

Visual Culture, Posthumanism and the Pythagorean Paradigm. Documentary vs the Politicization of Truth¹

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Abstract

The paper deals with a documentary narrative of the real story of a philosophical project that came out of a huge accident. The accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine, Soviet Union on April 26, 1986. In 1997, seven scientists involved into the accident leave Ukraine for health reasons. They settle on Gavdos, a small island south of Crete, the most distant border of Europe in the Mediterranean. They remain there for about fifteen years and initially have a major positive interaction with the local community, leading a Pythagorean School and several philosophical group meetings, public work, and constructions. During this time, they evolve a new philosophical approach to humanity, the option for immortality, based on what they call “Philosophical Evolution”, a combination of Pythagorean teaching and the ideas of Epicurus, and also specific views that can be related to critical posthumanism and transhumanism.

Keywords: *Visual Culture; Critical Posthumanism; Pythagorean Paradigm; Documentary; Politicization of Truth*

From visual culture to visual “truth”

The term “visual culture” is used today to describe a specific scientific area that consists of a set of visual practices and includes many academic subjects that focus on the study of the image, in an artistic or, more broadly, cultural context. The term is also found as “culture of the image”. James Elkins finds the first appearance of the term in 1972 in Michael Baxandall's book on 15th century Italian painting (Elkins, 2003, 1-7). The use of the term “visual culture” marks an historical shift in the meaning of vision itself, in the context of a continual re-examination and broadening of the concept of “optical”, which ultimately leads to a neologism: “visuality”. Visual Culture was thus created as a sub-discipline within the field of Cultural Studies, a broader discipline formed in England in the late 1950s to observe the influx of American culture that emphasizes the image (photography, cinema, comics, digital images, advertising).

However, the substantive study of visual culture begins during the 1990s and is linked to the policies of the international media, the study of visual image manipulation and the postcolonial analysis of the media society phenomenon, in the light of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and recently, posthumanism, during the age of information and globalization.

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The image, its social function, the visual perception, the new technologies and the subjectivities that constitute their interaction become dominant issues for any researchers.

According to Elkins, the shift towards an emphasis to the growing importance of the “visible”, but also of its manipulation, is due to two main factors: the organization of economies and societies based on images (which gradually replace the written text) and the overdevelopment of optical technologies (Elkins, 2003). The technologies of the image, from photography to cinema, television and computers, are decisively intertwined with reality and “the truth”, since the image is inextricably linked to the human condition and is the object of study and production of theory for both the positive-technological and the social sciences. At the same time, visual culture is a management solution for today’s multicultural societies in the globalized capitalist system. For Norman Bryson, between the subject and the world enter all the discourse versions that compose “optics” as a cultural construction, and which create the perception of “non-mediated visual experience” (Bryson, 1988, 90-91).

Nicholas Mirzoeff on the other hand, talks about the transition from René Descartes (1596-1650) to Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), and for the transformation of “I think therefore I exist” into “they see me, and I see that they see me” (Mirzoeff, 2002, 10). This includes the concept of surveillance by Michel Foucault (1926-1984), as well as what is described by the term *panopticism*, derived from the term *panopticon* earlier introduced by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) to define (through a prison plan he described) the meaning of visual surveillance for disciplinary purposes; Foucault used the term to describe a form of self-surveillance, an internalization of the gaze of power (Foucault, 2003, 61-71).

Karl Marx with Friedrich Engels, according to their writings in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, view the theory of labor as “a theory of disguised bondage” (2013, 43). For their historical/dialectical materialism, the emphasis on the visual could probably sound as a special kind of manipulation as they observe dialectical relations with objects in all the senses. Roland Barthes (1915-1980), in the study of *Camera Lucida* (1981), seeks the “essence of photography” in the personal—beyond public—recruitment, as a personal *animation* (Barthes, 1981, 20), while Guy Debord, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, describes the concept of spectacle as a social relationship between people mediated by images who are not related with the truth: “In a world that has really been turned upside down, the true is a moment of the false” (Debord, 1967, 3-13, 4, pt. 9). For Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media*, but also other researchers, this is the quintessence of the advertising image (McLuhan, 1964, 68-73). It is, however, strongly related to political truth.

Perceptions of the image are also shaped by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002, 94-136) in *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, who introduced the concept of “culture industry”, while Paul Virilio in *The Machine of Vision* highlights the role of optical technologies in surveillance but also in warfare, by creating virtual targets:

“Now objects perceive me”, the painter Paul Klee wrote in his Notebooks. This rather startling assertion has recently become objective fact, the truth. After all, aren't they talking about producing a “vision machine” in the near future, a machine that would be capable not only of recognizing the contours of shapes, but also of completely interpreting the visual field, of staging a complex environment close-up or at a distance? Aren't they also talking about the new technology of “visionics”: the



possibility of achieving sightless vision whereby the video camera would be controlled by a computer? The computer would be responsible for the machine's—rather than the televiewer's—capacity to analyze the ambient environment and automatically interpret the meaning of events. Such technology would be used in industrial production and stock control; in military robotics, too, perhaps (Virilio, 1994, 59).

While Virilio (1994, 63) refers to Gilles Deleuze's views on representation and cinematic perception (in Deleuze 1983; 1985), Jean Baudrillard (1994, 79-86) on the other hand connects the media with the concept of “simulation”, a process which he describes as making copies without originals. He also refers to technical metamorphoses of the body, criticizing what we already know as “transhumanism” (Baudrillard, 1994, 95-104). His views are shared with Douglas Kellner (2003, 15-17), who also refers to the connection between television images, ideology, and war. Finally, Lev Manovich (2016, 184-211) refers to the possibilities and social implications of widening the gaze through digital cinema.

It is not cinema but one of its sub-disciplines however, the *documentary*, that can hold pieces of truth in a media – ruled world of formal lies. According to Bill Nichols in his *Introduction to Documentary*:

Documentaries of social representation are what we typically call nonfiction. These films give tangible representation to aspects of the world we already inhabit and share. They make the stuff of social reality visible and audible in a distinctive way, according to the acts of selection and arrangement carried out by a filmmaker. They *give a sense of what we understand reality itself to have been*, of what it is now, or of what it may become. *These films also convey truths if we decide they do*. We must assess their claims and assertions, their perspectives and arguments in relation to the world as we know it and decide whether they are worthy of our belief. Documentaries of social representation offer us new views of our common world to explore and understand. (Nichols, 2001, 23). [my emphasis]

Documentary becomes thus a genre that attempts to conceive the truth by highlighting its sociopolitical power. It is perhaps the purest way to criticize any form of politicized truth.

The immortals at the southern point of Europe

My case study is *The Immortals at the Southern Point of Europe* (Labot & Moustakis, 2013), the documentary attempting to say the real story of a philosophical project that came out of a huge accident. On April 26, 1986, the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine, the Soviet Union at the time, suffered a massive explosion that released radioactive material across not only Ukraine but also Belarus, Russia, Scandinavia and Western Europe. In 1997, seven scientists who have survived the accident leave Ukraine for health reasons. They move to Greece and settle on Gavdos (Vatsiana village), a small island south of Crete, the southernmost point of Europe in the Mediterranean. They remain there for about fifteen years and form a philosophical group and a School influenced by Pythagorean theories. Their school gains international attention from “seekers of the truth”. They initially have positive interaction with the local community as they contribute with volunteer social work, and they organize an ecological way of living and a community receiving energy from nature. They construct a windmill, a solar energy bakery, photovoltaic panels, and an electricity generator.

They build a carpentry making furniture for the elderly. They even curve Christian altars, “iconostases”, and churches all over the island. In their teaching, on the other hand, they develop an alternative philosophical approach to the notion of the “human”, putting the option for immortality as central. They call it “Philosophical Evolution”. They also build a pentagon room where you enter from the top, for philosophical meetings and dinners/*symposia*. The dinner table is also a pentagon, as 5 is very important for the Pythagorean philosophy. Their school is a combination of Pythagorean teaching and the ideas of Epicurus that can easily be related to views of both transhumanism and critical posthumanism.

The documentary film records the story of their settlement on the island, keeping a special focus on the content of the Pythagorean teaching and the scientists’ perception of immortal beings. It was shot between 2013 - 2016³ and belongs to the ‘observational mode’ according to Nichols’ theory (Nichols, 2001, 109-116). The filmmakers attempt to tell the story from all sides following the protagonists in their everyday lives and their philosophical project in interaction with the locals and visitors. The film was screened at the 15th International Documentary Festival of Thessaloniki (2013) and other festivals.⁴

The script follows the scientists’ narratives about the accident and how they came very close to death but were finally rescued by a miraculous result of medical treatment. They had all been important back home: one of them, Andrei Drozdov, had been a leading member in the construction of the nuclear submarine *Kursk*, therefore he was called back to Ukraine after the submarine’s sinking to help drag it up. Members of the group were also a chemist, two electrical engineers, and a geologist. Gavdos was chosen as their migration place as one of the very few places in the world with a clear atmosphere and a very special energy that would bring them to a full recovery. However, conspiracy theories followed them from the beginning. Their departure was not unnoticed, especially by the Ukrainian yellow press and the CIA. It was also noticed by the Greek authorities, and it required the need to contact the American Embassy in Athens to assure they could remain on the island, especially as one of them, Boris, had an American ID. Conspiracy theories were also gradually created within the small community of the island: Could probably, behind the profile of “selfless workers and Orthodox Christian Russian scholars”, spies be hidden or members of a sinister sect? Why are they involved in the local class struggle?⁵ Why have they built a giant chair at the “southern point of Europe”? And who are all their visitors and students attending their school built under the ground in the shape of a pentagon? The philosophical agony of the seven scientists, their need to rebuild the world and give birth to a new “immortal” human being is finally demonized by the community and the authorities. The last act is played when reactions are sparked by the Church, culminating when the scientists start building a temple on the island, dedicated to Apollo. As a result, their relations with the locals are unsettled. Some of them leave the island while Andrei and others remain, keeping distance from both the community and their philosophical teaching.

The directors construct a narrative mainly based on interviews with the scientists, mainly represented by Andrei, and the locals. Their aim is, on one hand, to record the scientists’

³ Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/62810865>. Also: <https://trelogiannis.blogspot.com/2015/01/the-immortals-at-southern-point-of.html> and <https://www.gavdosisland.gr/el/video/video/athanatoi> (full version - unofficially)

⁴ Directors’ press conference: <https://www.filmfestival.gr/el/professionals/media-press/2605-newsid-el-1804>.

⁵ They had supported a poor local to build a house on a coast the major wanted to exploit by building a taverna.



“peculiar” philosophical thinking, while identifying at the same time how it was opposed to local beliefs.

Pythagorean philosophy vs the politicization of truth

We are living in an era where one’s ideology determines what one’s Truth is. The core of the teaching of the Ukrainian scientists is a comprehensive cultural critique opposing the politicization of the truth and is summarized in the sentence: “The immortal body is the achievement of the experience of human civilization” (IMM, 59:39).⁶ They believe that the transition from mortal human nature to an immortal meta-nature is a product of cultural experience concentrated on the vision of the “new human”, that must be fulfilled (IMM, 00:20). They look forward to the reconstruction of the world and its consequent development and improvement. Their proposal is actually a critical posthuman concept, according to which the transcendence and improvement of the human being is taking place, not with technology, against which they stand critically, but with the Pythagorean philosophy in a way reminiscent to “cognitive autopoiesis” and philosophical posthumanism as Francesca Ferrando writes in her book of that title (2019, 141-142).

The seven scientists believe that science, but also the arts, constitute a “very small piece of human intelligence” (IMM, 08:59) and that the abuse of technology leads humans to self-destruction. However, concealment over self-destructiveness leads to politicization of the truth. Thus, for Nietzsche, the politicization of truth becomes a struggle to maintain falsification.⁷ In this context, they also criticize communism and its own politicization of the truth: “we made the world of cars and computers, now we have to live in it. Is this human creation or is it [just] the development of the stone [technology]? [...] *All art is for animals. All activities that we think are human are also for animals.* Agriculture, industry, all these are animal activities. [...] By the way, the idea of communism is for animals. [...] I only do what is impossible and that alone. If I feel it is possible, I will not do it. That is the meaning of being human”. (IMM, 54:50) [my emphasis]. This is, on the one hand, a contradiction to a basic ideal of posthumanism as expressed in *Companion Species* (Haraway, 2021, 149-152), and on the other hand, completely in accordance with postmodern and posthumanist views on art (Tuncel, 2017, 114-125).

Philosophy emerges thus par excellence as the medium of achieving the impossible, something that corresponds to the measure of the real human who “precedes the action”; it constitutes a kind of contemplation theory of “practical life”: “Philosophy must come before action. It is in the nature of the laws of constructing the world. I build the world and it happens. This is a unique characteristic of the human” (IMM, 55:48). Philosophy always maintains a comparative advantage over technology, as it offers two tools that will achieve the change through which immortality will be achieved for the human: language and communication. Two media for controlling the politicization of truth (Stiegler, 2015, 86-89).

Ancient Greece stands out in this context as the ideal place in which mortals and immortals coexisted: “we consider Greece the birthplace of co-existence of immortals and mortals.

⁶ IMM is an abbreviation for the documentary title. The numbers indicate the film time.

⁷ In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra II*, chapter 20, On Redemption, Nietzsche says that the word ‘punishment’ is a lying word implying revenge that hypocritically asserts its good conscience. A word by which one conceals feelings of vengeful hatred, of will to power that would not exist if one would actually engage will to power. It’s like knowing the truth at some level but refusing to face it and lying becomes a politics to keep right on with not facing it. And this is something equal to self-destructiveness. Therefore, the immortality of self-healing becomes at least the healing of self-destructiveness (Nietzsche, 2006, 111).

There was a balance. Europe was basically born out of that. This is a pan-European offering of the Greeks to the whole history of Europe. We have to bring it back. However, the problem is that the human being has lost his/her orientation” (IMM, 36:49). Pythagorean philosophy consolidates communication between mortals and immortals, as the transition from homo sapiens to the “immortal human” is possible only after the transition to a level of collective existence (IMM, 54:15). This transition is the main reason for being a Pythagorean, as it demands living in philosophical groups sharing specific linguistic codes of communication (IMM, 44:19). The Pythagorean option comes for a second reason: because it cultivates *reasoning* on numbers to which symbolic significance is attached, and this is the basic criterion for distinguishing the human from any other being (IMM, 33:01-34:30). It comprises a clear system for the communication of pure truth seekers. And it also honestly communicates with Nietzsche’s denial of the truth (Sorgner, 2007, 15-37).

Another reason for following the Pythagorean approach is the philosophical dimension that the Pythagoreans attributed to the *letters of the alphabet* and the notion that the transcendence of the human will be achieved through language (IMM, 34:31). A final reason for studying the Pythagorean philosophy is that it constituted a special way of life and action that took place in the *mysteries* performed by the Pythagoreans: “from a strategic point of view it means that they [humans] must take a step towards immortality. A small step but let them do it” (IMM, 51:36).

The Chair is associated with the concept of transcending the human goal of achieving immortality of the body through the attainment of self-healing from natural diseases, and this is both an Epicurean and a critical posthumanistic concept (Markopoulou, 2019; Stiegler, 2015, 66-71): “the chair in Tripiti is a sign for the southernmost point of Europe. There are some who say that after having sat on the chair, many strange things happened to them. Like someone very ill, practically paralyzed, who was carried to the chair, a woman; five or six men carried her up the hill, put her on the chair and then she got up by herself” (IMM, 37:38). The Pythagorean life leads to a radical change of the body which is the precondition for achieving immortality. The change of the body is a special characteristic of the human that differentiates him/her from animals, which change only through mutation and death: “the idea of immortality exists in many philosophies in weaker forms. In Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism it is the immortality of the soul. But in the end, not many people want the immortality of the body. [...] We consider human someone who, having life experience, has the ability to change. [...] I can change in such a way that life will not be able to end. This is not eternal life. It is a life that affirms immortality through behavior” (IMM, 56:57, 1:00:07).

Finally, I would like to stress that the documentary itself stands against the politicization of the truth. We watch the realistic recording of a “difficult” story, of a special group of people developing their thinking and teaching in a sensitive geographical area of politicized truth. This is precisely the reason for the Ukrainian scientists’ adventures with the authorities and the local community. And this is the ultimate reason for their verbal “disappearance” and the current concealment of their story. People visit nowadays the “giant chair” as a touristic attraction, stripped of its philosophical content. Because we are living in an era where one’s ideology determines what one’s Truth is.



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