

INTRODUCTION TO

DOCUMENTARY

Second Edition

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Bloomington & Indianapolis

This book is a publication of

Indiana University Press 601 North Morton Street Bloomington, Indiana 47404-3797 USA

www.iupress.indiana.edu

Telephone orders 800-842-6796 Fax orders 812-855-7931

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Catalogingin-Publication Data

Nichols, Bill, [date]
Introduction to documentary
/ Bill Nichols. — 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical
references and index.
Includes filmography.
ISBN 978-0-253-35556-0 (cloth : alk.
paper) — ISBN 978-0-253-22260-2
(pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Documentary
films—History and criticism. I. Title.
PN1995.9.D6N539 2010
070.1'8—dc22

2010017294

5 15 14 13 12

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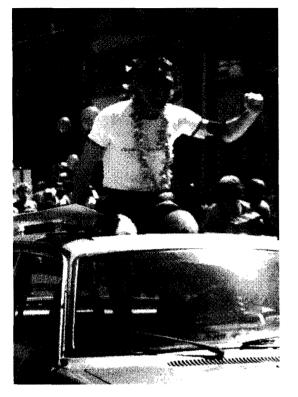
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1 How Can We Define Documentary Film?

ENTER THE GOLDEN AGE

This introduction to the ways in which documentary engages with the world as we know it takes up the series of questions indicated by the chapter titles. These questions are the commonsense sort of questions we might ask ourselves if we want to understand documentary film. Each question takes us a bit further into the domain of documentary; each question helps us understand how a documentary tradition arose and evolved and what it has to offer us today.

The current Golden Age of documentaries began in the 1980s. It continues unabated. An abundance of films has breathed new life into an old form and prompted serious thought about how to define this type of filmmaking. These films challenge assumptions and alter perceptions. They see the world anew and do so in inventive ways. Often structured as stories, they are stories with a difference: they speak about the world we all share and do so with clarity and engagement. Anyone who has come of age since the 1980s doesn't need to be convinced of this, but older generations may have to adjust their assumptions about the power of nonfiction relative to fiction. In a time when the major media recycle the same stories on the same subjects over and over, when they risk little in formal innovation, when they remain beholden to powerful sponsors with their own political agendas and restrictive demands, it is the independent documentary film that has brought a fresh eye to the events of the world and told stories, with



The Times of Harvey Milk (Robert Epstein and Richard Schmeichen, 1984). A significant influence on the acclaimed 2008 feature film, Milk, with Sean Penn as Harvey Milk, this documentary traces the career of the first openly gay political figure. Courtesy of Rob Epstein/Telling Pictures, Inc.

verve and imagination, that broaden limited horizons and awaken new possibilities.

Documentary has become the flagship for a cinema of social engagement and distinctive vision. The documentary impulse has rippled outward to the internet and to sites like YouTube and Facebook, where mock-, quasi-, semi-, pseudo- and bona fide documentaries, embracing new forms and tackling fresh topics, proliferate. Still one of many routes that aspiring directors take en route to their first feature film, documentary filmmaking is now, more than ever, an end in itself. The cable channels, low-cost digital production and easy-to-distribute DVDs, the internet and its next-to-nothing costs of dissemination, along with its unique forms of word of mouth enthusiasm, together with the hunger of many for fresh perspectives and alternative visions, give the documentary form a bright and vibrant future.

The Oscars from the mid-eighties onward mark the ascendancy of the documentary as a popular and compelling form. Never known for its bold preferences, often sentimental in its affections, the Academy of



Eyes on the Prize (Henry Hampton, 1987). The film depends heavily on historical footage to recapture the feel and tone of the civil rights movement of the early 1960s. The capacity of historical images to lend authenticity to what interviewees tell us makes their testimony all the more compelling. Courtesy of Blackside Inc./Photofest.

Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has nonetheless been unable to help itself when it comes to acknowledging many of the most outstanding documentaries of the current Golden Age. Consider the Oscar winners and some of the runners-up from the 1980s:

- The Times of Harvey Milk (1984), about the pioneering gay activist and politician Harvey Milk
- Broken Rainbow (1985), about the eviction of 10,000 Navajo from their ancestral lands in the 1970s, and Lourdes Portillo and Susana Muñoz's Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (1985), about the mothers who protested the illegal "disappearance" of their sons and daughters by the Argentine government, along with runner-up Ken Burns's first Oscar-nominated film, The Statue of Liberty
- Artie Shaw: Time Is All You've Got (1985), about the great jazz musician, and

- Down and Out in America (1986), about those most affected by the mid-eighties recession; the co-Oscar winners in 1986
- Runner-ups Radio Bikini (1987), about the atomic bomb blast that resulted in radiation death and injury to many, and Eyes on the Prize (1987), the epic story of the civil rights movement
- Hotel Terminus (1988), about the search for the infamous
 Nazi Klaus Barbie, and runner-up Christine Choy and
 Renee Tajima-Peña's Who Killed Vincent Chin? (1988),
 about the murder of a young Chinese-American man whom
 an unemployed Detroit autoworker attacked, partly out of
 irrational rage at the success of the Japanese auto industry in
 their competition with domestic car makers
- The AIDS-related tale of the Quilts Project, Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt (1989)
- American Dream (1990), Barbara Kopple's penetrating study of a prolonged, complex labor strike, and runner-up Berkeley in the Sixties (1990), a rousing history of the rise of the free speech and the anti-Vietnam War movements.

Conspicuous by their absence from this list are some of the first major box office successes of the late 1980s and early 1990s: Errol Morris's brilliant *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), about an innocent man awaiting execution in Dallas, Texas; Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989), about his mock-heroic attempt to ask the head of General Motors, Roger Smith, what he planned to do about all the folks left unemployed when he closed a factory in Flint, Michigan; and the extraordinary chronicle of 4 years in the lives of two high school basketball players whose ambition it is to play in the NBA: *Hoop Dreams* (1994).

These films, like dozens of others that have found national and international audiences at festivals, in theaters, and on cable and websites, attest to the resounding appeal of the voice of the filmmaker. This is not simply a voice-over commentary—although it is striking how many recent films rely on the actual voice of the filmmaker, speaking directly and personally of what he or she has experienced and learned. It is a voice that issues from the entirety of each film's audio-visual pres-



Who Killed Vincent Chin? (Renee Tajima-Peña and Christine Choy, 1988). Throughout the film, the directors draw on footage taken by local television stations as well as their own footage to explore what led to Vincent Chin's murder. This shot is a still camera shot taken by the filmmakers as television crews jockeyed to cover the event as well. The victim's mother is speaking at a rally with the Reverend Jesse Jackson in attendance. Courtesy of the filmmaker.

ence: the selection of shots, the framing of subjects, the juxtaposition of scenes, the mixing of sounds, the use of titles and inter-titles—from all the techniques by which a filmmaker speaks from a distinct perspective on a given subject and seeks to persuade viewers to adopt this perspective as their own. The spoken voices of filmmakers like Jonathan Caouette (*Tarnation*, 2003), Morgan Spurlock (*Super Size Me*, 2004), Zana Briski (*Born into Brothels*, 2004), and, of course, Michael Moore (*Fahrenheit 9/11* [2004] and *Sicko* [2007]) remind us that these filmmakers maintain their distance from the authoritative tone of corporate media in order to speak to power rather than embrace it. Their stylistic daring—the urge to stand in intimate relation to a historical moment and those who populate it—confounds the omniscient commentary

of conventional documentary and the detached coolness of television news. Seeking to find a voice in which to speak about subjects that attract them, filmmakers, like all great orators, must speak from the heart in ways that both fit the occasion and issue from it.

THE SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND: DEFINING DOCUMENTARY FILM

Given the vitality of expression, range of voices, and dramatic popularity of documentary film, we might well wonder what, if anything, all these films have in common. Have they broadened the appeal of documentary by becoming more like feature fiction films in their use of compelling music, reenactments and staged encounters, sequences or entire films based on animation, portrayals of fascinating characters and the creation of compelling stories? Or do they remain a fiction unlike any other? That is, do they tell stories that, although similar to feature fiction, remain distinct from it? This book will answer in the affirmative, that documentaries are a distinct form of cinema but perhaps not as completely distinct as we at first imagine.

A concise, overarching definition is possible but not fundamentally crucial. It will conceal as much as it will reveal. More important is how every film we consider a documentary contributes to an ongoing dialogue that draws on common characteristics that take on new and distinct form, like an ever-changing chameleon. We will, however, begin with some common characteristics of documentary film in order to have a general sense of the territory within which most discussion occurs.

It is certainly possible to argue that documentary film has never had a very precise definition. It remains common today to revert to some version of John Grierson's definition of documentary, first proposed in the 1930s, as the "creative treatment of actuality." This view acknowledges that documentaries are creative endeavors. It also leaves unresolved the obvious tension between "creative treatment" and "actuality." "Creative treatment" suggests the license of fiction, whereas "actuality" reminds us of the responsibilities of the journalist and historian. That neither term has full sway, that the documentary form balances creative vision with a respect for the historical world, identifies, in fact, one source of documentary appeal. Neither a fictional

invention nor a factual reproduction, documentary draws on and refers to historical reality while representing it from a distinct perspective.

Commonsense ideas about documentary prove a useful starting point. As typically formulated they are both genuinely helpful and unintentionally misleading. The three commonsense assumptions about documentary discussed here, with qualifications, add to our understanding of documentary filmmaking but do not exhaust it.

1. Documentaries are about reality; they're about something that actually happened.

Though correct, and although built into Grierson's idea of the "creative treatment of actuality," it is important to say a bit more about how documentaries are "about something that actually happened." We must note, for example, that many fiction films also address aspects of reality. Do the Right Thing (1989) deals with the very real issue of racism; Schindler's List (1993) tells the true story of Oscar Schindler, a Nazi Party member who saved the lives of over a thousand Jews, and JFK (1991) reexamines the actual assassination of President John F. Kennedy, using Abraham Zapruder's documentary footage of the president as the rifle shots struck him.

We might, therefore, modify this definition of documentary by saying, "Documentary films speak about actual situations or events and honor known facts; they do not introduce new, unverifiable ones. They speak directly about the historical world rather than allegorically." Fictional narratives are fundamentally allegories. They create one world to stand in for another, historical world. (In an allegory or parable everything has a second meaning; the surface meanings therefore may constitute a disguised commentary on actual people, situations, and events.) Within an alternative fictional world a story unfolds. As it does so it offers insights and generates themes about the world we already inhabit. This is why we turn to fiction to understand the human condition.

Documentary films, though, refer directly to the historical world. The images, and many of the sounds, they present stem from the historical world directly. Although this statement will receive qualification later, documentary images generally capture people and events that belong to the world we share rather than present characters and

actions invented to tell a story that refers back to our world obliquely or allegorically. One important way in which they do so is by respecting known facts and providing verifiable evidence. They do much more than this, but a documentary that distorts facts, alters reality, or fabricates evidence jeopardizes its own status as a documentary. (For some mockumentaries and for some provocative filmmakers this may well be exactly what they set out to do: as we will see, *Land without Bread* (1932) is a prime example of this possibility.)

2. Documentaries are about real people.

This statement, although true, also needs modification. Fiction films also focus on real people, except that these people are usually trained actors playing assigned roles (characters). Viewers often go to fiction films to see their favorite stars, even if the film itself seems mediocre. In fiction real people assume roles and become known as the characters who populate a fictional world.

A more accurate statement might be, "Documentaries are about real people who do not play or perform roles." Instead, they "play" or present themselves. They draw on prior experience and habits to be themselves in the face of a camera. They may be acutely aware of the camera's presence, which, in interviews and other interactions, they address directly. (Direct address occurs when individuals speak directly to the camera or audience; it is rare in fiction where the camera functions as an invisible onlooker most of the time.)

The presentation of self in front of a camera in documentary might be called a performance, as it is in fiction, but this term may confuse as much as clarify. What happens in a documentary differs from a stage or screen performance in the usual sense. Real people, or social actors, as Erving Goffmann pointed out several decades ago in his book, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), present themselves in everyday life in ways that differ from a consciously adopted role or fictional performance. A stage or screen performance calls on the actor to subordinate his or her own traits as an individual to represent a specified character and to provide evidence through his or her acting of what changes or transformations that character undergoes. The ac-

tor remains relatively unchanged and goes on to other roles, but the character he or she plays may change dramatically. All of this requires training and relies on conventions and techniques.

The presentation of self in everyday life involves how a person goes about expressing his or her personality, character, and individual traits, rather than suppressing them to adopt a role. It is how people undergo change as people, rather than how they represent change in fictional characters. There is no specific training for self-presentation other than the experience of becoming a member of society.

Instead of a gap between the presentation of self and the actual person, the "front" a person presents serves as a way to negotiate with others about the nature and quality of an interaction as it unfolds. Self-presentation allows the individual to reveal more or less of himor herself, to be frank or guarded, emotional or reserved, inquisitive or distant, all in accord with how an interaction unfolds moment by moment. The presentation of self is less an adopted mask than a flexible means of adaptation. It suggests that individual identity develops in response to others and is not a permanent, indelible feature. Some have even argued that gender identity (how a person understands his or her masculine or feminine nature) possesses a fluid, adaptable quality. The presentation of self comes into full play when people come before the camera and interact with filmmakers. It is not the same as adhering to a predetermined role.

In other words, a person does not present in exactly the same way to a companion on a date, a doctor in a hospital, his or her children at home, and a filmmaker in an interview. Nor do people continue to present the same way as an interaction develops; they modify their behavior as the situation evolves. Friendliness prompts a friendly presentation, but the introduction of a sarcastic remark may prompt guardedness. In documentaries, we expect social actors to present themselves in this sense, not perform the role of a character of the filmmaker's devising, even if the act of filming has a definite influence on how they present themselves. Fiction films such as Battleship Potemkin (1925), Bicycle Thieves (1948), Salt of the Earth (1954), and Shadows (1960) and TV shows like Real World or Survivor give us untrained social actors playing roles so strongly shaped by the filmmaker or producers



Monster (Patty Jenkins, 2003). Charlize Theron, a former model, dramatically altered her appearance to play the down-and-out Aileen Whornos. We learn very little about Ms. Theron as an individual apart from her acting skill as the film dwells on the character she plays. Copyright Media 8 Entertainment. Courtesy of Film Look Studios.

that these works are usually treated as fictions even though their style locates them very close to the documentary tradition.

3. Documentaries tell stories about what happens in the real world.

This commonsense notion refers to the story-telling power of documentaries. They tell us what leads up to actual events or real changes, be they the experiences of an individual or an entire society. Documentaries tell us about how things change and who produces these changes.

This notion also needs refinement. The basic question is, When documentaries tell a story whose story is it? The filmmaker's or the subject's? Does the story clearly derive from the events and people involved or is it primarily the work of the filmmaker, even if based on reality? We need to add to this commonsense notion something like, "To the extent a documentary tells a story, the story is a plausible representation



Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer (Nick Broomfield, 1992). In this documentary we see and hear Aileen Wuornos herself talk about her life. We learn a great deal from how she presents herself to the filmmaker as well as from what others say about her. Broomfield openly acknowledges the complex negotiations, and payments, involved in making the film. Courtesy of Nick Broomfield.

of what happened rather than an imaginative interpretation of what might have happened."

In most fiction films the story is essentially the filmmaker's even if based on actual events. "This is a true story" can easily be the introduction to a fiction film that draws from historical events for its plot. Schindler's List is not the story as told by Oscar Schindler himself or by the people he saved but an imaginative, allegorical representation of his story as told by Steven Spielberg, even though it is heavily based on historical facts. Monster (2003) is likewise a fictional account of the life of Aileen Wuornos, a female serial killer, but with Charlize Theron

playing Ms. Wuornos. By contrast, Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer (1992) is a documentary by Nick Broomfield that features Aileen Wuornos herself and addresses her life directly.

The "creative treatment of actuality," to loop back to Grierson's definition, allows "treatment" to include story telling, but such stories must meet certain criteria to qualify as documentaries. This is akin to the criteria of factual accuracy and interpretative coherence that governs history writing. The division of documentary from fiction, like the division of historiography from fiction, rests on the degree to which the story fundamentally corresponds to actual situations, events, and people versus the degree to which it is primarily a product of the filmmaker's invention. There is always some of each. The story a documentary tells stems from the historical world but it is still told from the filmmaker's perspective and in the filmmaker's voice. This is a matter of degree, not a black-and-white division.

A surprising number of documentaries, just like fiction films, tell stories—from how migrant farmworkers experience abject poverty as they move from Florida to New York harvesting the nation's bountiful crops in Edward R. Murrow's trenchant television documentary, Harvest of Shame (1960), to how, in 1974, Philippe Petit managed to walk from the top of one World Trade Center tower to the other in Man on Wire (2008). In these cases the stories told speak about the actual events directly, not allegorically, and the film adheres to the known historical facts. Social actors, people, present themselves in fluid, negotiated, revealing ways. They don't play roles or characters of someone else's invention.

Nanook of the North (1922), discussed in some detail in chapter 9, where it serves as a model for how to write about documentary films, is a vivid case in point. Whose story is it? The story is ostensibly that of Nanook, an intrepid Inuit leader and great hunter. But Nanook is to a large degree Robert Flaherty's invention. His nuclear family matches European and American family structure more than Inuit extended families. His hunting methods belong to a period some 30 or more years prior to the time that film was made. The story is of a bygone way of life that Nanook embodies in what amounts to a role and character performance more than a presentation of self in everyday life at the time of filming. The film could be labeled either fiction or documen-

tary. Its classification as documentary usually hinges on two things: (1) the degree to which the story Flaherty tells so carefully matches the ways of the Inuit, even if these ways are revived from the past, and (2) on the way Allakariallak, the man who plays Nanook, embodies a spirit and sensibility that seems as much in harmony with a distinct way of Inuit life as with any Western conception of it. The story can be understood as both a plausible representation of Inuit life and of Flaherty's distinct vision of it.

Were documentary a reproduction of reality, these problems would be far less acute. We would then simply have a replica or copy of something that already existed. But documentary is not a reproduction of reality, it is a representation of the world we already occupy. Such films are not documents as much as expressive representations that may be based on documents. Documentary films stand for a particular view of the world, one we may never have encountered before even if the factual aspects of this world are familiar to us. We judge a reproduction by its fidelity to the original—its capacity to reproduce visible features of the original precisely and to serve purposes that require precise reproduction as in police mug shots, passport photos, or medical X-rays. We judge a representation more by the nature of the pleasure it offers, the value of the insight it provides, and the quality of the perspective it instills. We ask different things of representations and reproductions, documentaries and documents.

The question of whose story is it leaves considerable room for ambiguity. Documentary reenactments are a prime example of this. Here the filmmaker must imaginatively recreate events in order to film them at all. All of Nanook of the North can be said to be one gigantic reenactment, but it retains significant documentary qualities. (John Grierson said Nanook possessed "documentary value." This is apparently how the term documentary film gained prominent use.) What the reenactment creates, however, needs to correspond to known historical fact if it is to remain plausible.

Reeanctments need not be highly realistic recreations, as they usually are in fiction films. Some documentaries recreate past events in clearly stylized ways. For example, in Waltz with Bashir (2008), the recreation of actual battles from the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the experiences of traumatized soldiers, and the grizzly massacre of Lebanese Muslims involves animated and highly stylized representations (except for the film's final scene). These animated sequences clearly possess a strongly subjective, even expressionistic, quality. They attempt to see war as the disoriented, confused Israeli soldiers, including the filmmaker, saw it. Their memories of the war come across in a series of actual interviews, represented by animation, as well. As a representation of subjective states of mind, the film achieves a high degree of plausibility even as it departs from any standard sense of documentary realism.

The idea that what we see and hear offers a plausible perspective also allows us to acknowledge that for any given event, more than one story exists to represent and interpret it. *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005), for example, does not support the story of Enron's failure as told by its own executives who claim it was a result of innocent mistakes or someone else's wrongdoing, and not their own actions. Instead the film tells the story uncovered by investigative journalists Peter Elkind and Bethany MacLean: it was the result of deliberate deception and greed by these very same executives.

Modifying the three commonsense definitions we have just examined into one somewhat more precise definition yields something like this:

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

FUZZY CONCEPTS AND THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

The definition above is a useful first step but it leaves considerable room for "creative interpretation." It is quite a mouthful, too. The temptation remains to resort to shorter, simpler definitions such as, "Documentaries address reality" or "Documentaries deal with real people being themselves." Such shorthand definitions have their usefulness as long as we remember that their brevity conceals complexity.

The more elaborate definition has another notable flaw: it does not differentiate among different types of documentary. (This task will fall to chapters 6 and 7.) Documentaries tend to cluster into different types or modes. They do not all address the historical world in the same way and do not adopt the same cinematic techniques. Voice-over commentary, once taken for granted, became anathema to the observational filmmakers of the 1960s, for example. Filmmakers are not beholden to definitions and rules to govern what they do. They delight in subverting conventions, challenging viewers, provoking debate. Definitions of documentary are always playing catch-up, trying to adapt to changes in what counts as a documentary and why.

Documentaries adopt no fixed inventory of techniques, address no one set of issues, display no single set of forms or styles. Documentary film practice is an arena in which things change. Alternative approaches are constantly attempted and then adopted or abandoned. Prototypical works stand out that others emulate without ever being able to copy or reproduce entirely. Test cases appear that challenge the conventions defining the boundaries of documentary film. They push the limits and sometimes change them.

More than upholding a definition that fixes once and for all what is and is not a documentary, we need to look to examples and prototypes, test cases and innovations as evidence of the broad arena within which documentary operates and evolves. The usefulness of prototypes to a definition is that they propose generally exemplary qualities or features without requiring every documentary to exhibit all of them. *Nanook of the North* stands as a prototypical documentary even though many films that share its reliance on a simple quest narrative to organize events, its exemplary, photogenic main character, and its implication that we can understand larger cultural qualities by understanding individual behavior also reject the romanticism, the challenges of the natural environment, and patronizing elements of *Nanook*. Indeed, some fiction films, like Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, can also share these qualities with *Nanook* without being considered a documentary at all.

Changes in an understanding of what a documentary is come about in different ways. Most change, however, occurs because of what goes on in one or more of the following four arenas: (1) institutions that support documentary production and reception, (2) the creative

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efforts of filmmakers, (3) the lasting influence of specific films, and (4) the expectations of audiences. In fact, these four factors—institutions, filmmakers, films, and audiences—deserve more extended discussion. They are the four fundamental factors that both uphold a sense of what a documentary is at a given time and place and promote the continual transformation of what a documentary is over time and in different places. We can get more of a handle on how to understand documentary film by considering these four factors in greater detail.

AN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

It may seem circular, but another way to define documentary is to say, "Documentaries are what the organizations and institutions that produce them make." This is similar to saying that the Hollywood feature film is what the Hollywood studio system produces. If John Grierson calls *Night Mail* (1936) a documentary or if the Discovery Channel calls a program a documentary, then these items come labeled as documentary before any work on the part of the viewer or critic begins. This labeling, despite its circularity, functions as an initial cue that a given work can be considered a documentary. The context provides the cue; we would be foolish to ignore it even if this form of definition is less than conclusive.

The segments that make up the CBS news program 60 Minutes, for example, are normally considered examples of journalistic reporting first and foremost simply because that is the kind of program 60 Minutes is. We assume that the segments refer to actual people and events, that the standards of journalistic reporting will be met, that we can rely on each story to be both entertaining and informative, and that any claims made will be backed up by a credible display of evidence. Shown in another setting, these episodes might seem more like melodramas or docudramas, based on the emotional intensities achieved and the high degree of constructedness to the encounters that take place, but these alternatives dim when the entire institutional framework functions to assure us that they are, in fact, journalistic reportage.

The classic mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, 1984) builds this type of institutional framing into the film itself in a mischievous or ironic way: the film announces itself to be a documentary,

only to prove to be a fabrication or simulation of a documentary. Much of its ironic impact depends on its ability to coax at least partial belief from us that what we see is a documentary because that is what we are told we see. (Mockumentaries adopt documentary conventions but are staged, scripted, and acted to create the appearance of a genuine documentary as well as leaving clues that they are not. Part of the pleasure they provide lies in how they let a knowledgeable audience in on the joke: we can enjoy the film as a parody and gain new insight into taken-for-granted conventions.) If we take *This Is Spinal Tap's* self-description seriously, we will believe that the group Spinal Tap is an actual rock group. In fact, one had to be created for the film, just as a "Blair witch" had to be invented for *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). The band members are real in the same way the actors who play characters in a film are real: they are real people but they are playing roles rather than presenting themselves.

An institutional framework also imposes an institutional way of sceing and speaking, which functions as a set of limits, or conventions, for the filmmaker and audience alike. To say "it goes without saying" that a documentary will have a voice-over commentary or "everyone knows" that a documentary must present both sides of the question is to say what is usually the case within a specific institutional framework. Voice-over commentary, sometimes poetic, sometimes factual, was a strong convention within the government-sponsored film production units headed by John Grierson in 1930s Britain, and reportorial balance, in the sense of not openly taking sides, prevails among the news divisions of network television companies today.

This "it goes without saying" quality also serves to leave documentary conventions unquestioned. For a long time, it was taken for granted that documentaries could talk about anything in the world except themselves. Reflexive strategies that call the very act of representation into question unsettle the assumption that documentary builds on the ability of film to capture reality. To remind viewers of the construction of the reality we behold, of the *creative* element in John Grierson's famous definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality," undercuts the very claim to truth and authenticity on which the documentary depends. If we cannot take its images as visible evidence of the particular nature of the historical world, of what can we



Always for Pleasure (Les Blank, 1978). Les Blank's films are difficult to place. Books on documentary and ethnographic film sometimes neglect his work even though films such as this one, on aspects of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, exhibit important characteristics of each of these types of filmmaking. Blank, like most accomplished documentary filmmakers, does not follow rules or protocols; he does not concern himself with where and how his films fit into categories. His avoidance of voice-over commentary, political perspectives, identifiable problems, and potential solutions follows from an emphasis on affirmative, often exuberant, forms of experience. Photo courtesy of Les Blank and Flower Films.

take them? By suppressing this question, the institutional framework for documentary suppresses much of the complexity in the relationship between representation and reality, but it also achieves a clarity that implies documentaries achieve direct, truthful access to the real. This functions as one of the prime attractions of the form, even if it is a claim we must assess with care.

Along with sponsoring agencies for the production of documentary work, a distinct circuit of distributors and exhibitors function to support the circulation of these films. These agencies supplement the dominant movie theater chains and video/DVD rental stores that emphasize mainstream fiction films over documentaries. Sometimes one organization, such as the National Geographic or Discovery channels, produces, distributes, and exhibits documentary work. Some distributors are distinct entities, such as specialty film distributors Women Make Movies, New Day Films, Facets, Third World Newsreel, or Netflix, or websites like YouTube that make documentaries produced by others available for viewing. (Netflix now combines both viewing on demand over the internet and film rental via DVD sent by mail.) Other agencies, such as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the British Film Institute, provide financial support for documentary production. Still others agencies, such as the Foundation for Independent Film and Video, the European Documentary Film Institute, or the International Documentary Association, provide professional support for documentary filmmakers themselves, much as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences does for Hollywood filmmakers. Whatever its role, these institutions contribute to the reality of what gets made and how it looks. They often impose standards and conventions on the work they support, and their goals and criteria change over time. Without them far fewer documentaries would reach their intended audience.

A COMMUNITY OF PRACTITIONERS

Those who make documentary films, like the institutions that support them, hold certain assumptions and expectations about what they do. Although every institutional framework imposes limits and conventions, individual filmmakers need not accept them. The tension between established expectations and individual innovation proves a frequent source of change.

Documentary filmmakers share a common, self-chosen mandate to represent the historical world rather than to imaginatively invent alternative ones. They gather at specialized film festivals such as the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival (United States), the Yamagata Documentary Film Festival (Japan), or the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival (the Netherlands), and they, along with critics, contribute articles and interviews to journals such as Documentary, Dox, and Studies in Documentary Film or to on-line forums such as that of In Media Res, part of the mediaCommons.futureofthebook. org website. They debate social issues such as the effects of pollution and the nature of sexual identity and explore technical concerns such as the authenticity of archival footage and the consequences of digital technology.

Documentary practitioners speak a common language regarding what they do. Like other professionals, documentary filmmakers have a vocabulary, or jargon, of their own. It may range from the suitability of various digital cameras for different situations to the techniques of recording location sound, and from the challenges of observing social actors effectively to the pragmatics of finding distribution and negotiating contracts for their work. Documentary practitioners share distinct but common problems—from developing ethically sound relationships with their subjects to reaching a specific audience, for example—that distinguish them from other filmmakers.

These commonalities give documentary filmmakers a shared sense of purpose despite the ways in which they may also compete for the same funding or distributors. Individual practitioners will shape or transform the traditions they inherit, but they do so in dialogue with others who share their sense of mission. These efforts contribute to the fuzzy but distinguishable outline of documentary film and to the historical variability of the form: our understanding of what is a documentary changes as those who make documentaries change their idea of what they want to make. What might begin as a test case or apparent anomaly, such as early observational films like Les Racquetteurs (1958), Chronicle of a Summer (1960), or Primary (1960), may fade away as a failed deviation or, as in this example, come to be regarded as transformative innovations leading to a new standard of accepted practice. Documentary has never been only one thing. For now we can use this history of a changing sense of what counts as a documentary as a sign of the variable, open-ended, dynamic quality of the form itself. Practitioners, through their engagement with issues, institutions, subjects, and audiences, contribute significantly to this sense of dynamic change.

A CORPUS OF TEXTS: CONVENTIONS, PERIODS, MOVEMENTS, AND MODES

The diversity of the films that make up the documentary tradition also contributes to its fluidity. Though different, Nanook of the North, Man

with a Movie Camera (1929), Land without Bread, Hoop Dreams, Dont Look Back (1967), Koyaanisqatsi (1983), and Roger and Me all represent landmarks in documentary film production. They all adopt and modify conventions associated with documentary. They offer us alternative ways of seeing the world, from the caustic but double-edged voice-over commentary on a seemingly doomed culture in Land without Bread to the unobtrusive, sync sound portrait of a great musician (Bob Dylan) in Dont Look Back. In looking at this wide array of films, we can consider documentary a genre like the western or the science-fiction film. To belong to the genre a film has to exhibit conventions shared by films already regarded as documentaries or westerns. These conventions help distinguish one genre from another: the use of a voice-of-God commentary, interviews, location sound recording, cutaways from a given scene to provide images that illustrate or complicate stated points, and a reliance on social actors, or people, who present themselves in their everyday roles and activities, are among the conventions common to many documentaries.

Another convention is the prevalence of an informing logic that organizes the film in relation to the representations it makes about the historical world. A typical form of organization is that of problem solving. This structure can resemble a story, particularly a detective story: the film begins by establishing a problem or issue, then conveys something of the background to the issue, and then, like a good detective, follows up with an examination of its severity or complexity. This examination leads to a recommendation or solution that the film encourages the viewer to endorse or adopt personally.

The City (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939) exhibits a prototypical approach to the idea of a documentary logic. It establishes, through a montage of scenes that include fast motion clips of frenzied city living and shots of extreme poverty, the proposal that urban existence has become a burden more than a joy. Modern city life saps people of their energy and zest for life. (The film also ignores related issues such as whether urban misery correlates with class.) What is the solution?

The film's final section provides one: carefully planned, "green" communities where everyone lives in harmony and the workplace is just a walk away. The terrible din of massive machinery and the billow-

ing smoke of heavy industry are nowhere to be seen. Poverty appears to vanish. Everyone is happy. While a labor-saving device (the 1930s version of a washing machine) takes care of the laundry, a group of women sit in the warn sunlight, chatting with one another.

The contentment of traditional small town life, buttressed by worker-friendly factories and plants, is suddenly available to all. The film's solution is a fascinating mix of visionary planning quite different from the cookie-cutter suburbia of the postwar years and a wishful evasion of hard economic realities. The film makes no reference to race and gives no hint how the urban down and out pick up and move to an idyllic new Shangri-la. What it does do is create a compelling vision of both a problem and a solution. It lets the viewer appreciate what it feels like to experience the joyful contentment of green communities as well the stress and misery of the traditional city. A classic in the documentary film genre, The City's main sponsor was the American Institute of City Planners. This group had a real stake in the transformation of the American city. The federal government also sponsored several key films of the 1930s, especially The Plow That Broke the Plains (1936) and The River (1937), a film that championed the efforts of the Tennessee Valley Authority to prevent flooding and produce electricity, a federal initiative that ran into conservative opposition.

A variation on the problem/solution style of logic occurs in *Triumph* of the Will (1935). Speeches by Nazi Party leaders refer to Germany's disarray following World War I while these same leaders nominate themselves, their party, and, above all, Adolf Hitler as the solution to the problems of national humiliation and economic collapse. The film glosses over the problem. It could assume viewers were well aware of inflation and political unrest. Instead it devotes the great bulk of its energy to the solution: the Nazi Party and its leader, Adolf Hitler. This man and this party would redeem Germany and put it on the path to recovery, prosperity, and power. More crucial to Leni Riefenstahl than archival footage of Germany's defeat in World War I, a review of the humiliating terms imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, or evidence of the hardships worked by skyrocketing inflation was a vivid, compelling portrait of the Nazi Party, and Hitler, at their carefully choreographed best.

The Cove (2009) takes up a very different dual problem: the slaughter of massive numbers of dolphins in a secret cove near the city of

Taijii, Japan, since the Japanese see the dolphin as annoying competitors to their fishing industry, on the one hand, and how to document this slaughter in the face of organized government efforts to thwart them, on the other. The film weaves a compelling tale that oscillates between detailing the scope of the slaughter and the exploits that allow them to secretly make their way to the forbidden cove. The film makes clear that the solution to the problem lies beyond its scope: it will require concerted action by any and all concerned parties to convince the Japanese government to put an end to the slaughter. Former dolphin trainer Ric O'Barry, now a fierce defender of dolphins, is the film's main protagonist, but his efforts are presented more as a model for others than an end in themselves.

The logic organizing a documentary film supports an underlying proposal, assertion, or claim about the historical world. With documentaries, we expect to engage with films that engage the world. This engagement and logic frees the documentary from some of the conventions relied upon to establish an imaginary world. Continuity editing, for example, which works to make the cuts between shots in a typical fiction film scene invisible, has a lower priority. What is achieved by continuity editing in fiction is achieved by history in documentary film: things share relationships in time and space not because of the editing but because of actual, historical linkages. Editing in documentary demonstrates these linkages. The demonstration may be convincing or implausible, accurate or distorted, but it occurs in relation to situations and events with which we are already familiar, or for which external sources of verifiable information exist. Documentary is therefore much less reliant on continuity editing to establish the credibility of the world it refers to than is fiction.

Documentary films, in fact, often display a wider array of shots and scenes than fiction films, an array yoked together less by a narrative organized around a central character than by a rhetoric organized around a controlling perspective. Characters, or social actors, may come and go, offering information, giving testimony, providing evidence. Places and things may appear and disappear as they are brought forward in support of the film's point of view or perspective. A logic of implication bridges these leaps from one person or place to another.

If, for example, we jump from a woman sitting in her home describing what it was like to work as a welder during World War II to a



The City (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939). Images of vast numbers of similar objects, and people, help make *The City's* point: urban design has fallen behind human need. *Photo courtesy of National Archives*.

shot from a 1940s newsreel of a shipyard, the cut implies that the second shot illustrates the type of workplace and the kind of work the woman in the first shot describes. The cut hardly seems disruptive at all even though there is no literal spatial or temporal continuity between the two shots.

Cuts like this occur over and over in Connie Field's *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980); the leaps of time and space do not confuse us because they support an evolving story and consistent argument about how women were first actively recruited to fill jobs left vacant by men called into the military and then, when the men returned, actively discouraged from remaining in the workforce. The shots fall into place in relation to what the women Field interviews have to say. We attend

The City (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939). Images of individuals such as this one disassociate the rise of the city with the rise of civilization: human triumph succumbs to a congested, frenzied environment. Such images illustrate the film's theme that the traditional city defeats the human spirit; they help prepare us for the film's solution: planned, green belt communities. *Photo courtesy of National Archives*.

to what they say; what we see serves to support, amplify, illustrate, or otherwise relate to the stories they tell and the line of argument Field follows in relation to what they say.

Instead of continuity editing, we might call this form of documentary editing evidentiary. Instead of organizing cuts within a scene to present a sense of a single, unified time and space in which we follow the actions of central characters, evidentiary editing organizes cuts within a scene to present the impression of a single, convincing proposal supported by a logic. Rather than cutting from one shot of a character approaching a door to a second shot of the same character.

acter entering the room on the far side of the door, a more typical documentary edit would be from a close-up of a bottle of champagne being broken across the bow of ship to a long shot of a ship, perhaps an entirely different ship, being launched into the sea. The two shots may have been made years or continents apart, but they contribute to the representation of a single process rather than the development of an individual character.

Pursuing the example provided by *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*, some specific choices for structuring a documentary about a topic such as shipbuilding can be sketched out. A film might

- Poetically or evocatively describe the process, capturing some
 of its mystery and wonder through camera angles, editing, and
 music.
- Offer a proposal or make an argument via commentary about shipbuilding—that women were urged to take up work during and then discouraged from continuing it after World War II, for example.
- Interact with actual shipbuilders by either simply observing them as they go about their work or by actively engaging with them, perhaps through interviews.
- Explain how to build a ship with details and information about specific parts of the process that would be of use to those who do the work. This might amount to an informational or "how to" film more than a documentary, although there is room for hybrid approaches.

In each of these cases editing serves an evidentiary function. It not only furthers our involvement in the unfolding of the film but supports the kinds of proposals or assertions the film makes about the world. We tend to assess the organization of a documentary in terms of the persuasiveness or convincingness of its representations rather than the plausibility or fascination of its fabrications.

In documentary, a great deal of this persuasiveness stems from the sound track. Ever since the end of the 1920s documentary filmmaking has relied heavily on sound in all its aspects: spoken commentary, synchronous speech, acoustic effects, and music. Arguments call for a



The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter (Connie Field, 1980). Women welders at the Landers, Frary and Clark Plant, Connecticut, 1943. Rosie the Riveter is a brilliant example of a film that uses archival film material not to confirm the truth of a situation but to demonstrate how truth claims can serve political goals. In this case the historical footage was designed to encourage women to enter the workforce during World War II and was then redesigned to urge them to leave the workforce when men returned from the war. Thanks to Field's editing, the contortions of logic required for this task are often hilariously blatant. (Few of the government's propaganda films even acknowledged the presence of African American women in the work force, giving this particular photo by Gordon Parks extra value.) Photograph by Gordon Parks.

logic that words are better able to convey than are images. Images lack tense and a negative form, for example. We can make a sign that says, "No Smoking," but we typically convey this requirement in images by the convention of putting a slash through an image of a cigarette. To decide to not show an image of a cigarette at all would not in any way communicate the same meaning as a sign declaring the injunction, "No Smoking." The convention of a slash mark through an image to mean "No" or "Not" is very hard to adapt to filmmaking. Whether it is through what we hear a commentator tell us about the film's subject, what social actors tell us directly via interviews, or what we overhear social actors say among themselves as the camera observes them, documentaries depend heavily on the spoken word. Speech fleshes out our sense of the world. An event recounted becomes history reclaimed.

Like other genres, documentaries go through phases or periods. Different countries and regions have different documentary traditions and styles of their own. European and Latin American documentary filmmakers, for example, favor subjective and openly rhetorical forms such as Luis Buñuel's Land without Bread or Chris Marker's Sans Soleil (1982), whereas British and North American filmmakers place more emphasis on objective and observational forms such as the "two sides of every argument" tone to much journalistic reporting and the highly noninterventionist approach of Frederick Wiseman in High School (1968), Hospital (1970), and La Danse (2009), among others.

Documentary, like fiction film, has also had its movements. Among them we could include the documentary work by Dziga Vertov, Esther Shub, Mikhail Kalatazov, Victor Turin, and others working in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and early 1930s. These filmmakers pioneered the development of the documentary form as a way of seeing the world afresh; they drew heavily on avant-garde practices and techniques. The British Documentary movement of the 1930s joined documentary filmmaking to the needs of the state and launched the careers of numerous filmmakers like Basil Wright, Harry Watt, Alberto Cavalcanti, Paul Rotha, and Humphrey Jennings under the leadership of John Grierson. The Free Cinema of 1950s Britain established another movement when Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson, and others took a fresh, unadorned look at contemporary British life in films such as Every Day except Christmas (1957), Momma Don't Allow (1956), and We Are the Lambeth Boys (1958). The observational filmmaking of Frederick Wiseman, the Maysles brothers, and Drew Associates (principally Richard Drew, D. A. Pennebaker, and Richard Leacock) in early 1960s America married a journalistic tone of apparent neutrality with a strongly observational style.

Film movements arise when a group of individuals who share a common outlook or approach join together formally or informally. Manifestoes and other statements such as Dziga Vertov's "WE: Variant of a Manifesto" and "Kino Eye," which declared open warfare on scripted and acted films, often accompany movements. Vertov's essays defined the principles and goals to which films like The Man with a Movie Camera and Enthusiasm (1930) gave tangible expression. Lindsay Anderson's essay in Sight and Sound magazine in 1956, "Stand Up! Stand Up!" urged a vivid sense of social commitment for documentary filmmaking. He defined the principles and goals of a poetic but gritty representation of everyday, working-class reality freed from the sense of civic obligation to provide "solutions" that had made work produced by John Grierson in the 1930s a handmaiden of the British government's policies of social amelioration.

Free Cinema advocates and practitioners sought a cinema free of a government's propaganda needs, a sponsor's purse strings, or a genre's conventions. Their movement helped stimulate the revival of the British feature film built around similar principles of the unvarnished representation of working people and an irreverent attitude toward social and cinematic conventions. The "angry young men" of 1950s Britain gave us Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (Karel Reisz, 1960), The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (Tony Richardson, 1962), and This Sporting Life (Lindsay Anderson, 1963) in a spirit that drew on sensibilities quite similar to the Free Cinema of the time. Many of those who began in documentary production in fact went on to make the "kitchen sink" feature films that dramatized working-class life.

Documentary falls into periods as well as movements. A period identifies a specific stretch of time during which films display common characteristics. Periods help define the history of documentary film and differentiate it from other types of films with different movements and periods. The period of the 1930s, for example, saw much documentary work address contemporary issues with an assembly of images held together by a voice-over commentary. Such films shared a Depression-era sensibility that reached across media, including a strong emphasis on social and economic issues. The 1960s saw the introduction of lightweight, hand-held cameras that could be used together with synchronous sound. Filmmakers acquired the mobility and responsiveness that allowed them to follow social actors in their everyday routines. The options to observe intimate or crisis-laden behavior at a distance or to interact in a more directly participatory manner with their subjects both became possible. The 1960s were thus a period in which the ideas of a rigorously observational and of a far more participatory cinema gained prominence over the use of voice-over commentary. These modes signaled a radical break with dominant documentary styles from the 1930s to the 1950s.

In the 1970s and 1980s, documentary frequently returned to the past through the use of archival film material and contemporary interviews to give a new perspective to past events or current issues. (Historical perspective was generally missing from observational and participatory filmmaking.) Emile de Antonio's In the Year of the Pig (1969) provided the model or prototype that many emulated. De Antonio combined a rich variety of archival source material with trenchant interviews to recount the background to the Vietnam War in a way radically at odds with the American government's official version. With Babies and Banners (1979), about a 1930s automobile factory strike but told from the women's point of view; Union Maids (1976), about unionorganizing struggles in different industries; and The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter, about women's role in the workforce during and after World War II, are but three examples that draw on de Antonio's example. They inflect his model to address issues of women's history. As such they were also part of a broad tendency in the 1960s and 1970s to tell history from below, history as lived and experienced by ordinary people, rather than history from above, based on the deeds of leaders and the knowledge of experts.

Periods and movements characterize documentary, but so does a series of modes of documentary film production that represent viable ways of using the resources of the cinema to make documentary films. Each mode emphasizes different cinematic resources or techniques.

Each mode also displays considerable variation based on how individual filmmakers, national emphases, and period tendencies affect it. Expository documentaries initially relied heavily on omniscient voice overs by professional male commentators. The mode remains in great use today but many voice overs are by females rather than males and a great many are by the filmmaker him- or herself rather than a trained professional. Observational filmmaking began in the 1960s but it remains an important resource today, although it is now frequently mixed with other modes to produce more hybrid documentaries.

The six principal modes of documentary filmmaking are

- Poetic mode: emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization.

 Examples: The Bridge (1928); Song of Ceylon (1934); Listen to Britain (1941); Night and Fog (1955); and Koyaanisqatsi. This mode bears a close proximity to experimental, personal, and avant-garde filmmaking.
- Expository mode: emphasizes verbal commentary and an argumentative logic. Examples: The Plow That Broke the Plains; Spanish Earth (1937); Trance and Dance in Bali (1952); Les Maîtres Fous (1955); and television news. This is the mode that most people associate with documentary in general.
- Observational mode: emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera. Examples: Primary; High School; Salesman (1969); The War Room (1993); and Metallica: Some Kind of Monster (2004).
- Participatory mode: emphasizes the interaction between film-maker and subject. Filming takes place by means of interviews or other forms of even more direct involvement from conversations to provocations. Often coupled with archival footage to examine historical issues. Examples: Chronicle of a Summer; Solovky Power (1988); Shoah (1985); The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert McNamara (2003); and Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room.
- Reflexive mode: calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking.

• Performative mode: emphasizes the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's own involvement with a subject; it strives to heighten the audience's responsiveness to this involvement. Rejects notions of objectivity in favor of evocation and affect. Examples: The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes (1971); History and Memory (1991); Tongues Untied (1989); Chile, Obstinate Memory (1997); Waltz with Bashir; and reality TV shows such as Cops (as a degraded example of the mode). The films in this mode all share qualities with the experimental, personal, and avant-garde, but with a strong emphasis on their emotional and social impact on an audience.

Modes come into prominence at a given time and place, but they persist and become more pervasive than movements. Each mode may arise partly as a response by filmmakers to perceived limitations in other modes, partly as a response to technological possibilities and institutional constraints or incentives, partly as an adaptation to particularly impressive (prototypical) films, and partly as a response to a changing social context, including audience expectations. Once established, though, modes overlap and intermingle. Individual films often reveal one mode that seems most influential to their organization, but individual films can also "mix and match" modes as the occasion demands.

A striking example of this mix and match phenomenon is the Battle 360 series on the History Channel. It chronicles the history of World War II from different perspectives such as that of one ship: the USS Enterprise, an aircraft carrier. The series uses voice-over commentary and archival footage (expository mode) predominantly but couples this with interviews (participatory mode) and animated sequences of battle (performative mode). The animation has the look and feel of a video game: planes dive-bomb ships and gunfire streaks through the sky; close-up shots track alongside steel-cased bombs as they plummet

to their target; torpedoes streak beneath the sea and pound into the flanks of enemy ships. Most of the animated attack sequences have no human figures in them: battle becomes removed from its human element and cost. These animated elements can also have a reflexive effect on some viewers, prompting them to question the assumption that a documentary must support its proposals or perspective with historically authentic footage. But the series' sponsor does even more. The History Channel website allows viewers to chat about the series online or to shop for DVDs of the different shows in the series. Although anchored in the expository mode, the series spills beyond not only that mode but the traditional frame within which documentary film production has taken place.

A CONSTITUENCY OF VIEWERS: ASSUMPTIONS, EXPECTATIONS, EVIDENCE, AND THE INDEXICAL QUALITY OF THE IMAGE

The final way to consider the fluidity of the documentary film involves the audience. The institutions that support documentary may also support fiction films; the practitioners of documentary may also make experimental or fiction films; the characteristics of the films themselves can be simulated in a fictional context, as works like No Lies (1973), The Blair Witch Project, and Best in Show (2000) make clear. In other words, what we have taken some pains to sketch out as the domain of documentary exhibits permeable borders and a chameleon-like appearance. The sense that a film is a documentary lies in the mind of the beholder as much as it lies in the film's context or structure.

What assumptions and expectations characterize our sense that a film is a documentary? What do we bring to the viewing experience that is different when we encounter a documentary rather than some other genre of film? The commonsense assumptions with which we began reveal some basic assumptions. Documentaries are

- About reality
- About real people
- Tell stories about what really happened.

Although we went on to qualify and elaborate on these points in important ways, they remain common starting points for audiences. These assumptions often turn out to rely heavily on the indexical capacity of the photographic image, and of sound recording, to replicate what we take to be the distinctive visual or acoustic qualities of what they record. This is an *assumption*, encouraged by specific properties of lenses, emulsions, optics, sound recorders, and styles, such as realism: the sounds we hear and the images we behold seem to bear the tangible trace of what produced them. Digital, computer graphic techniques can be used to achieve a similar effect even though they create the sound or image they appear to reproduce.

Some notes about the indexical image: recording instruments (cameras and sound recorders) register the imprint of things (sights and sounds) with great fidelity. It gives these imprints value as documents in the same way fingerprints have value as documents. This uncanny sense of a document, or image that bears a strict correspondence to what it refers to, is called its indexical quality. The indexical quality of an image refers to the way in which its appearance is shaped or determined by what it records: a photo of a boy holding his dog will exhibit, in two dimensions, an exact analogy of the spatial relationship between the boy and his dog in three dimensions; a fingerprint will show exactly the same pattern of whorls as the finger that produced it; a photocopy replicates an original precisely; markings on a fired bullet will bear an indexical relationship to the specific gun barrel through which it passed. The bullet's surface "records" the passage of that bullet through the gun barrel with a precision that allows forensic science to use it as documentary evidence in a given case.

Similarly, cinematic sounds and images, like photographic images, enjoy an indexical relationship to what they record. They capture precisely certain aspects of what stood before the camera, which is sometimes called the pro-filmic event. This quality is what makes the documentary image appear as a vital source of evidence about the world. Though true, it is immediately crucial to clarify this point. A document and an indexical sound recording or an indexical photo are documents; they provide evidence. But a documentary is more than evidence: it is also a particular way of seeing the world, making propos-

als about it, or offering perspectives on it. It is, in this sense, a way of interpreting the world. It will use evidence to do so.

What we need to keep in mind, therefore, is the difference between the indexical image as evidence and the argument, perspective, explanation, or interpretation it supports. Evidence is put to use. It serves the film's overall purpose. The same evidence can serve as raw material for multiple proposals and perspectives, as virtually every court trial demonstrates. The prosecution and defense refer to the same evidence but draw opposing conclusions. Similarly, the indexical image can appear to be proof of a given interpretation, but the interpretation cannot be assessed simply in terms of whether it uses valid evidence. Other interpretations, using the same evidence, will dispute its underlying assumptions.

This does not mean all interpretations are equally valid, however. Some may well make more convincing use of the available evidence and some may willfully misrepresent or suppress aspects of the same evidence. What is clear, in any case, is that the indexical image possesses a strong evidentiary power that has strongly contributed to the appeal of the documentary film. Who is not excited to see future President John F. Kennedy wind his way through labyrinthian backstage spaces only to emerge before a live audience during his 1960 Wisconsin primary battle with Hubert Humphrey in *Primary*? Who doesn't shudder to see the solitary Timothy Treadwell share the frame with looming grizzly bears in the remote reaches of the Alaskan wilderness in *Grizzly Man* (2005)? The indexical power of these images has a unique, compelling power.

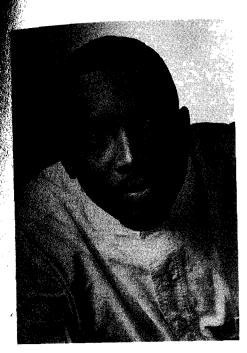
The shots of concentration camp victims and survivors in Alain Resnais's haunting documentary *Night and Fog* bear the same appearance as what we would have seen had we been there because the cinematic image is a document of how these individuals appeared at the moment when they were filmed during and at the end of World War II. The perspective of the film on these events, however, differs considerably from Donald Brittain and John Spotton's *Memorandum* (1965), Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, or James Moll's *The Last Days* (1998). Even if we rule out special effects, digital manipulation, or other forms of alteration that could allow a photographic image to give false

evidence, the authenticity of the image does not necessarily make one argument or perspective conclusive and another not. The internal logic and external verification of what a documentary claims to be true must be rigorously assessed: the inclusion of indexical images as evidence cannot do that job for us.

The weight we grant to the indexical quality of sound and image, the assumption we adopt that a documentary provides documentary evidence at the level of the shot, or spoken word, does not automatically extend to the entire film. We usually understand and acknowledge that a documentary is a creative treatment of actuality, not a faithful transcription of it. Transcriptions or strict records have their value, as in surveillance footage or records of specific events such as the launching of a rocket, the progress of a therapeutic session, or the performance of a particular play or sports event. We tend, however, to regard such records strictly as documents or "mere footage," rather than as documentaries. Documentaries marshal evidence and then use it to construct their own perspective or proposal about the world. We expect this process to take place. We are disappointed if it does not.

Among the assumptions we bring to documentary, then, is that individual shots and sounds, perhaps even scenes and sequences, will bear a highly indexical relationship to the events they represent, but that the film as a whole will go beyond being a mere document or record of these events to offer a perspective on them. As an audience we expect to be able both to trust to the indexical linkage between what we see and what occurred before the camera and to assess the poetic or rhetorical transformation of this linkage into a commentary or perspective on the world we occupy. We anticipate an oscillation between the recognition of historical reality and the recognition of a representation about it. This expectation distinguishes our involvement with documentary from our involvement with other film genres.

This expectation often characterizes what we might call the "discourses of sobriety." These are the ways we have of speaking directly about social and historical reality such as science, economics, medicine, military strategy, foreign policy, and educational policy. Inside an institutional framework that supports these ways of speaking, what we say and decide can affect the course of real events and entail real





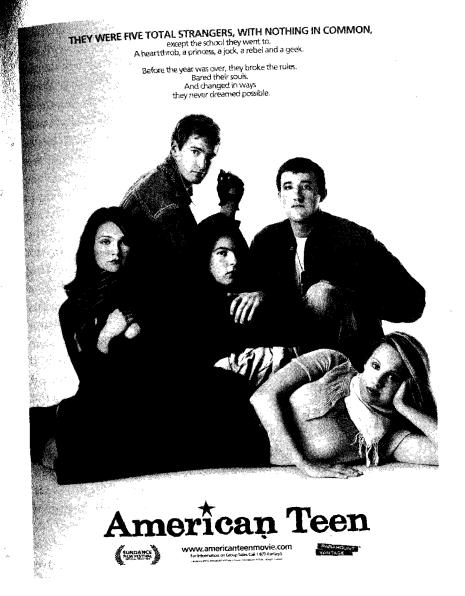
Hoop Dreams (Steve James, Frederick Marx, Peter Gilbert, 1994). William Gates is one of the two young men we follow in Hoop Dreams. These publicity shots of him, which offer an indexical record of his appearance as a young man, promise a "coming of age" narrative in which we will witness how he and Arthur Agee, the other main character, develop as basketball players and mature as men. The distributor of Hoop Dreams, in fact, mounted a campaign to have the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences nominate the film not for Best Documentary but for Best Picture. The campaign failed, but it underscored the permeable and often arbitrary nature of sharp distinctions between fiction and documentary film. Photos courtesy of Fine Line Features.

consequences. These are ways of seeing and speaking that are also ways of doing and acting. Power runs through them. An air of sobriety surrounds these discourses because they are seldom receptive to whim or fantasy, to "make-believe" characters or imaginary worlds (unless they serve as useful simulations of the real world, such as in-flight simulators or econometric models of business behavior). They are the vehicles of action and intervention, power and knowledge, desire and will, directed toward the world we physically inhabit and share.

Like these other discourses, documentary claims to address the historical world and to possess the capacity to intervene by shaping how we regard it. Even though documentary filmmaking may not be accepted as the equal partner in scientific inquiry or foreign policy initiatives (largely because, as an image-based medium, documentaries lack important qualities of spoken and written discourse, such as the immediacy and spontaneity of dialogue or the rigorous logic of the written essay), this genre still shares a tradition of sobriety in its determination to make a difference in how we regard the world and proceed within it. Not all documentaries, of course, are sober-minded, stodgy affairs any more than all political speeches or all scientific reports are dull. Wit, imagination, and persuasive rhetorical skills come into play in many cases. The history of documentary demonstrates just how true this is with its remarkable array of persuasive, compelling, even poetic representations of the historical world.

In viewing documentary films we expect to learn or be moved, to discover or be persuaded of possibilities that pertain to the historical world. Documentaries draw on evidence to make a claim something like, "This is so," coupled to a tacit, "Isn't it?" This claim is conveyed by the persuasive or rhetorical force of the representation. The Battle of San Pietro (1945), for example, makes a case that "war is hell" and persuades us of this with evidence such as close-ups of a series of dead soldiers rather than, say, a single long shot of a battlefield that would diminish the horror and perhaps increase the nobility of battle. The impact of such a sight, in close-up, carries an impact, or "indexical whammy," that is quite different from the staged deaths in fiction films, such as The Thin Red Line (Terrence Malick, 1998) or Saving Private Ryan (Steven Spielberg, 1998), that also ponder the human price of waging war. The representations may be similar, but the emotional impact of close-up images of the dead and dying changes considerably when we know that there is no point at which the director can say, "Cut" and lives can be resumed. Like many documentaries, The Battle of San Pietro has a sober-minded purpose, but it uses emotionally compelling means of achieving it.

Audiences, then, encounter documentaries with an expectation that their desire to know more about the world will find gratification during the course of the film. Documentaries activate this desire to



American Teen (Nanette Burstein, 2008). Nanette Burstein's documentary uses many fictional techniques to heighten the sense of what it feels like to be a high school teen (continuity editing, point-of-view shots, cross cutting, and so on). As this poster illustrates, the film pointedly marketed itself as a portrait of five classic high school types, or stereotypes, and it develops each of its main characters to reinforce how they embody a given type. The strategy resembles genre film marketing and caused debate about the film's status as a documentary. Courtesy of Paramount Vantage/Photofest.

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know when they invoke a historical subject and propose their individual variation on the history lesson. How did a given state of affairs come to pass (poverty among migrant farmworkers in Harvest of Shame, the degradation of farm land in The Plow That Broke the Plains)? What's it feel like to be a high school student (in High School or American Teen [2008])? How do people conduct themselves in situations of stress (female army recruits during basic training in Soldier Girls [1980], subjects undergoing tests of obedience that might cause harm to others in Obedience [1965])? What kind of interpersonal dynamics takes place in a concrete historical context (among family members all trying to make a go of a marginal pizza parlor in Family Business [1982] or trying to cope with charges of pedophilia against the father and one of the sons in Capturing the Friedmans [2003])? What is the source of a given problem and how might we address it (inadequate housing for working people in Housing Problems [1935] or colonial history and exploitation in Argentina in The Hour of the Furnaces [1968])? For what reasons should men fight (the Why We Fight series [1942–1945] on the reasons for the United States' entry into World War II, or Eugene Jarecki's more recent Why We Fight (2005), on the power of the military-industrial complex to fuel a need for wars)? How do members of a different culture organize their lives and express their social values (among the Dani of the New Guinea Highlands in Dead Birds [1963], among the Turkana of Kenya in Wedding Camels [1980])? What happens when one culture encounters another, notably when Western, colonial powers encounter so-called primitive people (for the first time in 1930s New Guinea in First Contact [1984], or on a recurring basis along the Sepic River in New Guinea as tourists meet indigenous people in Cannibal Tours [1988])?

Documentaries stimulate epistephilia (a desire to know) in their audiences. At their best, they convey an informing logic, a persuasive rhetoric, and a moving poetics that promises information and knowledge, insight and awareness. Documentaries propose to their audiences that the gratification of this desire to know will be their common business. He-Who-Knows (the agent has traditionally been masculine) will share knowledge with those who wish to know. We, too, can occupy the position of The-One-Who-Knows. They speak about them to us and we gain a sense of pleasure, satisfaction, and knowledge as a result.

This dynamic may pose questions as well as resolve them. We may Who are we that we may come to know something? What kind of wowledge is the knowledge documentaries provide? To what kind of use do we put the knowledge a film provides? What we know, and how we come to believe in what we know, are matters of social importance. Power and responsibility reside in knowing; the use we make of what we learn extends beyond our engagement with documentary films to our engagement with the historical world represented by such films.

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Quality	Expository	Poetic	Observational	Participatory	Reflexive	Per f ormative
An Alternative To	Fiction/avant-garde	Fiction/exposition	Classic oration and poetic expression	Passive observation and classic oration	Realist representation that ignores the formal process of representing the world or social assumptions about the nature of the world	Empirical, factual, or abstract forms of knowledge
Limited By	Didacticism	Formal abstractions that lose touch with historical reality	What occurs in front of the camera (hard to represent historical events)	May code control and point of view to others, lose independence of judgment	Increased sense of formal abstraction, detachment, loss of direct engagement with social issues	Personal pov or vision may become private or dissociated from more broadly social perceptions
Treats Knowledge As	Disembodied or abstract ideas, concepts, or perspectives	Affective, a new way to see and comprehend the world; see the familiar in fresh way	Tacit sense of what we learn by watching, listening, observing, and making inferences about the conduct of others	What we learn from personal interactions; what people say and do when confronted or engaged by others; what can be conveyed by interviews and other forms of encounter	Contextual. Always framed by institutional constraints and personal assumptions that can be exposed and changed; asks what we learn when we ask how we learn	Embodied. Affective and situated. What we learn from direct, experiential encounter rather than second-hand from experts or books

Sound	Expressive and cognitive, fully under the control of the filmmaker; no indexical link to the image it supports; often in a voice-over form	Expressive, used for pattern and rhythm but with filmmaker holding a high degree of control as in the expository mode	Tied to the image by the indexical link of synchronous recording. Filmmaker gives up full control of sound to record what is said and heard in a given situation; refrains from voice over	Stress the speech between filmmaker and subject, especially in interviews. Heavy reliance on sync sound but may also utilize voice over; filmmaker retains only partial creative control of sound	May meta- communicate about how communication takes place. Talk about talking about something as well as sync or nonsync sound	Often relies on fimmaker's own voice to organize the film; stress introspective, testimonial, essayistic forms of speech and dialogue. Mixes sypc and nonsync; uses music and sound expressively
Time and Space	Discontinuous. Uses images from many different times and places to illustrate a perspective or argument	Discontinuous. Uses images that build mood or pattern without full regard for their original proximity	Continuous. Strong sense of continuity that links the words and actions of subjects from shot to shot	Continuons. May interconnect a present tense time and space with a past tense (historical time and space)	Contextualized. Draw attention to how time and space may be manipulated by systems of continuity or discontinuity	Varies according to the expressive goals. May stylize time and space to emphasize its affective dimension
Ethical Concerns	Historical accuracy and verifiability; fair representation of others, avoid making people into helpless victims; develop the viewer's trust	Use of actual people, places, and things without regard for their individual identity; may distort or exaggerate for aesthetic effect	Passive observation of dangerous, harmful, or illegal activity can lead to scrious difficulties for subjects. Questions of responsibility toward subjects can become acute	Manipulate or goad others into confessions or actions they may regret; a strong responsibility to respect the rights and dignity of subjects. Questions of manipulation and distortion arise	Use or abuse subjects to pose questions that are those of the filmmaker and not the subjects	Degree of honesty and self-scrutiny vs. self-deception; misrepresentation or distortion of larger issues, lapses into wholly idiosyncratic
A Voice Characterized By	Classic oration in pursuit of the truth and seeking to inform and move an audience	An expressive desire to give new forms and fresh perspectives to the world represented	Patience, modesty, self-effacing Willingness to let audience decide for itself about what it sees and hears	Engagement, strong investment in the encounter with others or in presenting a historical perspective	Sclf-questioning, a voice of doubt, even radical doubt about the certainty or fixity of knowledge	Strongly personal, engaged orator pursuing the truth of what it feels like to experience the world in a particular way

TABLE 8.1. Two Emphases in Documentary

Social Issue Documentary	Personal Portrait Documentary
Voice of filmmaker or agency as authority, plus voice of witnesses and experts to corroborate what's said. Filmmaker interacts with subjects in relation to the social issue. May rely heavily on rhetoric to engage or persuade the viewer	Voice of social actors (people) who speak for themselves rather than as representatives of a cause or issue. Filmmaker interacts with subjects more personally, which may include discussion of the interaction itself. May rely heavily on style to engage or involve the viewer
Discourse of sobriety. Style is secondary to content; content is what counts—the real world as it exists or existed	Poetic or subjective discourse. Style counts as much as conteut; form is what matters—what the world feels like from a particular perspective
Stresses disembodied, conceptual knowledge, enduring importance of social issues and historical events	Stresses embodied, situated knowledge enduring importance of specific moments and individual experiences
Public issues	Private moments
The right to know or serving the greater good guides the quest for knowledge	The right to privacy and the boundary between the personal and the political is a conscious consideration
Characters gain minimal psychological depth relative to the exploration of broad concepts or issues	Characters convey considerable psychological complexity; larger issues emerge implicitly or indirectly
Individuals are often reptesented as: Typical (representative of a larger category) Victim Expert or witness	Individuals are often represented as: Unique or distinctive (idiosyncratic) Mythic Charismatic
Directs maximum attention to an issue, problem, or concept that is expressly named: sexism, global warming, AIDS, etc.	Direct maximum attention to the qualities and challenges of an individual, usually with indirect or implicit reference to larger issues
Stresses filmmaker's social mission or political purpose over his or her stylistic aplomb or personal expressiveness	Stresses filmmaker's style or personal expressiveness over his or her focus on a social issue

Social Issue Documentary	Personal Portrait Documentary
Filmmaker, or his voice-over surrogate, functions in an omniscient, transcendent realm that is distinct from the world of the film's subjects or social actors. Interviews, if present, serve the needs of this omniscient perspective	Filmmaker functions in the same social, historical realm as the subjects or social actors he or she interacts with. These interactions (especially interviews) may be a key element of the film
Commonly possesses a problem/ solution structure; often offers explanations for specific issues (poverty, welfare, war, social injustice, environmental hann)	Commonly presents a problem, situation, or individual without providing a solution or strong sense of closure; often invites understanding and empathy (of crises, intense experiences, maturation, personal growth or change, effect of experiences)
Stresses drama of finding a viable solution to a common problem	Stresses drama of experiencing the world from an individual's distinct perspective
Examples: Before Stonewall; Berlin: Symphony of a Great City; The City; Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room Eyes on the Prize; Harvest of Shame; In the Year of the Pig; An Inconvenient Truth; An Injury to One; Isle of Flower Land without Bread; The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter; The Man with a Movie Camera; Midnight Movies; Night and Fog; The Power of Nightmares; Taxi to the Dark Side; Th Film Is Not Yet Rated; Tribulation 99; Ways of Seeing (I-IV); Why We Fight	Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie; Man on Wire; Metallica: Some Kind of Monster; Murderball; My Architect; Nanook of the North; Portrait of Jason; Primary; Ryan; S 21; Salesman; Sherman's March; Silverlake Life; Standard Operating Procedure; Tarnation; The Wild Parrots of

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Some documentaries set out to explain aspects of the world to us. They analyze problems and propose solutions. They seek to mobilize our support for one position instead of another. Other documentaries invite us to understand aspects of the world more fully. They observe, describe, or poetically evoke situations and interactions. They try to enrich our understanding of aspects of the historical world by means