

Preenactment, Now and Then

In what feels like a lifetime ago, but in truth is less than twenty years ago, I gave a talk on what I called preenactment in documentary at the “Now (and Again)” BFI symposium. The symposium was focused on reenactment, a topic that never ceases to trouble the peace that documentary as a category seems utterly unable to find. These forays into scripted setups, often complete with actors, lighting, and props, make the already difficult proposition that documentary is entirely divorced from fiction an even harder sell.

Unbelievably, looking back at my own archive, I found an abstract for the talk dated before the talk was given, but written proleptically in the past tense, a preenactment itself. It foretells a resounding flop:

20 April 2007
London

Alisa Lebow gave a talk on what she called “preenactment” at the BFI on 28 April. It came toward the end of an all-day symposium, but raised some issues that had not been explored in the other presentations. The question of preenactment is a thorny one. There is the obvious objection that you cannot pre-enact what has not yet been enacted. Although, Lebow seemed to think that one could, at least as well as one could re-enact past events that remained undocumented. The films she discussed were premised on the fact that

Alisa Lebow, “Preenactment, Now and Then,” *JCMS* 64, no. 3 (Spring 2025): 144–149.

research can be conducted so as to reasonably deduce future events. Lebow used the term “hypothetical” documentary to describe the subgenre. The response was mixed. Some agreed that documentary had as much a place exploring the future as it did the past and present. However, others were decidedly agitated by the prospect of what seemed like an argument in favor of documentary divination. Questions raised: What ever happened to authenticity, veracity, truth? How can we speak about the truth of something that hasn’t (yet) happened? Should documentary filmmakers be in the business of prognostication? Isn’t it merely apocryphal? Lebow suggested that this was a burgeoning area of documentary practice that couldn’t just be wished away. Her thesis, though it was rejected by the crowd and she was eventually booed off the podium, was that preenacted documentaries were here for the foreseeable future. And it remains to be seen whether they do indeed foresee it. As she was escorted off the stage she continued to insist that the future belongs to documentary.

At the time of my talk, the theme of preenactment appeared somewhat outlandish, stretching credulity and entering the zone of the fake, the fabricated, or the false, evincing a distinctly un-documentary impulse. I was ambivalent about the topic myself, as evidenced by just how long I’ve let the work languish.

I say it feels like a lifetime ago also because back then I could frame my discussion within the discursive imprimatur of post-structuralism, which is no longer quite as readily available to scholars. Post-structuralism instigated a critique (of objectivity, of scientific certainty) that has become trickier to assert in the post-truth era. The post-structuralist approach maintained that a core problem plaguing Western epistemology was a belief in an ultimately unattainable objectivity, the pursuit of which, one could extrapolate, merely masked a white, straight, male, Euro-American bias. That critique of objectivity has since been appropriated and weaponized by that same privileged elite. So, while many of post-structuralism’s insights were demonstrably correct, it is no longer straightforward to contend that objective truth is chimerical when whole political platforms and authoritarian regimes are using such claims against the verifiability of certain truths (like the legitimacy of an election or rigged voting machines).

In the past, one could argue, without multiple caveats, that even the scientific method lays claim to some form of speculation. What else is a hypothesis but an educated guess about a future result that may or may not prove to be correct—yet one that nonetheless advances a position based on extensive research, training, background knowledge, and a good solid hunch? Now, as I write this in 2025, even while I continue to be persuaded by the validity of these post-structural claims, I cannot afford to ignore the radical usurpation of this argument by those who, rather than wishing to challenge historical inequities, hope to further entrench them by authoritarian means. The era of fake news and alternative facts, proliferated through means of both traditional and new media, human and post-human forms of mass

communication, has forced a reckoning with what in the end are the limits of skepticism about documentary's truth claims.

Post-structuralist critique did not intend for science or rationality to be utterly distrusted but rather rejigged these epistemologies to admit for other possible approaches, reducing rationality's exclusive grip on notions of truth and opening thought to worldings which that rigid paradigm had actively foreclosed. It's as if today's authoritarians were sitting at the back of the classroom missing the main thrust of the argument—against hegemony, against domination, against usurpation of control for the purposes of subjugation—and only heard the part about the manipulability of facts and the inevitability of bias. Of course, authoritarian leaders never needed us to tell them they had the power to control the narrative. Even Joseph Goebbels did not invent this power-communications nexus, though he may have helped perfect its modern-era incarnation.

In direct response to this unabashed mendacious authoritarian turn, Erika Balsom provocatively dispensed with the received wisdom of documentary studies and declared her desire to be situated firmly in the “reality-based community.” She tossed her hat in with the upsurge in observational documentary witnessed in the 2010s, privileging that mode as in fact making a renewed claim to reliably representing reality.¹ Her declarations might have sounded naive and old-fashioned had they not come at a moment when everywhere one encountered what had recently come to be referred to as “alternative facts.”²

Balsom's declared desire to abandon radical relativism led another documentary scholar, Toby Lee, to persuasively update and reframe the post-structuralist argument in her retort.³ Lee admirably challenges Balsom's perhaps too hasty re-embrace of notions of truthfulness in documentary. In her article “The Radical Unreal,” Lee maintains the importance of “the unreality effect” for its ability to envision alternatives to the world as we have come to know it. By challenging dominant notions of reality, she maintains that this “unreality effect” entails a “vital strategy of political resistance.”⁴ She also reminds us that such strategies, in the hands of talented filmmakers, have long represented a vibrant tool for dissent. Lee asserts that any retrenchment to a supposedly firmer “reality” has “historically been reserved for the privileged few,” and for the rest, “the ‘real’ has itself long been a battleground, or worse yet, a weapon or tool of oppression.”⁵

Lee's position helps re-open the path that I had tentatively begun to chart all those years ago, to (responsible, ethical, politically motivated) documentary futurizing. And while not all preenactment documentaries share Lee's concerns—they do not necessarily stage future potentialities

1. Thomas Waugh critiqued the apolitical stance of observational cinema in his article “Beyond Verité: Emile de Antonio and the New Documentary of the 70s,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 10–11 (1976): 33–39.

2. Erika Balsom, “The Reality-Based Community,” *e-flux Journal*, no. 83 (2017), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/83/142332/the-reality-based-community/>.

3. Toby Lee, “The Radical Unreal: Fabulation and Fantasy in Speculative Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (2021): 9–18, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2021.74.4.9>.

4. Lee, 10.

5. Lee, 17.

originating from a place of contested present reality—they stake the same claim to documentary’s right to imagine otherwise, in this case in the future tense. Indeed, preenactment in documentary can be said to be an extension of what Andrea Reiter calls “prospectivity,” something shared by all documentaries that have as their aim to signal alternatives to the current situation.⁶ Prospective documentaries may not attempt to paint a picture of a future for us, but they certainly attempt to “initiate future oriented thinking.”⁷ So, if the future inheres as a vector toward a future imaginary even for documentaries that do not attempt fabulation, then it’s one small step for documentary to also attempt to envision such a future.

When writing back in 2007, my concern was mainly abstract, asking what it might mean for documentary, an address that is largely seen to be grounded in the historical event, to speak in the future tense. My focus at the time was on journalistically inclined docudramas, such as *Death of a President* (Gabriel Range, Channel 4, 2006) and *Smallpox 2002: The Silent Weapon* (Dan Percival, BBC Two, 2003). Both model a type of counterfactual documentary science fiction, staging a “what if” scenario based on the evidence at hand. While these were never going to be the most innovative examples of future-oriented documentary and had no obvious relation to the radical futurisms that, for instance, T. J. Demos writes about, the films followed popular documentary formulas so closely that they warranted attention as notable iterations of the documentary form.⁸

At the time, and in the absence of any sustained scholarship in the documentary field about the futuristic documentary, I enlisted thinking in three cognate fields: history, philosophy, and psychoanalysis.⁹ The eminent historian Eric Hobsbawm once argued that it was not only possible but imperative that the historian make predictions about the future—as long as these predictions were based on sound analysis rather than mere desire.¹⁰ In philosophy, Immanuel Kant appears to have had objections to speculative reason but had no qualms about what he calls “hypothetical reason,” based as it would have to be “on something perfectly certain.”¹¹ In other words, if searching for the imprimatur of two of the disciplinary pillars of Western rationalism, one can surely find it.

6. Andrea Reiter, “Prospectivity in Political Documentaries,” in *Utopia and Reality: Documentary, Activism and Imagined Worlds*, ed. Simon Spiegel et al. (University of Wales Press, 2020), 138–166.

7. Reiter, 139–140.

8. See T. J. Demos, *Radical Futurisms: Ecologies of Collapse, Chronopolitics, and Justice-to-Come* (Sternberg Press, 2023); and his earlier article “Radical Futurism: Documentary’s Chronopolitics,” *Trigger*, June 11, 2021, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://fomu.be/trigger/articles/radical-futurism-documentarys-chronopolitics>.

9. Two notable exceptions were Paul Ward’s excellent article “The Future of Documentary? ‘Conditional Tense’ Documentary and the Historical Record,” in *Documentations: Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and Fictional Filmmaking*, ed. Gary D. Rhodes and John Parris Springer (McFarland, 2006), 270–283; and Mark J. P. Wolf, “Subjunctive Documentary: Computer Imaging and Simulation,” in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 274–291.

10. Eric Hobsbawm, “Looking Forward: History and the Future,” in *On History* (Abacus, 2007), 49–73.

11. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (J. M. Dent, 2000), 499–500.

But it was in the field of psychoanalysis where I found the most complex and fruitful grounds for thought. Of course, psychoanalysis has always had a great deal to say about repetition and its compulsions, which pertains directly to what we call reenactment. The preenactments that I had been concerned with also repeat or retread familiar traumatic ground while preparing the ground for future events. Perhaps we can call it the prepetition compulsion? Here we can perceive resonances with Slavoj Žižek's work on 9/11 in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, where aviation disaster films pre-imagine events that will take place in the future, pre-creating or pre-viewing images in order to better imagine or even facilitate their fulfillment.¹² Surely films such as *Death of a President* and *Smallpox 2002* in some way partake in this coping mechanism.

The prepetition compulsion would seem to be a function of what Freud famously referred to, in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, as wish fulfillment. In this case, these films assert, in effect, *this hasn't happened yet, but we harbor a deep desire for it to do so*, and the cinematic dream machine is the place where this desire can manifest itself prior to the event. Like most of the mainstream preenactment films to date, a film such as BBC's *Death of a President* buries its latent wish fulfillment under an apparent preventive motivation: more cautionary *be careful what you wish for* than celebratory *wouldn't this be grand*.

Death of a President, made and broadcast while George W. Bush still held the office of US president, proposes without enthusiasm but in great detail a hypothetical future in which Bush is assassinated. In this counterfactual future imaginary, the story goes, if Bush were to be assassinated tomorrow, Dick Cheney would become president, Homeland Security would extend its powers, there would be a police crackdown on all oppositional activities, anti-Muslim hysteria would reach a fevered pitch, and civil liberties would become a distant memory.

Repetition compulsion and wish fulfillment may have been at work given that much of the plotted pretext from this 2006 film accurately describes the current sociopolitical reality in North America and Europe. However, wish fulfillment may be insufficient to fully explain the operations of the political hypothetical's preenactment agenda. These preenactments are mainly meant as object lessons—a type of preventive foreshadowing. They amount to an inversion of George Santayana's famous phrase, that those who can envision the potentially pernicious aspects of the future may prevent us from being condemned to live them.¹³

Perhaps beyond psychoanalytic wish fulfillment, preenactments should instead be understood as positioning themselves more in the sacralized space of predictive prophecy, bearing just the veneer of scientific or forensic accuracy. When projected into the future, documentary's *truth effect* can transform into a kind of *divination effect*. Due to the assertive stance and heightened

12. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (Verso, 2002).

13. Philosopher George Santayana's famous aphorism to which this sentence refers, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," is from his five-volume study *The Life of Reason, or The Phases of Human Progress* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905–1906).

realism of the techniques used, these films don't merely hypothesize but appear to prophesize, asserting not *this could happen*, but *this will happen*.

It seems that not all filmmakers are entirely averse to being seen as prophets. As the producer of *Smallpox 2002*, Simon Chinn, dissimulated a bit too excitedly, "We began production on *Smallpox 2002* in February 2001. 'This is not science fiction,' had been our mantra, this could happen. This film is not about a distant future, it's about tomorrow. Suddenly, seven months later [with 9/11 and the threat of Anthrax], bioterrorism became a reality and *Smallpox 2002* acquired the kind of prescience it had never sought."¹⁴

We are left to wonder, had it really not sought to be prescient? Perhaps prescience and foreshadowing are precisely what such a film seeks: documentary as a powerful tool for prognostication.

Science, fiction, hypothesis, wish fulfillment, object lesson, or prognostication—call them what you will. These films and more form part of the documentary field, and it is only now that the question of futurity, fabulation, and science fiction are gaining traction among documentary scholars. Years after Mark Wolf and Paul Ward started the ball rolling, and I made my first forays into this territory, it seems the field of documentary studies is finally ready to reckon with *the future of documentary*. I wonder if this turn has something to do with the palpable fear that the future itself is rapidly being foreclosed. There's nothing quite like the imminent threat of extinction to get people's future imaginaries flowing.

Alisa Lebow is Professor of Screen Media at the University of Sussex. Her research is focused on questions of the political in documentary, most recently thinking with and against documentary incursions and interventions in the logics of the Anthropocene, with special attention to futuristic documentary. For more information: www.alisalebow.net.

14. "Smallpox 2002," BBC, October 28, 2014, accessed January 15, 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/smallpox2002/>.