis for forging a connection with others. The pressure to develop the charismatic aspects of one’s persona persists regardless of whether or not these traits are innately possessed. How do Sennett’s arguments about the role of the subject relate to conceptions of the postmodern subject? Stuart Hall has provided perhaps the clearest articulation of the postmodern

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8 A similar description is invoked by Baudrillard when he says, “Now the whole present architecture of the media is founded on this last definition: they are what finally forbids response, what renders impossible any process of exchange” (Selected Writings 208). The ability of the media to speak without response, Baudrillard argues, enables it to enact a system of social control.
subject in “The Question of Cultural Identity” (1992). Here, he charts the major historical shifts that changed the way the individual subject is perceived. During the period of the Enlightenment, the subject was perceived to be unified, centered and in-control of his or her circumstances. The idea of the subject being at the centre of knowledge is best surmised by René Descartes’ famous dictum, “I think therefore I am” (282). Hall stresses that this is how the modern subject has been conceptualized, in contrast to the postmodern subject. The increasing complexity of societies in the first half of the twentieth century, influenced in part by a Marxist belief in collective action, led to the belief in what Hall terms the “sociological subject.” Here, the subject is “formed subjectively through their membership of, and participation in, wider social relationships” (284).

Hall dates a growing conception of the ‘de-centred’ postmodern subject to the 1960’s. He attributes the growth of the postmodern subject to five “great advances in social theory”: Marxism and Louis Althusser’s structural ideology, Freudian theories of the unconscious formation of the self, Ferdinand de Saussure and structural linguistics, Foucauldian theories of state power, and feminist social critique.

What emerged out of these five influential schools of thought was an image of a fragmented subject whose identity is continually shifting. It illustrates how profoundly individuality is affected by various political, linguistic and psychological forces which all contribute to a continual re-negotiation of a subject’s sense of self. As Hall says, “as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily” (277). David Harvey seems to concur with Hall when he describes the postmodern condition as “schizophrenic.” Following Jameson and Hassan, Harvey suggests that modernism’s “alienated subject” has shifted to postmodernism’s “fragmented subject” (53). This vision of the
subject as de-centred and fragmented would seem to be in tension with the way Sennett describes the intimate society’s need for intimate connection. My contention is that portrait documentaries are the site of the struggle between these two seemingly contradictory forces. What I hope to have illustrated in the previous sections is an image of a subject at a crossroads between various competing historical and theoretical trajectories. In the following chapters, I hope to bring these concepts to bear on contemporary portraiture documentaries.
Chapter 2: Nick Broomfield and postmodern portraiture

“I suppose I would look to be beautifully lit and to be composed, whereas for me the wonder and the beauty of documentary is that it’s wild and it’s full of adrenaline and uncertainty, and it’s not scripted and no one really knows what’s going to happen next”

-Nick Broomfield in Quinn (62).

Documentary filmmaker Nick Broomfield has made a career out of depicting organized chaos. His films, most prominently those made in the latter half of his career, possess a reflexive trademark in which the director is featured as a central component of films that depict, as Stella Bruzzi suggests “the tortuous chase after elusive subjects and the collapsed interview” (207). Not only does Broomfield expose his failed attempts at accessing his central subject and the persistent difficulties he faces in his filmmaking process, they are highlighted to the point where they become a central feature of his documentary narratives. Broomfield, for the most part, has chosen to focus his documentary investigations on single or double subjects, individuals who possess a certain prior degree of notoriety. Indeed, his filmography reads like a list of names gathered from news media headlines throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 200s: Lily Tomlin (Lilly Tomlin 1986), Margaret Thatcher (Tracking Down Maggie 1994), Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love (Kurt and Courtney 1998), Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur (Biggie and Tupac 2002), and Sarah Palin (Sarah Palin: You Betcha! 2008) are all lives that he has attempted, with varying degrees of success, to document.

Broomfield’s consistency in choosing subjects who possess a certain prior degree of public visibility has been a successful strategy in allowing him to develop a directorial trademark. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his self-reflexive attempts to document the notorious have

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9 In the first half of his career, Broomfield directed his lens at more broadly based situational cinéma vérité style documentaries. These include Driving me Crazy, Chicken Ranch, Soldier Girls.
bestowed a degree of notoriety on Broomfield himself, garnering him his own star persona as a bumbling, ineffectual everyman attempting to gain access to the walls raised to bar him from his subjects. Broomfield has developed somewhat of an auteurist corpus based on his failure to access his subjects and deliver the intimate tell-all revelations that motivate his investigations. However, against the more disparaging accounts of Broomfield’s work, I argue that his films offer valuable insights into the cultural ecology that emerged in the latter decades of the twentieth century. The subjects he attempts to document possess not a stable and identifiable character but a “fleeting multiplicity of possible identities” (Hall 277) remaining elusive to both Broomfield and the viewer. His films operate as meta-textual exposures of how images of notorious individuals are traded as fetish commodities, built into a capitalist framework that postmodern theory has worked to reveal and subsequently destabilize. His non-fiction representations are important in a postmodern context because they allow us to confront, and make sense of, an increasingly imagistic society, and specifically how personhood can be understood in a culture where visual referents exceed our ability to know and understand other individuals. In the following chapter, I will discuss two of what I feel are Broomfield’s most important texts: Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam and Aileen Wuornos: Life and Death of a Serial Killer. Reading these two films alongside one another allows for an illumination of some of the major tenets of both Broomfield’s work, as a director who has exhibited a consistency of style throughout his career, and as visuals texts which exhibit the major features of postmodern culture.

2.1 Nick Broomfield: documentarian for the postmodern era

What is perhaps most interesting about Nick Broomfield’s career trajectory is that he is a director who began making films in the vein of cinéma vérité pioneers Frederick Wiseman and
D.A. Pennebaker, later switching over to an overtly reflexive style that was to become his authorial trademark. His early documentaries, *Juvenile Liaison* (1976) and *Soldier Girls* (1981) – both co-directed with Joan Churchill – allow the narrative to play out with little interference from Broomfield as the director. His previous foray into the world of pandering – 1983’s *Chicken Ranch* – was an observational study of the Nevada brothel of the same name. In this film Broomfield allows for the conversations between the working girls and the brothel’s madam to transpire in much the same way that Wiseman allows the encounters between students and administrators to play out in *High School* (1968).

It was only with *Lily Tomlin* (1986), made after a decade of documentary filmmaking, where Broomfield began to overtly feature himself as a central component of the film’s narrative. The film which most clearly marks the shift to self-reflexivity is 1988’s *Driving Me Crazy*, which charts Broomfield’s catastrophic attempt to make a documentary about Andre Heller’s musical “Body and Soul.” The narrative of the film becomes less about Heller’s production and more about the repeated financial and logistical problems that arise for Broomfield and his crew. Here the emphasis is shifted from the film’s intended subject to the financial, artistic and personal difficulties involved in making a documentary. As Broomfield has said, his interest shifted from vérité portraits to reflexive examinations of evasive subjects because “The most interesting subjects aren’t cooperative – they don’t necessarily want to be filmed; they have things they want to hide” (129).

Due to this turn to reflexivity, Broomfield has repeatedly been associated with a group of filmmakers – including Michael Moore, Morgan Spurlock and Ross McElwee – who all bring attention to the processes involved in creating a documentary narrative. Jon Ronson, in a *Sight and Sound* article, termed these filmmakers “Les Nouvelles Egotistes” (the new egotists).
describing them as filmmakers who, in contrast to vérité pioneers like Wiseman and D.A. Pennebaker, make themselves a central feature of the documentary narrative, a sort of subjective proxy through which their subjects are understood. This movement is often framed in the context of a broader suspicion toward the truth claims of documentary and the validity of images in a hyper-saturated media landscape. Accompanying these newly reflexive techniques is a greater interest in salacious, populist material, prompting Paul Arthur to term them “tabloid documentaries” and a shift of the form away from its exclusive association with the intellectual elite. These are films, *Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam* and Bruce Sinofsky’s *Paradise Lost* (1996) trilogy among them, which “nudged the normally austere, marginalized precinct of independent documentary closer to the glare of tabloid journalism” (75). The self-referential approach of these documentaries prompts an implicit questioning of “historical interpretation and media exploitation” and the “demystifying” of the sterile and serious tradition of documentary (75). Arthur cites *Heidi Fleiss* along with *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* as two *par-excellence* examples of the tabloid documentary. In both its resistance to the traditional objectivity of documentary and its choice of subject matter traditionally considered ‘low brow’ pulp, the tabloid documentary bears out postmodern cultural tendencies – including a scepticism over absolute truth claims, the breakdown of totalizing narratives, and a privileging of the visual – which all began to emerge in the final decade of the twentieth century.

Broomfield’s shift to a heavily reflexive style has not come without derision. Dovey argues that, due to Broomfield’s self-obsession and persistent absorption in his own relationship to the filmmaking process, the ‘public address’ of the documentary is lost. Broomfield loses sight of his central documentary project and his films devolve into speculation and rumour. Dovey sees Broomfield’s films as failing the central aim of documentary to inform and educate or, as
Nichols terms it, an ‘epistophilia’ (pleasure in knowing) (33-34). He sees Broomfield’s work as part of a “rhetoric which privileges individual subjectivity as an essential component of social praxis” (34). Paige Schilt concurs with Dovey in her analysis of *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer*, aligning it with a tabloid culture that “threaten[s] to erode documentary film’s reputation as a genre rooted in the goals of public service and an informed citizenry” (53). Like Dovey, she cites Nichols’ contention that documentary has a stewardship role to serve the public interest by informing and educating on a socially relevant topic, one which necessitates an “oppositional relationship to popular culture” (53). For Schilt, Broomfield’s subject matter and approach, therefore, compromises the serious and ‘important’ intent of documentary.

### 2.2 Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam and the postmodern, mediatized subject

Departing from these previous assessments of Broomfield’s work, I argue that it is precisely because of the film’s failure to deliver the ‘documentary goods’ that makes *Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam* a valuable documentary text. At the level of content, rhetorical structure and style, the 1996 film *Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam* is exemplary of Broomfield’s broader filmmaking tendencies, with the director depicting himself attempting to tease out the scurrilous gossip and multifarious rumours that orbit the woman termed ‘madam to the stars’ as she prepares to go on trial for charges of pandering and drug possession. The film imbricates layers of contradictory testimony with archival news footage, still-photo montages and, perhaps most prominently, scenes of Broomfield as he pre-emptively negotiates the financial and logistical challenges of filmmaking. Despite his stated intent to deconstruct the various competing stories about Fleiss’s life, Broomfield only further enlarges her myth to the point where rumor becomes indistinguishable from fact.

Instead of seeing this as a failure of the documentary project, as other scholarly writings
have tended to do, I claim that it is precisely this dissonance of stable information that makes *Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam* a valuable text that speaks to the broader exigencies of a celebrity media culture that has only accelerated in the decades following the film’s production. By forcing the viewer to adopt and re-tread various vantage points in relation to the film’s central subject, the film operates as a meta-text on celebrity personage, demonstrating the tabloid media’s depiction of public figures as a mosaic of fragmented images absent of a stable intimate core. The film extends the postmodern cultural conditions described by both Boorstin and Baudrillard, in which images become indistinguishable from reality, operating to conceal the processes involved in their creation and the consumer capitalist framework that structures all social relations. As evidenced by an in-depth examination of both the form and content of *Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam*, I suggest here that Broomfield’s formal and stylistic approach indicates acute epistemological scepticism, framing a media culture that has conflated individual and image to the point of indiscernibility.

*Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam*, along with Broomfield’s other documentary works on the famous and renowned, offers a vision of culture in which the pseudo-event, and the human pseudo-event, constitute the way fame is ingested by the public. Under these cultural conditions, we – the spectators, or postmodern witnesses to the manufacture of fame – are only able to understand public figures through visual proxies (televised news reports, tabloid images and video recordings). Although Broomfield states that Fleiss had agreed to be interviewed by him while out on bail, this is negated by her subsequent arrest. In the absence of a sit down interview with Heidi – the absent subject being a trademark of Broomfield’s documentary work – the filmmaker constructs an image of Heidi based on the claims of her close friends, former lovers and acquaintances, coupled with a fragmentary series of images from tabloid and news media
and personal video footage and photographs. Instead of getting to the centre of who Heidi Fleiss ‘really is’, Broomfield only further serves to entrench the myth around Fleiss. The film paints a picture of a thoroughly postmodern subject, one represented as decentred, piecemeal and lacking a stable identity. The film’s status as a postmodern text is evidenced by both the film’s structure – Broomfield’s conflation of his own subjective presence with the central subject he is investigating – and by the visual and aural components of the film, which adopts what Jameson termed the “schizophrenic aesthetic” of postmodern art and architecture (Postmodernism 26).

Although the trajectory of the film can hardly be called linear, the loose narrative structure can be roughly divided into a number of acts each tackling a different aspect of Fleiss’s life and relationships. In the first act, we see Broomfield gradually make his way from Fleiss’s outer circle – those only loosely connected to her through the Los Angeles sex trade – to his dialogues with her intimate acquaintances and, finally, with Fleiss herself. Broomfield has spoken in interviews about how his decision to make himself part of the narrative is an intentional device to provide context and “make seemingly disparate bits of information link” (Broomfield and Stubbs 129). The first act serves to figure Broomfield as an outsider, the layman in opposition to Hollywood’s secret society and the proxy through which we are allowed access to Hollywood’s lurid underside. His outsider status is visually actualized in footage of Broomfield circling the exterior of Fleiss’s vacated Hollywood mansion out of which she ran her escort business.

At a distance from Fleiss, he resorts to guerilla tactics and interviews prostitutes working Hollywood’s Sunset Boulevard, all of whom are unhelpful at best and openly hostile at worst. That Broomfield’s admittedly desperate attempt to glean information about Fleiss proves futile demonstrates the economic dissonance between the women who work “the strip” and the
moneyed clientele that Fleiss liaises with. His major lead comes with his motel room interview with Ron Jeremy (referred to as the director of the John Bobbit starring Bobbit Uncut), who connects him with women who had, in fact, worked for Fleiss. In contrast to the guerilla interviews on Sunset Boulevard, here we get an image of the context in which Fleiss is working, a notorious and lucrative Hollywood skin trade. Los Angeles, a city with its own weighty mythology, functions as a particularly appropriate backdrop for Broomfield’s investigation. In Land of Smoke and Mirrors: A Cultural History of Los Angeles, Vincent Brook describes Los Angeles as a city “inextricably bound to its mystification” but one whose contradictory status preserves “L.A.’s position as poster child for the postmodern condition” (10). L.A., he argues, is a city whose history is layered in the way scripture on a palimpsest is “scraped clean and used again” (11). Here, Los Angeles the mythic city serves to further bolster the image of the mythic personage, Fleiss, in a seeming endless array of competing imagistic signs.

These opening interviews serve to bring Broomfield closer to Fleiss’s inner circle. He interviews Fleiss’s formerly close friend, Victoria Sellers (daughter of Peter Sellers) who briefly discusses their falling out. However, it is at this point where Broomfield’s interview techniques begin to veer away from his stated goal of discovering who “Heidi Fleiss” is, shifting toward a line of questioning which only serves to enhance the enigmatic and lurid draw of the Hollywood sex industry. The bulk of his interview with Sellers involves questions as to the operation of the brothels, the desires of the clients and the ‘worst’ thing she ever witnessed from a client while working for Fleiss. Here, Broomfield seems less interested in exploring the psychology of his central subject than the sensational aspects of the Hollywood sex trade. She discusses how Fleiss’s primarily Arab clientele had an overwhelming preference for blonde women, the California ‘girl next door.’ Sellers’ testimony services to further embolden the simulacra which
construct the mythical image of Hollywood as a place of derivative stereotypes and perverse hedonism.

Sellers connects Broomfield with Madam Alex who, along with Fleiss’s former boyfriend Ivan Nagy, is to become one of the film’s primary sources of testimony on Fleiss and her personal history. One of the most notorious madams in Hollywood, Alex’s powerful status and shrewd business sense—a woman who allegedly “ruled” the Hollywood sex trade for over twenty years—is only undercut by her diminutive and matronly appearance. Broomfield initially credits her with ushering Fleiss into the business, mentoring her as she built her base of Hollywood clientele. Broomfield interviews her exclusively in the West LA home that she “rarely leaves.”

This image befits Los Angeles as a city which, in contrast to New York, is so often characterized as a city of interiors. It brings out a visual parable in the film for Broomfield’s investigation of Fleiss: the closer he moves to her inner circle, the more often the pastel interiors of his subject’s home occupy the frame. This dichotomy between public exposure and interior privacy is emphasized when Madam Alex says “You don’t do that in this business. That’s what you people are here for, you want to find out what you can reveal about Hollywood. Hollywood doesn’t want to be revealed.” This reinforces the position of Broomfield as the bumbling everyman in opposition to an unheard of, yet, titanic Hollywood underbelly. However, this opposition soon dissolves as Broomfield moves closer toward his interview with Fleiss.

The revelation of monetary exchange for testimony is a common occurrence in Broomfield’s films from *Driving me Crazy* to *Biggie and Tupac*, and is an explicit component of *Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam*. Before Madam Alex even appears on camera, she is heard demanding Broomfield hand over her “green,” $1,500 cash in exchange for providing an on-camera interview. Paul Arthur artfully comments on the metaphorical significance of this
exchange in relation to *Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam*’s subject matter: “The idea about moviemaking and paid sex is a dangerous, perhaps irresponsible trope, but taken as an indictment of traditional documentary’s high moral purpose is worth a hundred award-winning scruples and coy denials” (80). However, where Arthur interprets the depiction of financial transaction as an exposure of the corrupt aspects of documentary production, I argue that it also reflects on the very clear power imbalance between filmmaker and subject. Throughout, Broomfield allows his subjects to have the upper hand, indicating that, despite having greater access to Fleiss’s inner circle, he still performs the role of the layman. This further enhances their distance from not only Broomfield, but from the viewer who subjectively identifies with Broomfield’s on-screen persona. Additionally, it conveys the persistent tendency in postmodern culture to make everything, even human interactions, fit within the framework of consumer capitalism. This puts the film at an even greater remove from documentary as a “discourse of sobriety” (Nichols *Representing* 3) edging it closer to the realm of schlock entertainment.

Bruzzi frames Broomfield’s films as “performativé documentaries,” films which “draw attention to the impossibilities of authentic documentary representation” (185). By bringing attention to the subjective aspects of filmmaking, Broomfield acknowledges the “inevitable falsification” of non-fiction representation. She applies J.L. Austin’s speech model which suggests that communicative utterances “perform the action they name” (187). Bruzzi argues that because Broomfield features so heavily in his films he serves the dual function of performer – as an on-screen performer- and director – as the individual controlling the film’s narrative. This method of filmmaking problematizes notions of absolute documentary truth by revealing the subjective source through which the narrative is filtered. Bruzzi argues for the radical potential of Broomfield’s films as texts which re-shape notions of what constitutes and defines a
documentary, putting the form forward as “dialectical and open to reinterpretation” (217). Extending the notions put forward by Bruzzi, I would like to suggest that Broomfield’s films operate as tabloid entertainment – marking a shift away from the serious discourses considered to be in the domain of non-fiction filmmaking to a tabloid emphasis on news as entertainment – while bringing attention to the falsification and unreliability of tabloid representations.

Broomfield further draws attention to the various subjectivities in the film through the juxtaposition of competing testimony: Ivan Nagy, the initially charming and gregarious Hungarian-born Hollywood director with whom Fleiss has an ongoing and tumultuous relationship, and Madam Alex. Both subjects have differing versions of the series of events that led to Fleiss becoming a Madam, something that is perhaps responsible for the deep hostilities between Nagy and Alex. Madam Alex claims that Nagy sold Fleiss to him for five-hundred dollars, an initial move that was part of an elaborate plot in order to have Fleiss and Nagy steal the business from Madam Alex. She also alleges that Nagy used to “beat her [Heidi] up”, painting a picture of a disempowered Fleiss sold into the business by her manipulative older lover. Nagy vehemently denies this claim during his interview with Broomfield (“do I look like a man who needs five-hundred dollars?!” Nagy says while gesturing toward the extravagant art pieces in his home). In turn, Nagy describes Alex as a sadist and “one of the most horrible human beings I’ve ever seen in my life. If there is pure evil, it is Madam Alex.”

Complicating the stressed relationship between Madam Alex and Nagy are the claims and opinions of the other subjects that Broomfield solicits for the film. L’Hua Reid, a former friend of both Fleiss and Nagy, says that the “most important thing to Heidi” was “getting at Ivan,” suggesting that she had persistent romantic feelings for Nagy. Jim Wakefield, an ex-detective for the LAPD, alleges that Nagy was and is “pulling the strings” on Fleiss’s business, a claim that
seems to be further supported by the revelation that Nagy is producing a pornographic film entitled *Heidi’s Girls*, a move that seems to financially exploit his hand in Fleiss’s business.

However, both Reid and Wakefield seem to be drawing their claims from unreliable recollection, influenced by both the subjective dimensions of their memory and their access to the case, which serve to neither substantiate nor entirely detract from the case against Nagy. For his part, Nagy persists in his denial that he was involved in Fleiss’s call girl operation, maintaining that this was a ruse initiated by Madam Alex in order to sabotage him. All of these claims, whether they come from those close to Fleiss or acquaintances only tangentially connected with her, come across more as scurrilous gossip than evidentiary information on her biography.

The fragmentary and disorienting narrative that builds around Fleiss during these interviews also extends to the stylistic approach of the film. Broomfield’s lack of aesthetic finesse – what Schilt called his “aesthetic of technical incompetence” (51) - seems to compound his amateur directorial persona, grainy video footage and awkward, unintentionally obscured framing which empty the film of any stylistic meaning. However, at various points Broomfield makes use of visual montage that mirrors the fragmentary status of Fleiss. The postmodern has so often been defined as visual ontology, a cultural phenomenon which privileges modes of seeing (television and film) over those of knowing (the written or oral). Norman Denzin describes the postmodern subject as a “restless voyeur, a person who sits and gazes (often mesmerized and bored) at the movie or TV screen” (9). The postmodern aesthetic has also been called an “anti-aesthetic”, with postmodern works of art and architecture making heavy use of superfluous stylistic features that are empty of meaningful referent (Denzin). Jameson describes the postmodern aesthetic as schizophrenic, in the Lacanian sense a breakdown in the signifying chain of meaning (26). Postmodernist works, he says, have “adopted schizophrenic
fragmentation as their fundamental aesthetic”, bringing attention to the inherent superficiality of the work. In art and architecture, the schizophrenic aesthetic is evidenced by a combination of apparently incongruous styles and forms, and the inclusions of the superfluous. This produces works of stark heterogeneity a “virtual grab bag or lumber room of disjoined subsystems and random raw materials and impulses of all kinds” (31). It is also an aesthetic based on the process of reproduction, a visual culture of simulacrum.

Further supporting its status as a postmodern work is Broomfield’s heavy employment of flashy yet superficial aesthetic techniques. In the absence of an on-camera interview with Fleiss, Broomfield is forced to rely on testimony that seems to loosely circulate around Fleiss’s biography and motivations, without ever landing on substantial evidence of what occurred in her life that motivated her to become a madam, and the events that transpired to land her in prison. The fragmentary nature of information that Broomfield receives is mirrored by the aesthetic dimensions of the film, which are primarily composed of still photographs and sparse video footage in order to convey Fleiss’s upbringing and other aspects of her life prior to becoming a madam. There are a number of still photo montages in the film narrated by Broomfield, used in order to fill in the informational gaps between interviews. An early montage shows various pictures of Fleiss with the women who worked for her. Later, Broomfield uses the same device to illustrate her relationship with the ultra-wealthy Bernie Cornfeld, while Broomfield details the extravagances that he provided for Fleiss.

The regularity with which photomontage is dispensed as an expositional device is suggestive of Broomfield’s lack of reliable information, a gap that he fills with a mosaic of images and video recordings. It serves to reinforce the fragmentary and elusive nature of Fleiss, upholding her as a mysterious figure who can only be reached through pictures and the words of
others. To the postmodern notion of proliferating simulacrum, these photographs act in place of the subject – rendering her absence irrelevant. Heidi Fleiss is replaced by Broomfield’s loose construction (through photographs and interviews) of who Heidi Fleiss is, blurring the distinction between individual and myth. William Merrin has discussed the idea of simulacra in relation to Princess Diana, arguing that the media coverage of her death represents an example of simulacra erasing the subject it claims to represent. He suggests that “We can find no unmediated ground for our knowledge of Diana: for us her life was always imagic” (43). Diana, Merrin posits, did not represent herself but a series of qualities which were projected onto her image, and consequently “the icon and not the real saint had become the actual object of veneration” (46). Fleiss is constructed in much the same way; however instead of her image serving as a symbol of otherworldly goodness, her image represents an insatiable capitalist impulse and the trash and depravity of Hollywood.

The simulacra of Fleiss are extended to the film’s framing of her various legal battles, and Broomfield’s aim to discover, as he says in the film’s voice-over narration, “why the state of California was pursuing her so relentlessly for pandering.” Broomfield frames the legal proceedings as a carnivalesque media spectacle exhibited in televised news reports. Broomfield cuts and pastes clips from various televised news reports of Fleiss’s trial in a postmodern pastiche of televisual signs. All of these images are overlain with an even grainer filter than the rest of the film, a distancing technique that further emphasizes the heavy degree of media speculation directed at Fleiss. Images of Fleiss sitting in court are juxtaposed against sensationalist headlines affixed by the news program. Broomfield inserts footage of interviews conducted by other journalists with Victoria Sellers and Fleiss’s mother, Elissa Fleiss, two subjects whom Broomfield interviewed previously. When Fleiss’s guilty verdict is announced,
Broomfield is unable to record the unfettered reactions of his subjects. Instead, he borrows the filmed reactions obtained by other news organizations. News cameras film Fleiss deflating in court after the guilty verdict is announced, while Nagy is interviewed by a television news station. Here, Broomfield brings attention to the media as a site of reproduction, and that the public image of Fleiss-and to a certain degree all public figures-is one endowed by the tabloid media. This sequence simulates the way in which the postmodern subject is inundated with images, processing information through a spectatorial gaze that relies on the visual.

As with Broomfield’s film, the tabloid and news organizations bury the ‘real’ Fleiss under layers of images and competing testimony. Broomfield inserts these image so as to be experienced by the viewer as visual deluge, reflecting not only on the volume of media attention aimed at Fleiss during the height of her public notoriety, but the rapidity by which tabloid images are generated. Kevin Glynn argues that tabloid culture was a key feature of the nineties. He observes the hastening of the temporal recycling of information, instantaneously rendering present news as past history:

This process therefore primes us for the quick relegation of events to the dustbin of “ancient” history. Thus, although the modern category of “news” has always been, by definition one that has a sort of “planned obsolescence” built into it, I believe that under current conditions distinguished by the hyperspeed of media mobilization and a hyperabundance of images and discursive output, hypers(t)imulation and overpresence produce events that verge on a necrotic form of history even before their achievement of narrative closure. (19)

The obsessive documentation of Fleiss’s story can be seen as an expression of a tabloid media culture that negates the possibility of deep exploration in favor of a constantly shifting series of
images.

All of this previous narrative meandering would be rendered futile and wasteful if the final interview with the central subject was to produce major insights and extract revelations. However, when Broomfield finally does sit down to interview Fleiss (out on bail after her guilty verdict is announced), it only compounds the existing confusion in the narrative. The final act of the film is comprised of a confusing triangular discussion between Fleiss, Nagy and Broomfield, focusing on the nature of Fleiss and Nagy’s relationship. Several of those in Fleiss’s social circle assert that it was Nagy who was responsible for turning her over to the police, resulting in her arrest. However, during Broomfield’s conversation with Fleiss, she is vague in her answers and evades certain questions (such as when Broomfield asks about her first time working as an escort). When asked about the testimony of Madam Alex and Ivan Nagy, she neither corroborates nor denies either person’s claim. Fleiss is not upheld in this final conversation as any more of an authority on her life than the other interview subject, or even Broomfield himself.

What does a relatively obscure documentary text made almost two decades ago have to do with a contemporary culture whose fascination with celebrity and obsession with narcissistic visual documentation far outstrips that of the previous years? I argue Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam is valuable for depicting an emergent media trend that was to accelerate in the coming decades. This is a culture in which public figures possess illusory qualities, seeming to exist only as imagined simulations. As Glynn says, it is a media landscape in which all involved parties become part of a “single simulacrum” making it “virtually impossible to disentangle the various levels of reality and representationally involved” (47 Tabloid Culture). Tabloid media are complicit in promulgating the myth of the individual in question, through their continual circulation and dissemination of visual information. Broomfield’s futile attempt to transgress
these images, to find some kernel of authenticity, reveals just how much the line between image and reality has blurred.

2.3 Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer and the simulacra of the other

It is with a similar sense of de-stabilization and dislocation that Broomfield characterizes Aileen Wuornos in his two films on the most notorious female serial killer in US history, 1992’s The Selling of a Serial Killer and 2003’s follow-up Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer. In the former film, Broomfield deflects slightly from Wuornos to look at the moneyed interests of those looking to cash in on her story. Broomfield forefronts attempts by her foster mother and lawyer to cash in on her story, filming exchanges of cash for on-camera testimony. However, his follow-up film – which was prompted by the first – is more in line with Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam’s motivations toward portraiture and personal revelation. Life and Death of a Serial Killer offers an example of raised stakes in the portrait documentary, moving away from the relatively soft subject matter explored in Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam, to far more sinister and socio-politically loaded territory. By maintaining the tabloid aesthetic applied in Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madame, Broomfield reflects on the increasing perversity of the tabloid media and the tendency to exploit the macabre and freakish aspects of public figures. Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer reflects on how Aileen Wuornos was staged as a media event, further promulgating the myth of “America’s first female serial killer.” I argue for the radical potential of Broomfield’s documentary as a resistant text that challenges dominant media representation. This opposition is facilitated by bringing attention to the film as a media text itself, and allowing Wuornos a forum of expression that enables her to challenge persistent media framings of her case.

These two films also offer an illuminating comparative analysis as they consider two
opposing sides of prostitution, with Heidi Fleiss operating a high class escort service that catered to a stable of wealthy clients, and Wuornos, dubbed the ‘hitchhiking hooker’ in the news media, reflecting on the consequences of women forced in to prostitution due to economic vulnerability. They are both indicative of Broomfield’s career-long interest in the sex trade, beginning with his cinéma vérité-style Chicken Ranch, and continuing up until his most recent film Tales of the Grim Sleeper (2014). In his survey of prostitution in cinema, Russell Campbell argues that most depictions of prostitution originate from a patriarchal imaginary, resulting in the fitting of female sex workers into several recurring types. Male filmmakers have found the “fictional prostitute uniquely suited to embodying fantasies in which their acute desires and anxieties find expression” (5). This fascination is perhaps attributable to the figure of the prostitute having a “potent symbolic value for creative artists” thereby resulting in proliferating representations in art, literature and, to a lesser extent, film. While it is tempting to frame Broomfield’s films as a working through of a patriarchal curiosity and fascination with prostitutes, however when viewed more broadly, it can be situated within his career-long interest in exploring the various challenges faced by both powerful and vulnerable women. Broomfield has explained this inclination by saying, “I suppose what's happened to women this century is a lot more interesting to me than what's happened to men” (Broomfield interviewed by Kelly). If prostitutes possess a “potent symbolic value” as Campbell would suggest, then there would be no better figure through which to understand the exigencies of the individual subject in an era of manifold visual symbols.

While it is easier, and less ideologically harmful, to place the dalliances of the Hollywood

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10 Campbell only briefly mentions Aileen: The Selling of a Serial Killer in his discussion of filmic depictions of Aileen Wuornos, focusing primarily on fictional representations of Wuornos in the TV movie Overkill: The Aileen Wuornos Story (1992) and Monster. Documentary representations of prostitution are conspicuously absent from Campbell’s study.
elite in the context of tabloid entertainment, there is a greater risk attached to Broomfield’s approach when considering the Wuornos case. The film entails an exploration of deep psychological disturbance, childhood and adolescent trauma and the corruptions of the American justice system (including the contentious subject of the death penalty). In the course of the film, it becomes clear that Wuornos’s image, like Fleiss’s, has exceeded simple narrativization. Instead of positioning Wuornos as a symbol for various social dysfunctions that lead to crime, the documentary shows how her image – in both the trial and the media coverage of her life – came to represent nothing but the idea of Aileen Wuornos as a character of depravity. *Life and Death of a Serial Killer* is another example of postmodern documentary portraiture in that it emphasizes how the media subjects operate as simulacrum. Broomfield demonstrates how media representations of Wuornos created a scenario of hyperreality – the copy (in this instance the image of Wuornos) succeeding and becoming indistinguishable from the real thing. Additionally, and to a greater extent than *Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam*, *Life and Death of a Serial Killer* can be viewed as a postmodern text in its exposure of how various parties traded in Wuornos’s image for capital gain. If Broomfield is a director whose work is trademarked by a keen sense of self-reflexivity and self-consciousness, then consideration needs to be given to his career-long interest in media representation. I suggest that his work maintains a consciousness of the ways in which images, particularly those of controversial and notorious individuals, are constructed and proliferated to serve ends which go far beyond the lived reality of the individual in question.

The context and motivation for *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* represents a particularly unique example of a filmmaker fully traversing the line between director and subject. It was due to *Selling of a Serial Killer* that Broomfield was called to testify at one of Wuornos’s legal hearings. While Broomfield has traditionally made his relationship with the central subject
a key point of his documentary narratives, it seems that with his two films on Aileen Wuornos he reached the apex of closeness and influence with his subject. The film looks at the relationship between Broomfield, Wuornos’s adopted mother Arlene Pralle and lawyer Steve Glazer (who runs his legal practice under the moniker of Dr. Legal). It was because of footage from this initial film that Broomfield was subpoenaed to testify at Wuornos’s trial (Broomfield and Stubbs 136).

It is perhaps because of Broomfield’s unique closeness to Wuornos, coupled with the notoriety of its subject, that the film has attracted the most critical and scholarly analysis of all of Broomfield’s films. Much of this attention has been critical of the film, suggesting that it fails to fully come to terms with the ideological structures that position Wuornos as an ‘other.’ The aforementioned Paige Schilt launches a particularly critical assessment of Selling of a Serial Killer, arguing that Broomfield is complicit in exploiting Wuornos’s story for his own gain as a filmmaker. Furthermore, she suggests that, despite aiming to be an alternative to dominant media representations of Wuornos, it fails to “provide viewers with the tools to critique the gender, sexual and class biases embedded in dominant media images of Wuornos” (57). Tanya Horeck, critiques Broomfield along similar lines in her comparative analysis of Life and Death of a Serial Killer and Patty Jenkins’ Monster. She argues that both films, to a certain extent, exploit images of Wuornos as a “monstrous other” (142), employing editing techniques that stress “visual images of her as a freak” (147). However, she does commend the film for its overall conveyance of ambiguity, citing this as one of its most “compelling” aspects (152). Thomas Doherty, in his review of Life and Death of a Serial Killer alongside Monster for Cineaste, dismisses Broomfield film as “stalkerazzi cinema,” and concurs with Horeck’s claim that the director exploits the freakish aspects of Wuornos’s story (3).

What makes Broomfield’s film a valuable documentary text is the way in which it
subtextually explores the process by which the media image of Wuornos came to supersede Wuornos herself. The result is a scenario in which Wuornos’s image became indistinguishable from the reality of her personhood, the simulacrum indistinguishable from her being. Additionally, I argue, against readings of the films by Horeck, Schilt and Doherty, that Broomfield maintains an awareness of his own complicity in creating this image of Wuornos by bringing attention to the film as a media text. Whereas Broomfield figured Fleiss as a postmodern subject, *Life and Death of a Serial Killer* extends this notion to the order of the hyperreal, imbricating it within the legal, industrial and patriarchal power structures of the United States. This is an image of Wuornos tied to her repeated framing as a lesbian killer of men, and her persistent stance as “America’s first female serial killer,” a dubious honour not supported by factual information.11

A discussion of the way Broomfield depicts Wuornos can be situated within a broader academic and critical discussion about her place in a culture in which she was persistently figured as an other. Most of the academic works on Wuornos have focused on the way her homosexuality and, as a woman who targeted straight white men, is a reversal of the traditional serial killer paradigm of men victimizing women, and it drew her a particular kind of scorn from the public and media outlets. This is something that Broomfield himself mentions in an opening scene of the film when he says: “The idea of a woman killing men, a man-hating lesbian prostitute who tarnished the reputation of all her victims, brought Aileen Wuornos a special kind of hatred.” In his history of the connection between serial killers and celebrity in America, *Natural Born Celebrities*, David Schmid presents the thesis that the fame of serial killers has a

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11 As pointed out by Schmid and Pearson, references to Wuornos as “America’s first female serial killer” are incorrect. As Schmid says: “A cursory glance at a reference book such as Kerry Segrave’s *Women Serial and Mass Murderers* will confirm that, technically speaking, this is a nonsensical claim, as there were many women before Wuornos who killed serially” (231).
cultural function in American society, exorcising the two-fold public need to witness violence and death and to adulate celebrity, both functioning as a form of catharsis for the viewing public. In his section on Wuornos, he argues that the attention paid to Wuornos as a female, lesbian serial killer can be tied to a history of vilification of lesbianism and the conflation of homosexuality with violence. This helped to explain the fact that so few seemed to accept Wuornos’s claims of self-defence, the image of her construed in the media contributing to her receiving the death penalty (239). Public disparagement of Wuornos was further compounded by her already maligned status as a prostitute, a figure who Campbell describes as “as a symbol of flesh against the spirit, of the polluted against the pure, of the commercial against the freely offered, or of the depths of social life against its heights, she is negative” (5). Wuornos came to stand as a simulation of the most frightening threats to the patriarchy, a lesbian who inverted the traditional paradigm of masculine violence against vulnerable women.

A similar argument is made by Kyra Pearson in her discussion of the feminist reaction to Wuornos’s crimes. The “trouble” with Wuornos for feminists is that, because of the nature of her crimes she did not fit into the “clean case” of female victimization, one which involves violence at the hands of an intimate acquaintance in the domestic sphere. Wuornos, because her primary operational space was the highway, was coded as male, which, along with her position as a prostitute, rendered claims of self-defence and victimization unintelligible to the general populace. Furthermore, her deviance was “configured as the “logical” outcome of divorced parents, teen pregnancy, incest, child abuse, and drug and alcohol use” (265). Information about Wuornos’s past was figured into a narrative which saw Wuornos as being

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12 Schmid contrasts the media depiction of Wuornos with equally notorious male killers, suggesting that Wuornos received an inordinate amount of hatred for her crimes: “Even though the murdering methods of the women may be relatively mild compared with those of their male counterparts, the women are still much more likely to be described as vicious sadists, while the men are rarely described as such.”(236)
“genetically hard wired for crime” (266), further pathologizing her as a cold blooded, masculine killer. Pearson argues that Wuornos’s case represents the need for an expanded understanding of female victimization and violence and normative conceptions of gender, which often delimit an understanding of the ways that individuals can be oppressed.

The narrativizing of Wuornos life is, indeed, a strategy employed by Broomfield in *Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, a cause-and-effect impetus suggested by the title of the film. However, the film brings to light the way in which this narrative, and the attributes ascribed to Wuornos, the simulcarious image of her created in the media, was ultimately used to condemn her. As in *Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam*, what begins as an attempt to find the root cause of Wuornos’s transgressions becomes a critique of the way her image was symbolically configured, an image which Wuornos herself refused to concede to. One way that Broomfield does this is through his regular technique of self-reflexivity, a quality that is especially palpable due to *Life and Death of a Serial Killer*’s dialectical relationship to Broomfield’s previous documentary on Wuornos. The most obvious instance of the film’s self-reflexive tendencies appear early in the film, when Broomfield is called to the stand at Wuornos’s trial and questioned about footage in *Selling of a Serial Killer*. The prosecutor asks Broomfield about an extended car ride sequence featuring Wuornos’s former lawyer, Stephen Glazer, one which, due to the preponderance of marijuana use on Glazer’s part, Broomfield termed the “seven joint ride.” This footage was used to delegitimize Glazer’s abilities as a lawyer, rendering his defense of Wuornos suspect. The lawyer attempts to resuscitate Glazer’s reputation by accusing Broomfield of manipulative editing techniques which make it appear as if Glazer is smoking more marijuana in this time frame than he actually did, bringing up two different shots from the film that show Glazer wearing different coloured shirts. Here, using his own film as an example, Broomfield brings
attention to the ability of media to manipulate and distort. Although Broomfield defends his choice of footage as an honest reflection of the car ride, it nonetheless introduces the idea that media texts are not to be taken at face value. The viewer is indirectly warned to take a suspicious stance toward all media texts, Broomfield’s included.

Horeck argues that the images that Broomfield selects of Wuornos in his still photo montage emphasize her “monstrosity,” referring specifically to an image used of Wuornos rubbing her eyes which make her face appear to be distorted and “grotesque”. However, against Horeck, I argue that the use of these images are part of Broomfield’s visual strategy to bring attention to the simulacra of Wuornos, the construction of her image as a “hitchhiking hooker” and “America’s first female serial killer” that proliferated in the media and used for capital gain. Broomfield’s use of an amateurish aesthetic seems particularly fitting when considering that the exploitation of Wuornos’s image for profit is a theme that runs throughout both Selling of a Serial Killer and Life and Death of a Serial Killer. If there is a singular thematic thread that runs throughout Broomfield’s films, particularly his films made in America, from Driving me Crazy to Biggie and Tupac, it is that anything can be bought. Along with his self-reflexive techniques, this is what most solidifies the stance of Broomfield’s films as postmodern texts. With Wuornos as Fleiss as central subjects, the idea of human relationships as a financial transaction takes on a doubled meaning considering that the two women worked as prostitutes.

Throughout both films, Wuornos’s body becomes a site of exploitation both in and out of prison. As a “hitchhiking hooker” she occupied the position of the degraded street prostitute. As an imprisoned serial killer, her story was being covertly sold to Hollywood by those involved in her trial. Broomfield structures the film in such a way that prior to his interviews with Wuornos we are introduced to the various exigencies and complications of her case, which, shrouded in
layers of corruption and conflicting testimony, proves to be anything but straightforward. In his narration, Broomfield tells us that he maintained sympathy for Wuornos because she had been “betrayed” by those closest to her, who attempted to sell her story for “as much money as possible.” He then references the ending of Selling of a Serial Killer which revealed that several Florida police officers had been forced to step down after it was discovered that they illicitly attempted to strike a deal with Hollywood movie studios over the rights to Wuornos’s story, in an attempt to cash in on the novelty of “America’s first female serial killer.” In this instance, Wuornos’s image has become a literal commodity, eclipsing the political, social and legal dimensions of her case. Broomfield is demonstrating the consequences of a cultural condition that privileges the trade and profit of images over the very real social and psychological factors that led to Wuornos’s crimes. For many of those involved, and for the witnessing public, Wuornos image – one of her as a carnivalesque freakshow – supersedes the facts involved in the crime.

How does Broomfield attempt to counter the mythic simulacra that have built up around Wuornos? As with Fleiss, this strategy still leaves the viewer with an incomplete picture of the subject. In Wuornos’s case, this means that the attempt to draw a connection between her traumatic childhood and violent crimes is not easily facilitated. Pearson observes that profiles of Wuornos in popular magazines such as Glamour and People emphasized the connection between the sexual and physical abuses Wuornos suffered as a child and teenager and the crimes she later committed. However, as opposed to eliciting a degree of sympathy for Wuornos, “it was incorporated into her “profile” as a serial killer, functioning as evidence of her criminality” (265). Broomfield initially seems motivated to reveal the same kind of cause and effect patterns that pre-disposed Lee to a life of crime. He spends a good deal of the film with Wuornos’s
childhood best friend, who facilitates a re-visitation of the places of Wuornos’s past: her childhood home, the Michigan woods where she slept in a car as a homeless teen. Broomfield also journeys to Florida where Wuornos moved to escape the harsh Michigan winters, re-visiting the dive bars where Aileen and her lover Tyria Moore were regular patrons. All of this seems to give weight to the criticisms of Horeck and Schilt that Broomfield does little to counter an image of Wuornos as “white trash”, the filmmaker doing little to interrogate the class biases that form the simulation of Wuornos.

However, it is not these segues into Wuornos’s biography that offer the viewer the clearest portrait of her, it is Broomfield’s three filmed interviews with her in prison. Here, Broomfield allows Wuornos’s own testimony to stand against her persistent demonization by a legal system and a media complex grounded in patriarchy. With each successive interview, Wuornos shows increasing signs of mental disturbance, gradually becoming more paranoid that she is being used as a bargaining chip for political and financial gain by both those involved in the case and by Florida’s state government officials. In these scenes, however, we are reminded of Broomfield’s assertion at the beginning of the film that he finds Wuornos to be “the most honest person involved in the case.” Here, Broomfield invokes an almost Foucauldian mandate by allowing the confined “mad person” a forum for public address. He reverts back to the pre-seventeenth century, before the leper became the madman, and the universalizing view of the potential for insanity to reside in all of us. Indeed, Wuornos herself, whether consciously or not, revives this line of thinking when she says “We have evil in us, all of us do.”

13 Broomfield’s allowance of an open forum for Wuornos is strikingly reminiscent of the historical examples that Foucault draws upon in Madness and Civilization, his history of insanity in Western civilization. Foucault offers several historical examples of countries throughout continental Europe, France, Germany and England included, which, prior to the advent of mental asylums in the nineteenth century, put “madmen” on display for the enjoyment of the viewing public and “elevated to spectacle above the silence of the asylums, and becoming public scandal for the general delight” (Foucault 69).
allow Broomfield and Wuornos to rehabilitate the Foucauldian project to “put madness back in dialogue with reason, to restore the voice of madness that reason’s monologue has suppressed” (Todd 36).

In their interviews, Broomfield is able to elicit some kernels of authentic truth from Wuornos that speak to both the persistent social maligning of prostitutes and the exploitation of her image, demonstrating an acute awareness of the way her image has been exploited by those involved in the case. Broomfield shows footage of Wuornos being interviewed by news media after she is sentenced, where she claims to have received the death penalty not because of the nature of her crimes but because of the “media coverage” of her case. At the beginning of her first interview, Wuornos is shown saying she wants to re-start the interview because “you guys pre-tape and you clip.” In her second interview with Broomfield, Wuornos claims that the police ignore certain cases,14 including hers and the women missing from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, in order to create “high profile” cases which could then be sold for lucrative book and movie deals. Wuornos is also seen regularly adjusting her hair and appearance during the interviews, conscious of the way she is being presented in the media. It is these revelations of Wuornos’s self-consciousness of her mediated image that bring further attention to the construction of these images, subsequently reflective of the status of Broomfield’s documentary as a media text itself.

As with Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam, the interviews Broomfield conducts with Wuornos don’t provide the viewer with any clear answers as to her motivations or psychological processes, disallowing the possibility of major revelations. This is partially attributable to the

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14 The disappearance and murder of African American prostitutes from South Central Los Angeles is the subject of Broomfield’s most recent documentary Tales of the Grim Sleeper (2014). The film exposes news media organizations and law enforcements repeated dismissal of the disappearances, which began occurring as early as 1985.
contradictory nature of Wuornos’s claims. Her assertion that she killed in self-defence made so
virulently in Selling of a Serial Killer are retracted here, with Wuornos saying that she killed in
cold blood and primarily for financial gain. She maintains this line of explanation until the
second interview, when she thinks Broomfield is no longer filming. Without Wuornos’s
knowledge, Broomfield’s cinematographer and co-director Joan Churchill covertly films
Broomfield listening to Wuornos as she reverts back to her initial claim of self-defence,
contradicting this claim publically in order to hasten her execution. Claims of self-defence,
Wuornos believes, could result in an extension of her prison sentence, something that she is no
longer able to emotionally and psychologically withstand. After her death warrant is signed,
Wuornos grants her final death row interview to Broomfield, where he again attempts to broach
the subject of whether or not she killed in self-defence. Wuornos tells Broomfield to “put a big
question mark on your film”, and refuses to speak further about her cases.

By reading Heidi Fleiss Hollywood Madam alongside Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial
Killer, I have demonstrated Broomfield’s continual fascination with the human subject as a
mediatized event. To differing degrees of seriousness, both films demonstrate how personhood,
particularly notable and the notorious, are conceived of in an imagistic postmodern society. In
Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam, Broomfield demonstrates the fragmented nature of the
postmodern subject, who in a postmodern culture can only be understood as a series of visual
referents. With Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer, Broomfield brings attention to the way
the simulacra of a notorious individual eclipses the ideological and political significance of her
actions, and how this image is subsequently traded as a fetish commercial object. It should be
noted, particularly in the case of Wuornos, that Broomfield’s intent is never to garner sympathy
or absolve his subjects of what they have done or of the crimes they have committed. Instead,
Broomfield’s main interest as a filmmaker is bringing attention to the way in which his subjects have been framed by mainstream media outlets, and to challenge and complicate this framing.
Chapter 3: Images of the self in postmodern television documentary

He doesn’t just watch, he gets all involved with the people. It’s like they’re more ‘real’ to him than the people he knows.

-Elizabeth Moss as herself in “Intervention Intervention with Fred Armisen”, Funny or Die, 2009

3.1 Liminal spaces between documentary and reality television

Reality television, like the “tabloid documentary” (Arthur 74) discussed in the previous chapter, has maintained an uneasy relationship with the traditional perception of documentary, simultaneously corrupting its claim to seriousness and higher moral purpose with appeals to sensationalism and entertainment, whilst bringing a discussion of non-fiction representation into the foreground of popular debate. As Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette point out, reality television is driven by more overtly commercial pressures than a documentary film project motivated by social stewardship. They define the form as “an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real” (2). While documentary filmmakers have traditionally sought to distance themselves from a form made “in the name of uncertainty, voyeurism, and popular pleasure” (3), reality television similarly interrogates the division between “‘reality’ and its representation” (5). Due to the further conflation of falsity and truth evidenced in reality television, it has often been analyzed in relation to concerns that re-appear in postmodern discourse. In light of this, reality television can be seen as ushering into our current age a postmodern cultural condition that can be traced back to documentaries made in the final decades of the twentieth century. If television has been called the postmodern form par excellence, providing the viewer with a seemingly endless array of visual options, then reality television meets the postmodern “medium” with a similarly fragmented and hyperreal
An additional feature that draws documentary and reality television together is the continued fascination with single-subject narratives and the biography of the individual. Reality television, particularly series produced in the last fifteen years, has accelerated the focus on individual pathos that originated with the tabloid documentaries of the 1980s and 90s. The key difference is that while documentary has tended to be more selective in its choice of subject matter, often choosing prestige subjects with some pre-existing measure of fame, reality television has democratized the process of single-subject portraiture narratives. Reality television has broadened the scope of the documentary to encompass subjects from a wide array of backgrounds, abilities and dispositions. This inclination toward democratization has been endemic to the form since its inception with *An American Family* (Craig Gilbert, 1973), termed the first reality television show, and has persisted up to the current age where networks appear to have filled their programming slates to the brim with reality shows. Popular reality television dramas *The Real World* (MTV, 1994 - ), *The Hills* (MTV, 2006 - 2010) and the *Real Housewives* series (Bravo, 2005 - ), although ranging in structure and style, all share the common trait of giving otherwise anonymous figures their time in the televisual sun. The unavoidable allure of reality television, particularly for a public obsessed with watching, lies in its offer that even the most anonymous among us can be *seen*, and hopefully understood, by an attentive audience. John Corner has observed that the increasing popularity of reality television has been marked by a “narrative of localized feelings and experiences presented against what is often a merely sketchy if not entirely token background of social setting” (256). The reality television genre hastens a scenario whereby we increasingly rely on mediatized and visualized methods of communication.
In the following chapter, I will offer an analysis of two examples of reality television programs that focus on the personal histories of individual subjects. The first is Errol Morris’s *First Person* (IFC Films, 2000–2001). Marketed as a “Different kind of reality television” (DVD box set), the show profiles individuals who have exceptionally outlandish life stories, careers or predilections. Employing his famous Interrotron device during interviews, Morris presents us with an almost oppressively close view of his subjects’ faces. By evoking associations with facial close-ups in the cinema, Morris shows the filmed instance of the face to be a simulacra, transcending and eclipsing all other aspects of the individual’s being. The face as the central point of intimate identification is bound to the biographies of his subjects, which often present themselves as fragmented and, in the case of the two episodes discussed, intrinsically connected to media technologies and visual modes of knowing. I will engage an analysis of *First Person* with a brief discussion of A&E’s *Intervention* (2005 - ), a show that chronicles the lives of individuals with severe addictions. The show extends notions of mediated intimacy introduced in Morris’s series by documenting the most intimate and painful aspects of the subject’s life. Reality television, by virtue of being channelled through visual mediums, provides the subject with the opportunity to reveal more about themselves than real encounters, fulfilling Baudrillard’s dictum, that in a mediatized age images are “more real than the real” (*Simulations* 81). The examples I discuss show that the individual subject is increasingly being rendered in visual terms, the scale of space and understanding subject to “telecommand and the microproccession of time, bodies, pleasures” (*Baudrillard Ecstasy* 129) and, particularly in the case of *Intervention*, pain. Instead of attempting a representational fidelity to lived reality, these filmed instances of the subject occur within the closed circuitry of mediatized simulacra.
3.2 *First Person* and mediatized intimacy

Sitting on the border zone between Morris’s early human-interest works, *Gates of Heaven* (1978), *Vernon, Florida* (1981), and a latter phase of his career motivated, in large part, by political concerns, *The Fog of War* (2003), *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), and *The Unknown Known* (2013), is the *First Person* series. The series was initially pitched to the Bravo television network, and was later picked up by the Independent Film Channel (IFC) in 2000. Although it only ran for two seasons, it garnered a spot on *Time* magazine’s list of the year’s ten best television series (Ebert 103). It is mostly referenced in relation to its use of Morris’s cinematographic inventions the Interrotron and the Megatron. However, the significance of the series in Morris’s career has been largely ignored and underestimated. *First Person* marks a shift in Morris’s directorial trajectory, and thus serves as an example of the characteristics of the early and late phases of his filmography. Like *Vernon, Florida* and *Gates of Heaven*, the series takes an in-depth look at individuals with often bizarre stories and abnormal obsessions. The series also gives an indication of the more serious direction that Morris was to take in the latter half of his career, moving away from the light and quirky fare endemic to his early works. Subjects like Sondra London, a self-professed “serial-killer groupie”, and Antonio Mendez, a 25-year veteran of the CIA, offer stories that combine components of quirk and socio-cultural significance, appealing to equal measures of educational interest and entertainment.

*First Person* occupies the malleable border zone between documentary film and reality television. Tethered to the documentary tradition as a project by one of the form’s foremost auteurs, it also maintains reality television’s promise to provide a “playful look into the “entertaining real’” (Murray and Ouellette 4). The series was preceded by HBO’s television documentary series *America Undercover* which premiered in 1984. *America Undercover* tackled
a number of controversial, and often sexually provocative topics, and similarly towed the line between the moral sensibilities of documentary film and the exploitative sensationalism that we now associate with reality television. Susan Murray has offered a discussion of the liminal space documentary programming occupied in the 1980s and 1990s, looking specifically at the various challenges posed to networks when marketing such programming. Murray’s study, which comparatively analyses the discrepant network packaging of *America Undercover* and the PBS/Fox show *American High* (2000), points to the persistent struggles faced when attempting to identify documentary as a generic mode, one based on a belief that they should be “educational or informative, authentic, ethical, socially engaged, independently produced, and serve the public interest” as distinct from reality television as a genre that is “commercial sensational, popular, entertaining, and potentially exploitative and/or manipulative” (43).

Murray’s study, while pointing to the extratextual factors involved in securing a definition of reality television, also points to questions of quality and taste influencing the perception of the genre. Premiering at the end of what is often considered the first “wave” of reality television (a cycle that began with MTV’s *The Real World* (1992 - ), CBS’s *Survivor* (2000 - ) and Fox’s *American Idol* (2002 - ), *First Person* represents an interesting case study of a documentary form that continually straddles the line between seriousness and entertainment.

Supporting the stance of *First Person* as a documentary series is that it is formally and aesthetically consistent with Morris’s directorial style, employing many of the artistic and rhetorical strategies that he has become known for. In each of the episodes, Morris films interviews with his trademark Interrotron device. The device facilitates a type of facial exposure subject which would not be possible using traditional camera equipment. With subject and interviewer sitting in separate rooms, a camera records each of them and feeds that recording to
the other person. Instead of having a face-to-face conversation, both subject and interviewer talk to projections of the other. What this allows, and what Morris aimed to achieve with this, was having the interview subject look directly into the camera when answering questions. Previously, direct visual connection between subject and director was physically compromised by the camera, with the subject having to look to either the left or right of the camera to look at the interviewer and thus deviating their eye line slightly away from the focal lens. The Interrotron side-steps this by allowing the subject to look directly into the camera and meet the viewer’s gaze.

Although the central concept of the Interrotron is to record an unbroken face-to-face contact between subject and interviewer, allowing the viewer to meet the eyeline of the filmed subject, there is an inherent paradox in the device’s function as it necessitates that they be in different rooms for the duration of the interview. Morris has said that the geographic dissonance between director and subject is partially intentional, as the distance contributes to a more open field of conversation. He describe this precise effect by saying, “The Interrotron plays on the idea that you can say things on the phone that you would never ever in a million years say to someone sitting directly across from you. In effect, greater distance means greater intimacy” (Cronin 146). Further intensifying the effects of the Interrotron, was Morris’s development of the Megatron. The Megatron is a supersized version of the Interrotron, using between ten and twenty cameras. It allows him to film his subjects from a number of different angles and maximize the facial space he can cover, and thus enhancing the affective and cinematographic potential of their visage.

Like Broomfield, Morris has often been aligned with postmodern tendencies in recent documentary narratives. While not possessing the same overt reflexivity of Broomfield’s oeuvre,
his work demonstrates acute epistemological scepticism, never wholly subscribing to the testimony of his subjects whose recollections he interrogates with staged re-enactments and competing claims. Linda Williams used Morris’s *The Thin Blue Line* (1987) as indicative postmodern documentary projects that “intervene in the construction of truths whose totality is ultimately unfathomable” (14). Similarly, Linda Ricciardelli argues that Morris’s films exemplify a postmodern documentary style: “a form of filmmaking that favors self-reflexivity, adopts a provocative tone, rejects the totalizing meta-narrative as a way to organize knowledge of the past, and mixes fact with fiction” (36). These are authorial tendencies that readily manifest in *First Person*; however, mediatisation and imagistic oversaturation as having a central influence on our understanding of truth, impinging on our social reality so as to shape our actions and beliefs about the world. More than any other film in Morris’s oeuvre, this attention to mediatisation is brought to the fore through an aesthetic pattern that brings attention to the way subjective realities and understandings are reliant on that which is visually accessible.

Morris’s focus on the faces of his subjects can be positioned within a filmic and scholarly lineage that presents facial close-ups as fundamental to cinematic language. Early examples of this can undoubtedly be found in works of the silent era, films which rest on the emotive ability of the face to deliver narrative and tonal information. Carl Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) has achieved cinematic immortality because of the purely expressive power of Maria Falconetti’s face. Perhaps the first film scholar to recognize the unique power of the close-up in cinema was Béla Balázs. He suggests that the close-up, facial or otherwise, reflected the expansive possibilities of film. The close-up “revealed also the hidden mainsprings of a life which we had thought we already knew so well” (273) turning otherwise banal moments into “lyrical” images that resonate with meaning and power. Balázs suggests that facial close-ups
offered us the closest view of another person’s subjectivity. Close-ups allow us to view the most
minor alterations in an individual’s expression, what he called “microphysiognomy” (278),
offering us the most accurate external representation of internal states. For Balázs, by registering
that which would otherwise be imperceptible, the face confronts us with an authentic purview of
the internal, emotional experiences of the individual witnessed.

The idea of the face possessing a deep visual resonance is extended by Roland Barthes
who, following Balázs, wrote on the connection between star power and facial close-ups in “The
Face of Garbo.” He refers to the silent era of cinema as one where “the face represented a kind of
absolute state of the flesh, which could be neither reached nor renounced” with Greta Garbo’s
face in particular offering “a sort of Plantonic Idea of the human creature” (471). Barthes’ almost
hyperbolic appreciation of Garbo’s visage assigns her with superhuman qualities, the celluloid
projection bestowing her with a god-like status. It is important to emphasize here that, for both
Barthes and Balázs, the power of the face is drawn out through the cinematic medium. The facial
close-up comes to attain this transcendental power only when it is transposed as an image.

The language used by Barthes and Balázs to describe cinematic facial close-ups is evoked
in later writings by Baudrillard, works such as Fatal Strategies and Simulacra and Simulation,
which deal more directly with image circulation in mass consumer culture. The scenario he
describes in these books is one in which images have displaced meaning, only referring to other
images. What has occurred is the “postmodern displacement of the real by the televisual image,
advertising sign, or computer model” (Smith 5). These images are characterized by their excess,
maintaining a sense of being “more real than the real” (Simulations 81) and superseding the
meaning offered to us by real life communications and interactions. For Baudrillard, the image as
object possesses “superlative power” (Selected Writings 186). Due to our intense attachment to
images, we lose sight of real social connections, with the media acting as “producers not of socialization, but of exactly the opposite, of the implosion of the social in the masses” (Simulations 81). Facial close-ups offer an example of what Baudrillard termed “hyperreal obscenity,” which, as Glynn describes, “magnifies and fetishizes minute details” (Tabloid 50). In First Person, the face is amplified to allow for a level of deep yet disorienting visual access to the subject.

The facial close-up serves a particular use value in the episode entitled “One in a Million Trillion”, an episode about the varied life of Rick Rosner. Along with providing a good example of the persistent formal and aesthetic choices Morris makes throughout the series, it also explores the life of an individual who perfectly fulfills the description of the postmodern subject. Rosner’s varied and unusual life experiences are indicative of a self who “embodies the multiple contradictions of postmodernism” (Denzin vii). Among other things, Rosner was a former contestant on the game show Who wants to be a Millionaire, boasts a genius-level IQ score, worked as a stripper and a bouncer, and altered his personal record so that he could re-live high school. Rosner’s desire to “fix” his past seems to be a recurring theme of the interview, encapsulated by a visual motif of falling puzzle pieces, a metaphor for his fragmented sense of self. His desire to do his life over led to him disguising himself as a teenager in order to make better on what had been an unsatisfactory high school experience. Rosner speaks of his sexual frustration and his constant attempts to alter his appearance so that he is more attractive to women. His nagging sense that he was treated unfairly in life is also responsible for his grievances against Who wants to be a Millionaire, who he claims gave him an incorrect question that led to him being eliminated from the show in an early round.

The seemingly random and incongruous events of Rosner’s biography collide and lose
their temporal grounding through Morris’s non-linear juxtaposition of the various events in his life. The episode goes back and forth between Rosner’s time on *Who wants to be a Millionaire* and his performative repetition of high school. The point of reference for Rosner’s story is his face during the interview segments. His face is seen as the most reliable bastion of information in a story that becomes increasingly ludicrous and unbelievable. His physical being and facial features become of particular thematic relevance when seen in the context of his adoption of various different personas throughout his life. Morris includes pictures and video footage of Rosner’s face at different stages in his life, from his various high school year book photos to video footage of him on *Who wants to be a Millionaire*. When Rosner is discussing his early life, there is a shot of a sheet of a dozen photographs all containing the same portrait of Rosner as a young boy of about five or six. The shot expresses the multiple roles that he was to take on throughout his adulthood. Later, we see a picture of Rosner as a pre-teen sporting thick glasses and an unwieldy haircut. A close up of Rosner’s eyes in the picture fades out to the full photograph. On the audio track, Rosner talks about his experience being the school “nerd”: “Every nerdy person hopes, or knows, in his heart that he’s nerdy, but that he is so brilliant that his inner goodness and smartness will shine through and he’ll still be able to get a girlfriend.” Rosner’s self-image at this stage in his life is reflected in a picture of a facial close-up from his early years.

Knowledge of both Rosner’s past and present is tied to the various pictorial presentations of his face. This is connected to the importance that Rosner himself places on his outward appearance, which he equates with sexual desirability. He speculates that he was not chosen for his initial audition for *Who wants to be a Millionaire* because he was no as aesthetically pleasing as his younger competitor. Rosner goes on to discuss how he mutilated himself because he
thought that scars would make him more attractive to women. He mentions that his facial hair posed a problem for him when trying to disguise himself as a high schooler. Both Rosner’s monologue and the inclusion of images of him at various stages of his life paint a picture of an individual who is consumed by vain consternation. Through Rosner’s story, facial visage becomes synonymous with visual deception, a fragmented piece through which the entire life of the individual is understood.

That Rosner was on Who wants to be a Millionaire, a reality game show, and one in which images of faces in intense concentration are elemental in creating suspense and excitement, indicates the important symbolic role of his face as a site where the drama of his life is played out. Morris includes footage of Rosner’s episode of the show. We see footage of his ecstatic response to making it past the final qualifying round to the chair. Morris includes a large section of the episode in which Rosner agonizingly thinks through the answer to the question that was to get him eliminated from the show. The filmed interview and the game show are here paralleled as two examples of non-fiction forms where fascination is derived from watching people think. Additionally, the featuring of Rosner’s run on Who wants to be a Millionaire reflects his overarching preoccupation with being seen. In order to be a visible person, to have a measure of significance in the world, Rosner must be rendered in visual terms. This happens doubly, once with his run on the game show and secondly with his appearance in the documentary.

Morris’s audible interjection into the interview occurs more frequently in the First Person series than it does in his previous documentaries. Aside from this being a self-reflexive intrusion, the aural questioning precedes the subject’s subsequent expression of contemplation as he thinks through the answer, externalizing his mental processing. In “One in a Million Trillion,”
Morris is heard asking Rosner about his “naked bingo” game, the object of which is to be naked in all of the locations listed in the Thomas Guide map book of Los Angeles. Rosner pauses to think of the logistics of competing with himself to be prolifically naked around the city. This is similar to the structure of game shows, which require an awareness of the questions in order to give gravitas to the contestants’ faces as they frantically search their mind for the answer. There is a pained look on Rosner’s face as he deliberates the answer to the question, and we witness his expression of crushing disappointment when the incorrect answer gets him eliminated from the show. Here again, Morris emphasizes the face as a site where the drama of internal thought processes is physically manifested as an expression. Intimate expressions must not only be manifested in physical terms but also mediated in visual images.

The connection between intimacy and mediatization is emphasized to a greater degree in “Harvesting Me.” The episode centres on the story of Josh Harris, internet pioneer and self-professed television addict. Harris is responsible for inventing video chat as we know it, and proclaimed the power of digitized images well before the internet became an indispensable component of daily life. Harris’s vested interest in the dissemination of images and his early participation in technologies that precipitated the rise of social media make him a particularly fitting subject for a television documentary series about unique lives. In the early 2000s, Harris essentially turned his life into a reality television show by installing cameras all over his New York City apartment, which filmed every detail of his domestic life with his girlfriend, 24/7. This footage was streamed online for public consumption, enabling viewers to indulge their most voyeuristic inclinations. The art-project cum social experiment was entitled “We Live in Public”, and it offered one of the first examples of a pattern of excessive self-exposure that was to characterize internet usage throughout the decade.
Harris’s story reflects not only on the over-zealousness with which entrepreneurs capitalized on the World Wide Web in the early days of the internet, but also Baudrillard’s description of the obscene, to which I referred in Chapter One and which I will reiterate here. Baudrillard’s argues that a mediated, imagistic society is characterized by a breakdown of the walls between private and public to the point where even the most private instances are revealed publically. For Baudrillard, electronic communication is instrumental in the dissolution of the private, the point when there “is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparence and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication” (“Ecstasy” 130). “We live in Public” made immediately available the most mundane aspects of a Harris and his girlfriend’s life: eating, excreting, watching television, arguing and sleeping. In this case, the mundane becomes the spectacle and, in a sense, negates the very concept of spectacle as that which surprises and stimulates.15

“Harvesting Me” understands Harris as an individual whose primary connection to the outside world is through media. As Harris states at the beginning of the interview “my emotionality is not derived from other humans, but rather, from Gilligan.”16 Throughout his life, Harris’s primary access to human faces was not in physical reality, but through the mediated simulation of the television screen. Likewise, in his project “We Live in Public”, Harris conveys himself as a character who privileges experiences that can be achieved through visual and mediatized means. Mirroring this, Morris’s aesthetic techniques in the episode draw attention to

15 It should be noted here that Baudrillard uses the word spectacle as a reference to Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle, which he used to describe a culture of commodity fetishism in 1960s France (preceding the May 1968 protests). In the society of the spectacle, the media is used as an instrument of political and capitalist domination, seducing the public with images and infringing on all aspects of social life. Society of the Spectacle is an essential precursor to many of Baudrillard’s most important theories, providing an early theoretical model for what, by mid-century, was becoming an increasingly image and media dominated society.

16 Gilligan is a reference to the television show Gilligan’s Island (CBS, 1964-1967).
the fact that the viewer of First Person is watching Harris on a screen, doubling the layers of televisual broadcast. He includes a filter over Harris’s face at regular intervals which makes it appear as if he is filming a television screen. The filter makes Harris’s face appears pixelated, creating a distancing effect. It visually simulates Harris’s existence as one that was consistently mediated through the screen of televisual recordings, a barrier that kept him at a remove from the real world. Harris is both the object and subject of the cameras lens: screens were both the way that Harris had access to public life, and the way that the outside world was allowed to view him. As a purely visual subject he exists for the viewer in a closed circuitry of optic layers, with the self-disappearing behind a compound of layered simulacra.

Harris’s life operates as an allegory for the complicated nature of intimacy in the digital age, and the extent to which people will attempt to facilitate social connection through purely visual means. Sennett has observed technology’s dismantling of social life, arguing that “Electronic communication is one means by which the very idea of public life has been put to an end. The media have vastly increased the store of knowledge social groups have about each other, but have rendered actual contact unnecessary” (282). Yet, both Morris and Harris deny that true intimacy has been achieved by indicating that although Harris allowed the public, his “watchers,” unprecedented access to his everyday life, they really knew nothing about them. This is in part due to the fact that the surveillance set-up was such that it rarely allowed a view of Harris’s, or his girlfriend’s, face. By contrast, his interview with Morris brings him in face-to-face contact with the camera. This creates a greater sense of intimacy and connection with the viewer than his hours on “We Live in Public” were able to achieve. The set-up which Harris engineered contributed to his emotional breakdown. The project had an adverse effect on Harris’s personal relationship with his girlfriend, with the continual intrusion of the public eye
causing conflict and sexual dysfunction. At the end of the episode, Harris says that he feels that his watchers have taken everything from him, leaving him with nothing personal or sacred. Instead of achieving a sense of closeness or emotional engagement between Harris and the public, he develops feelings of disdain and alienation towards those who watch and comment on his life. True intimacy has therefore been negated in a process of overexposure followed by feelings of violation.

The inherent paradox of “We live in Public” is that, although it required Harris to relinquish a large amount of his privacy to his watchers, it did not really require Harris to reveal anything about his internal self. By contrast, Morris’s “talk therapy” interview method and the direct address to the camera elicits an exposure of Harris’s internal workings. Harris is able to discuss his dissatisfaction with the process. There is a level of frustration and sadness that is visible on his face throughout the interview. The close proximity of Morris’s camera enables a level of emotional access to Harris that was not permissible through the cameras which relentlessly watch his apartment. The inclusion of Harris’s story in the series provides a point of contrast between two different modes of documentary filmmaking. “We Live in Public” demonstrates an almost cinéma-vérité style of filmmaking, offering a view of daily life without any comment from the filmmaker. This is a style of documentary which Morris has heartily rejected in favor of a more stylized approach to non-fiction filmmaking. When paralleled, it is clear that Morris’s style of filmmaking offers closer access to an individual’s life than a vérité mode that prides itself on distance and non-interference. “Harvesting Me” invites viewers to compare the way that Harris’s life is conveyed by Morris’s documentary and his own documentation of his daily life. Two different levels of intimate access emerge from this comparison; however, both reflect on the need to translate the subject’s pathos into visual terms.
“Harvesting Me” preceded another documentary on Harris, so named for his digital project, *We Live in Public* (Ondi Timoner, 2009). Timoner’s documentary focuses more heavily on a digital living project Harris staged in New York City in the late 1990s, before he began the obsessive documentation of his own domestic life, entitled “Quiet: We Live in Public.” The project saw one-hundred volunteers living in what was termed a “human terrarium,” and who agreed to have their every waking minute, from going to the bathroom to having intercourse, filmed for a show that was to be streamed online. The project, which precipitates an era of obsessive visual documentation on the part of everyday citizens, takes the idea of filmed intimacy to an extreme. Framed as an acceleration of intimacy, “Quiet: We Live in Public” can also be seen as an extension of the kind of intimacy Morris was attempting to capture. In both of these documentaries, Harris’s life and experimentations with visual culture provide a darkly humorous example of the hyperreal qualities of the internet age.

3.3 *Intervention* and the obscene pathos of addiction

Many of the techniques associated with Morris have been adopted by other documentary filmmakers and on reality television shows. A clear demonstration of the influence Morris has had on contemporary non-fiction formats can be seen in several television documentary series produced by A&E. *Hoarders, Obsessed* and *Intervention* all stage interviews to the same effect of those filmed using the Interrotron, having subjects starkly lit against a dark background, facing the camera directly. The first and most popular of these series, a movement that has been termed “recovery television” (Hargraves 71) and “life intervention” (Oullette and Hay 63) is *Intervention*, and it bears more than just stylistic similarities to *First Person*. The series centres

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on individuals with severe cases of addition and behavioral disorders. *Intervention* covers a wide range of addictions, including drugs and alcohol, gambling, shopping and eating disorders. The show extends the emotional and affective confrontation with the subject in *First Person*, depicting a highly emotionally charged, traumatic and often disturbing look at the lives of its subjects. In the broader purview of postmodern culture, the series exemplifies the way our relations, even the most personal and private of those relations, have become entirely mediatized. Each episode is narratively and aesthetically constructed in such a way as to facilitate a highly intimate, albeit one-sided, connection between viewer and subject. The act of filmmaking both the subjects and their friends and family results in a feeling of accelerated closeness with the subject, one that I argue can only be achieved on the premise of its mediatisation, one that is initiated by the producers and filmmakers. The show demonstrates what Baudrillard termed the “obscenity” of televisual communications whereby “the most intimate processes of our life become the virtual feeding ground of the media” (56).

Each episode of the show is structured around the narrative of the addict’s life and addiction, titled with the name of the addict to emphasize the single subject nature of each episode. The segment begins with a preview of the addict’s affliction and a screen caption that reads: “Millions of Americans struggle with addition. Most need help to stop. This is [name of participant]’s story.” This intertitle alerts the viewer to the idea that the broader economic, social and legal issues of substance abuse and behavioral disorders are being filtered through the story of an individual struggle. Each story is structured into chapters that are juxtaposed to maximize the pathos of each episode, emotionally appealing to the viewer in order to express the show’s intended to suggest the corrupting influence of substance addiction, and the pain and suffering experienced by the individual user. The chapters are as follows: 1) an introduction which
demonstrates the severity of the victim’s addiction; 2) The personal history of the subject, which describes the addict’s life before their addiction and points to the root cause of their emotional rupture; 3) Footage that highlight the stress put on the addict’s personal relationships; 4) The intervention, whereby the family makes an appeal for the addict to seek treatment and states a set of consequences if the addict decides against it; 5) A follow up which gives us an update on the addict’s progress or, in some cases, relapse. At all stages, footage of the addict is intercut with interviews with the addict, their family and friends, who speak frankly about the subject’s addiction and the emotional and psychological struggles said addition has caused. Title cards appear at regular intervals to educate the viewer on the psychological and physical damage caused by long-term use of the drug. All this leads to the final intervention which, for many of the addicts depicted on the show, involves intense physical resistance and attempts to escape distressed family members who are then seen chasing the addict down. In the instance that the addict does, peaceably, join the intervention the family members in attendance read often highly emotional letters on the way that the addiction has impacted both the addict and her relationships. The interventionist then offers the addict the chance for recovery at a top notch rehab centre. The last act of the episode lets the viewer know whether or not the treatment was successful, showing us a follow-up interview with a healthy and sober former addict or a title card telling us of their relapse.

The production methods of Intervention’s filmmakers and producers have received sharp criticism from television and culture writers. The subjects are initially told that they are being interviewed for a documentary on addiction, to which they comply to have their lives recorded. The producers claim that keeping the intervention secret from the addict is imperative to its success. It is only in the final moments of the episode that they discover their families have
submitted them for an intervention, which often sparks outrage, feelings of having been deceived and the aforementioned physical resistance to the intervention. Ouelette and Hay describe the show’s tactics as “bullying, cajoling, trickery, and force” (72). The show also raises issues of generic classification, not easily fitting in to either the category of reality television or documentary. Although the show aims to educate the viewer on the risks and outcomes of addiction, this is matched by the often sensationalist and exploitative filming methods that align it with reality television. As Ouelette and Hay point out, Intervention and other series like it have primarily commercial concerns and “operate within a cultural economy of commercial television” while they “fuse the aims of cultural commerce (ratings, advertising, and product-placement revenue, licensing, and merchandising tie-ins) with claims of public service” (66).

It is perhaps because of the multitude of ethical and categorical concerns raised by Intervention that it has proven to be a compelling object of interdisciplinary scholarship, attracting writing from the fields of sociology, psychology, communications and film and television studies. Broadly speaking, these studies have tended to be critical of the show’s filmic methods and representation of addiction. Several scholars have noted a connection between reality recovery narratives and the neoliberal policies of the Bush administration – such as welfare reform and increased privatization – which emphasized and individual’s role in creating his or her own well-being (Daniels, Hargraves, Ouelette and Hay). Ouelette and Hay argue that Intervention, along with the teen behavioral reformation show Brat Camp, demonstrates the paradox of neoliberalism’s belief in complete sovereignty with the impetus to regulate deviant behaviors, a process enacted through the privatization of social work (70-73). In an article from the academic journal Substance Use & Misuse, Kosovski and Smith explore the show from the perspectives of both psychology and communications. They argue that the show’s portrayal of
addiction treatment is both ineffective and misrepresentative (853), contributing to an overrepresentation of addiction in the same way that Cops and America’s Most Wanted exaggerates the amount of violent crime in American communities. Hunter Hargraves argues the “structuring of affect” in reality television in general, and Intervention in particular, creates an “addicted spectator” who is compelled to repeatedly watch a show about addition. Paradoxically, the viewer becomes addicted to a program which aims to expose the horrors of addiction.

Hargraves’ account of the addicted spectator is particularly useful when considering the postmodern spectator, a “restless voyeur” (Denzin 9) who is lulled into a state of complacency by an innumerable array of visual signs. What is of interest to me here is how the practice of “addictive spectator,” who Hargraves describes as a “hyperactive, amped-up TV junkie” (73), works in tandem with the show’s overbearing emotional and affective dimensions to create a simulation. However, whereas Hargraves posits that the spectator watches ironically, distanced from the spectacle of the addict by a sense of instilled “moral superiority,” (90) I argue the inverse. The use of “talk therapy” interview segments intercut with graphic images of the addicts suffering force an intimate confrontation between viewer and subject. The show is structured in such a way as within the first thirty minutes the audience is privy to the most intimate details of the addict’s personal history and witness to their daily patterns of destructive behavior. What results is an accelerated knowing of the subject, a feeling quoted from a Funny or Die satire of the show in this chapter’s epigraph that, for the viewer, the people on the show feel more real than the people we know. The lines between reality and the simulacra become increasingly blurred, breaking down the distinctions between image and referent, personal and public. This

18 Hargraves cites Susan J. Douglas’s model of “ironic viewing,” described as a response created when: “reality shows use idiotic, arrogant, or self-destructive behaviors which we are urged to judge and which are designed to make us feel much better about ourselves: however dumb or selfish we were today, at least we weren’t like that” (71-72).
also marks the influence of Sennett’s “intimate society” whereby the subjective experience of the individual is privileged over collective concerns. In the case of Intervention, the scourge of substance abuse and other behavioral disorders is not seen as a societal, governmental or public issue, but a problem that begins and ends with the individual sufferer, a belief that can also be situated within a neoliberal structuring of society. Baudrillard would call this the “obscenity” of a media culture in which all intimate details and personal sufferings are offered up for mediatisation and social consumption. What the popularity of Intervention suggests is that it is only when suffering is translated into visual terms, made part of a televisual narrative, that it gains significance.

The affective dimensions of Intervention are matched by the show’s implicit references to other media depictions of addiction. The repetitive nature of reality programming means that nearly any episode chosen at random would fulfill the deep affective confrontation with the viewer that amounts to a simulation. As detailed above, the show, despite the variety of subjects they document, follows a very consistent pattern of telling each subject’s story. With that in mind I have chosen examples from a number of episodes to support my claim that the show is both informed by pre-existing visual depictions of addiction and, in its fourteen seasons on air, has subsequently informed a perception of what addiction looks like. The visual signifiers used in Intervention are similar to the way Glynn describes how the format of law enforcement reality dramas Cops and American Detective create a “media template” for the behaviors of cops and criminals:

We know that everybody who steps in front of a Cops or American Detective videocam is “real,” but they play their roles with such dogged intensity that often we can’t quite be sure…We sense intuitively that everybody on Cops and
*American Detective* is playing a role that we (and they) expect them (selves) to play, but they often overplay their roles to just the point where we can no longer be certain – to where they couldn’t possibly be acting, because the act is so incredible. The more authentic it gets, the more apparent the artifice, for these characters are no less mediatized than “real.” (55)

When viewing the series as a whole, one can’t help but to ascertain very clear patterns of representation which are the result of choices made by those involved in the creation of each episode. These choices often involve playing into the viewer’s pre-existing perception of drug addiction, one gleaned from visual signifiers and simulacra which circulate in a number of different cultural forms. The outcome of this is a further blurring of the lines not only between reality and representation, but the line demarcating where one media text ends and another begins. This reflects the postmodern dictum that we live in an “imagistic society” whereby images have so saturated our daily lives that it becomes impossible to delineate between the real and the represented. I should include a caveat here to make clear that I am not suggesting the deep pain and suffering of the addicts depicted on intervention, often incited by harrowing trauma, does not come from a very real place in the subject’s life. What is of interest to me here is the way in which *Intervention* as a media text has chosen to frame the process of addiction, and the subsequent effect this has for the viewer.

The show regularly includes interview commentary, intertitles and visual imagery which invite the viewer to measure the depiction of the addict against pre-existing representations of substance dependency and behavioral disorders, along with other cultural forms. The episode “Lawrence” from the show’s fourth season documents the severe alcoholism of the owner of a successful chain of tanning salons in Las Vegas. Lawrence’s brother recalls another filmic
depiction of alcoholism when says that he is “not unlike Nicholas Cage in *Leaving Las Vegas.* He is drinking himself to death.” In “Sarah and Mikeal,” an episode about two young heroin addicts who are as addicted to the drug as they are to each other, Mikeal’s mother says they are like “Romeo and Juliet on heroin.” However, a more apt comparison would be the destructive, co-dependent relationship between the title characters in the *Sex Pistols* biopic *Sid & Nancy* (Alex Cox 1986). In A&E’s description of the show entitled “Dallas” they liken the subject’s lifestyle to the “heroin-chic” fashion trends made popular in the 1990s. These references serve to situate *Intervention* within a circuitry of mediated references that enlarge a simulation of addiction.

Several of the episodes emphasize the role that place, particularly drug and crime infested urban centres, play in the subject’s drug habit. Two episodes “Kristen” from the fourth season and “Tiffany” from the twelfth season – centre on two young women who trek from the quiet suburbs of West Virginia to Baltimore to purchase drugs and engage in prostitution, which finances their habit. In both of these episodes, Baltimore’s reputation as a haven for deviant behaviour is optically coded through carefully chosen footage highlighting images of urban squalor and in the testaments of interviewees, serving to highlight a selective representation of the city such as to evoke Baltimore-set crime shows *The Wire* and *Homicide: Life on the Streets.*19 In Kristen’s episode, we see an innocent yet sickly looking 23-year-old as she wanders around the seedy streets of Baltimore, buying heroin and injecting it intravenously in alleyways. In one scene staged to amplify the suspense of the viewer, Kristen’s mother drives from West Virginia to Baltimore at dusk to save her daughter from the dangers of the city. A distressed Kristen is shown walking around the streets while sounds of screams and glass breaking are

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19 Both *The Wire* and *Homicide* are television dramas based on the books of true crime writer David Simon.
heard in the background. There is a cut to an interview clip of Kristen saying, “It’s very
dangerous in the city.” It is later revealed that Kristen stole $400 worth of drugs from a
Baltimore dealer, and she fears the possible fatal repercussions of this.

The danger of the city is emphasized to an even greater extent in Tiffany’s episode,
which was filmed five years later. Like Kristen, Tiffany makes an almost daily trip into
Baltimore with her boyfriend, driving 90 miles from West Virginia to buy heroin. Tiffany
describes the city as the “heroin capital.” Her uncle Adam recalls the city’s reputation by saying
“Baltimore is known for drugs, crime, robberies, anything bad. It’s Baltimore.” The show
corroborates this description with an intertitle that reads “In 2012 Baltimore was rated one of the
10 most dangerous cities in the United States,” citing the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)
as their source. In both of these cases the peaceful and somewhat idyllic looking suburbs of West
Virgina are contrasted with the dark and decaying urban spaces of Baltimore. Additionally, both
of the episodes juxtapose the image of an innocent and pure looking white girl with the scourge
of an urban environment that has a predominantly black citizenry.\(^{20}\) The show imbricates the
stories of Kristen and Tiffany into a web of representation that encompasses geographic
associations with drug cultures.

The show’s visual coding of addicts also extends to the way that domestic spaces are
figured in the series. Within this visual coding one can detect a sharp delineation between “street
drugs” such as crack cocaine and heroin and the abuse of prescription drugs such as Xanax and
OxyContin. Street drugs are consumed in environments of squalor and filth. In Sarah and
Mikeal’s episode, we see the two shooting heroin in their dirty and decrepit apartment. In an
episode entitled “Rocky,” about championship boxer Rocky Lockridge’s descent into crack

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\(^{20}\) For an in-depth discussion of the role race has played in *Intervention* history see Daniels.
addiction, we see him shooting up on the streets of Camden, New Jersey where he lives in abandoned houses, described by one of his friends as “not fit for a human to live in.” By contrast, drugs such as Xanax and OxyContin, along with eating disorders bulimia and anorexia, are more commonly associated with the suburbs. The episode entitled “Katie” shows a 25-year-old woman with alcoholism and bulimia to be living in relative upper-middle class socio-economic comfort, the producer’s choosing to film her in the tidy living spaces of her suburban home.

The way that the show has informed a cultural perception of both addiction and recovery is exemplified in an episode entitled “Andrew.” The episode follows an 18-year old boy who suffers from bulimia. Initially, the episode follows Intervention’s typical format by first introducing Andrew by showing the mass amounts of food he binges on and then purges. The show then traces through Andrew’s childhood and adolescence, pointing to several harrowing episodes of teenage bullying coupled by feelings of paternal abandonment as the factors inciting his disorder. However, when the crew attempts to film the footage that normally comprises the ‘third chapter’ of each episode – showing more footage of the havoc that the disease has wrought on the subject’s physical and emotional being – Andrew refuses to be filmed. He threatens to call the police if the camera crew do not leave his home. It is revealed that Andrew submitted himself to the show and is fully aware that his family is about to stage an intervention. An intertitle reads that “Andrew and his parents deceived producers by concealing that Andrew submitted himself to the show.” In the midst of filming Andrew has decided he no longer wants to go through with the process, or to receive treatment. His family convenes and decides to hasten the intervention, making it a day earlier than Andrew anticipated. Andrew runs away from the intervention, imitating a scene that has become endemic to the show’s narrative of addiction. We sense that Andrew is playing to a scenario that has enacted itself many times on the show: the addict,
feeling deceived, strongly resists the intervention. This resistance is complicated by our knowledge that Andrew has submitted himself for the intervention. What we witness is the simulation of addiction, the line between what Andrew is actually experiencing and acting-out of the role of an Intervention subject disappear, in a similar fashion to the way Glynn describes the subjects of Cops.

Television shows like Intervention, ones that reveal the innermost trauma of its subjects and serve them up on a visual platter for spectatorial consumption, have come to proliferate. Securing Intervention’s unique status among these shows is both its pioneering nature – as one of the first television shows to establish the subgenre of “recovery television”, spawning a countless number of imitators – and its continued popularity. Although the show announced it was coming to an end in July of 2013, it was revived this year for a 14th season (Stedman). “Intervention Directory,” a blog dedicated to the show and its subjects, presents evidence of a strong but committed fan base. It also presents evidence of the way that each subject on the show has become a media object, with the site’s author neatly organizing the subjects under lists such as “Most Disturbing Episodes” or “Most In-Denial Addicts.” However, it also reveals the profound closeness that viewers feel with the subjects of the show. The comments section is filled with the inquiries of curious viewers, eager to follow-up and often expressing real concern that a particular subject has maintained his or her sobriety. This is further evidence that Intervention has been successful at suturing the imagined gap between spectator and subject, instilling a sense of connection and knowing in the viewer.
Conclusion

In the introduction to his critical analysis of Baudrillard’s work, written in 1989, Douglas Kellner asks whether or not his subject’s quick ascent to academic celebrity is a “quick blip on the cultural scene, soon to be replaced by the next turn of cultural fashion, or has he posed problems and offered positions that are likely to concern us for some time?”(1). Considering the current cultural predicament we find ourselves in, it is not hard to argue in favor of the latter. Evidence of persistent postmodern tendencies abound in 2015. If one needed further proof of the pervasiveness of a postmodern condition characterized by excessive self-exposure, proliferating visual symbols, and the fragmentation of social identities, one need look no further than social media platforms, the habitual use of which is part of many people’s daily lives. As I hope to have demonstrated, the media texts that I have discussed in this project represent an ongoing phenomenon which is not just limited to the realm of film and television. The internet has been a harbinger of the cultural shifts that Baudrillard and Boorstin predicted. As opposed to seeming hackneyed or dated, the postmodern project, by contrast, seems incredibly prescient in retrospect. One can’t help but wonder what Baudrillard and Boorstin would have thought of Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, forms which further dissolve the boundaries between real and represented, self and simulation.

All of these forms, but Instagram and Youtube in particular, fulfill the notion that the visual, Boorstin’s “world of the image,” is increasingly eclipsing our lived realities. Guy Debord, a contemporary of Baudrillard, argued that capitalism and consumerism transformed 1960s France into the “society of the spectacle.” A more apt description for our current cultural condition would be the spectacle of the mundane. Social media insists upon the translation of every instance of our lives into visual terms—the places we travel, the food we eat, and the books
we read. In this thesis I have attempted to demonstrate that postmodernism offers a compelling way to wrangle with a seemingly constant and endless slew of visual stimulants, and to make sense of the impact these stimulants exert on our social and ontological selves. Indeed, postmodernism’s interrogation of the image is one of the reasons it has been of such use value to film scholars, and why academics such as Jameson and Denzin have so readily taken to an application of these theories to film. To an even greater extent than fiction films, documentary and reality television, modes that raise concerns over the ability of the filmed instance to capture the real, prove to be particularly ripe objects of postmodern theoretical application.

As Baudrillard, Boorstin and others have observed, the increasing visualization of the social is one that has been hastened by the wide availability of digital technologies. The ubiquity of these technologies has been partially responsible for a postmodern breakdown of the differentiation between experts and amateurs. Instagram and YouTube allow for the amateur photographer or videographer to occupy the same informational and social space as experts. Eddy Bores-Rey has discussed the breakdown of the amateur/professional distinction with relation to citizen journalists. He argues that Instagram has allowed for the citizen journalists to create a hyperreal vision of the world through the ability to alter and manipulate photographs, in effect making the original referent disappear. His study of several prolific photojournalists on Instagram reveals that the collision of amateur and professional aesthetics “mediate the new meanings attached to emerging photographic practices and the technologies that make them possible, thus challenging our interpretations of authenticity, the real and what distinguishes professionals from amateurs” (587). What Borges-Rey’s argument demonstrates is that the creation of hyperreal simulations has infiltrated our everyday understanding of the world, not just from the film and television shows that we consume as entertainment, but a transference of
everyday epistemology into an optical spectacle.

Postmodernism’s tendency to see everything in visual terms is matched by a preoccupation of the self in non-fiction forms, resulting in an increase in the number of films that focus on the lives of particular individuals. The subsequent consequence of this is that we demand that filmed biographies offer us the same level of intimacy as we have in our everyday lives. We expect that the single subject story should feel real to us, potentially even more real than our everyday connections. That mediatisation of the individual regularly appears as a feature of contemporary non-fiction filmmaking is evidenced by the slate of biography and portraiture documentaries that have come out in recent years. Alex Gibney, one of the most prolific and acclaimed documentary auteurs of recent years, has regularly chosen to focus on single subjects of notorious stature, including disgraced former New York governor Eliot Spitzer (*Client 9: The Rise and Fall of Eliot Spitzer* (2010)), a scandalized Lance Armstrong (*The Armstrong Lie* (2014)) and has documentaries on Frank Sinatra and Steve Jobs upcoming. Netflix has also tapped into the desire for personal life stories with a slew of originally produced portraiture documentaries on subjects such as former United States Secretary of Treasury Henry Paulson (*HANK: Five Years from the Brink* (2013)), Nina Simone (*What happened Miss Simone?* (2015)), and comedian Tig Notaro (*Tig* (2015)). Framed in the context of obscene narcissistic visual obsession on social media, what the persistence of non-fiction portraiture shows us is a continual desire to search for and obtain the real through the photographed and filmed instance, even if that real may not be accessible.

What I endeavored to demonstrate in this thesis is that the postmodern emphasis on the imagistic nature of society is matched by a neoliberal preoccupation with the self, with what Sennett termed our “single life histories” (5). In Chapter One, I attempted to draw theoretical
linkages between postmodern theory, documentary scholarship, and the broad-ranging societal valuation of intimate revelation described by Sennett. The portraiture documentaries of Nick Broomfield, which I discussed in Chapter Two, represent a working through of the competing features of postmodernism, characterized by destabilized narratives and fragmented subjectivity, and the impetus to glean intimate revelations from documentary subjects. Broomfield’s films reflect on how public figures can only be accessed as imagistic simulacra, the truth of their person-hood buried under layers of competing visual signifiers. In the cases of both Heidi Fleiss and Aileen Wuornos, they acted as visual symbols onto which various ideological conceptions were projected. Broomfield’s techniques of self-reflexivity brings attention to the status of his films as a media text, inviting viewers to reflect on the processes of visual construction which engender a perception of the subject. The visualized subject is reflected to a different degree in Intervention and First Person, which I discussed in Chapter 3. In these television series, intimacy and pathos must be translated in visual and cinematic terms in order to be understood by the viewer. Intervention and First Person provide reflective examples of a prevailing trend in reality television characterized by the acceleration of intimacy and the exposure of the personal and traumatic exigencies of the subject’s personal experiences. These examples were intended to provide a rough, and thus inevitably incomplete, genealogy to help situate widespread digital and social media trends in a televisual history that has been incrementally brewing for the past several decades.

While postmodernism, with its emphasis on an imagistic understanding of the world, provides an appealing theoretical avenue when analysing film and television documentaries, it is certainly not fail safe. Like any body of theoretical texts, it has limitations and faults. The more I conducted in-depth my research for this thesis, the clearer the limitations of this theoretical
model became. In its ready insistence on the ubiquity of images, postmodernism often fails to comprehend that the representational choices being made in the production of images consciously or subconsciously reflect embedded and pre-existing belief systems. Although I did not initially intend to explicitly address ideological concerns in this thesis, one finds that a consideration of the way they factor into non-fiction narratives is unavoidable. While non-fiction films may indeed operate as simulations, they are inextricably bound to other media images which contribute to dominant notions of race, class, gender and sexuality.

The solution to this for future applications of postmodern theory may be to recognize that although the mediatized figure may exist in a state of hyperreality, this hyperreality is one that is informed by a pattern of representation that reveals problematic assumptions and render certain, often marginalised groups, invisible. The malleability of postmodern theory and its implicit resistance to intellectual authority and hierarchies of knowledge offers hope that greater emphasis can be put on ideological concerns, without wholly disavowing the project of postmodernism. As John Dovey has pointed out, it is tempting for media and film scholars to get caught up in the hyperbolic appeal of theories of simulacrum to the point where “there is little room for any exploration of specific texts which might reveal the importance of their function as ideology” (89). I would like to suggest that it is possible to create a space of ideological discussion by recognizing that simulacra, too, can convey political, ethical and social meanings. One could argue that breaking down the hyperreal qualities of certain non-fiction texts allows for an exploration of the false systems of belief from which these images emerge.

An additional avenue of scholarly address not covered in this project is a greater emphasis on extra textual factors, including news reports, memes, reviews and fan blogs, with an exploration of the way these contribute an understanding of non-fiction forms. In my analysis of
*Intervention* in Chapter Three, I touched briefly upon the fan blog “Intervention Directory,” which helps to legitimate my claim that viewers feel a deceptively authentic connection with the subjects portrayed on the show. A more incorporative methodology could potentially offer a revealing discourse analysis of comments that fans and critics have made online, further demonstrating the way viewers interact with these texts. For a future study, a twofold approach combining theory with empirical data and discourse analysis from watchers could provide additional insights into the questions offered by non-fiction portraiture. Although Baudrillard suggests that images, now directed to the viewing public through the television, computer and portable device, negate the spectator’s ability to talk back and break down traditional communicative patterns, the incorporation of audience discourse could re-introduce the possibility that we are not disempowered witnesses to the inundation of simulacra that create our reality.
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