

PART I

Documentary Meets the Neighbors

The Avant-Garde and Fiction Film



WHAT DISTINGUISHES DOCUMENTARY FILMS THAT REPRESENT our shared reality from fiction films that imagine elaborations of it or alternatives to it? And if documentary and the avant-garde are commonly regarded as polar opposites, pursuing content over form or form over content, respectively, how can they share much in the way of common purpose? One gives priority to the world around us, the other to the vision of a filmmaker. Or so it seems.

More doggedly than I realized at the time, I pursued these questions in *Representing Reality* and *Blurred Boundaries*. Can we distinguish documentary from its neighbors in any consistent way? What makes a documentary a documentary? Is it internal to the film or a question of framing and context? Three questions taken up in *Representing Reality* remain pertinent: (1) How does storytelling relate to the examination of historical events (a problem familiar to historians, anthropologists, and others but less often addressed among most film critics whose focus is mainly on fiction films)? (2) What is the role of rhetoric in making persuasive arguments in documentaries? and (3) How does objectivity function as a (rhetorical) mantle all the better to shroud the subjective, persuasive, and ideological dimensions to documentary films? In each case something feels different about the uses of storytelling, rhetoric, and objectivity, but it is not easy to say what that is in a conclusive way.

The essays here continue this investigation into intriguing aspects of the complex overlap between documentary and its neighbors. "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde" returns to the question of how documentary came to be considered a distinct form of cinema in the late 1920s. Prior to that, the word *documentary* did not designate any particular type of film even though most documentary historians assign its origin to

much earlier times, often to the quotidian events captured by the Lumière brothers at the end of the nineteenth century in films like *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895). I argue that earlier works like these are best understood in other ways that locate them in a different moment of social history and a different period of film history. By the 1920s, however, documentary and avant-garde efforts were closely aligned, sharing the same fertile soil of experimentation and differentiation from the mainstream fiction film. The differentiation was gradual, and incomplete, but the result was that a new form of filmmaking achieved recognition around the world.

Here's another question: how do documentaries incorporate a fantasmatic dimension despite their realist predilections? By *fantasmatic* I mean an entire mise-en-scène that possesses more of a psychic reality than a historical one, more an imaginary basis than a factual one. Although documentary is often seen as a sober enterprise, it clearly contains elements that are removed from the usual forms of factual representation, most notably but not exclusively in reenactments. "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject" explores this idea at length and proposes a possible typology for reenactments from highly realistic ones to extremely stylized, even Brechtian ones.

Part I also introduces "Further Reflections," shorter, more sharply focused pieces, often in different formats such as the letter, book review, or online post. As a whole, these pieces serve to instigate reflection rather than exhaust a topic. They suggest ways in which the overall topic—the relation of documentary to its closest neighbors in this case—can be further explored. They also provide examples of how forms of critical writing other than the standard essay form can contribute to our understanding of an underlying issue or question.

The "Letter to Lynn Sachs on *Investigation of a Flame*" provides a personal response to Sachs's quite experimental documentary on the Catonsville Nine. I relate my viewing of the film to what I was doing at the time of the original event and how her formal choices generated a particular form of recall, one better discussed in a letter than an essay. The letter was prompted by an invitation to contribute to a book of letters to independent and experimental filmmakers—a superb idea, I thought—but the book never materialized in that form.

The concluding piece in this part, "*Breaking the Frame: Gender, Violation, and the Avant-Garde*," began as a post on my website. I edited and amplified it for the book, but it remains primarily an indication of how I responded to Marielle Nitoslawska's poetic, highly experimental account

of Carolee Schneemann's career as a filmmaker and artist. The blog does not fully review the film or probe any particular aspect of it in depth, but it does clearly point to the blurred boundaries that make any attempt to differentiate or define documentary from its neighbors a most vexing matter.



1 Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde

OVERTURE

How is it that the most formal and, often, most abstract of films and the most political, and sometimes, didactic of films arise, fruitfully intermingle, and then separate in a common historical moment? What motivated this separation and to what extent did it both succeed and fail? Our understanding of the relationship between documentary film and the modernist avant-garde requires revision. Specifically, we need to reconsider the prevalent story of documentary's "birth" in early cinema (1895–1905). How does this account, inscribed in almost all of our film histories, disguise this act of separation? What alternative account does it prevent?

Ostensibly, the origin of documentary film has long been settled. Louis Lumière's first films of 1895 demonstrated film's capacity to document the world around us. Here, at the start of cinema, is the birth of a documentary tradition. Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) added plot development, suspense, and more fully delineated characters to recordings of the historical world. He gave the documentary impulse fresh vitality. And in 1929 John Grierson, the documentary film movement's greatest champion, used his own film portrait of North Sea fishing, *Drifters*, to convince the British government to establish a filmmaking unit within the Empire Marketing Board, an agency charged with the circulation of food products and the promotion of "empire" as, in Grierson's words, not the "command of peoples" but "a co-operative effort in the tilling of soil, the reaping of harvests, and the organization of a world economy."¹ Grierson presided over an institutional base for documentary film production; thus, it was on his watch that documentary film practice reached maturity. It was not until I had the opportunity to prepare a paper comparing and contrasting the careers of Dutch avant-garde and documentary filmmaker Joris Ivens and

Russian suprematist painter Kazimir Malevich that I began to wonder if this story of documentary's beginnings did not belong more to myth than to history.²

The established story of documentary's beginnings continues to perpetuate a false division between the avant-garde and documentary that obscures their necessary proximity. Rather than the story of a very early birth and gradual maturation, I suggest that documentary film only takes form as an actual practice in the 1920s and early 1930s. Earlier efforts are less nascent documentaries than works organized according to different principles, both formal and social. The appearance of documentary involves the combination of three preexisting elements—photographic realism, narrative structure, and modernist fragmentation—along with a new emphasis on the rhetoric of social persuasion. This combination of elements itself became a source of contention. The most dangerous element, the one with the greatest disruptive potential—modernist fragmentation—required the most careful treatment. Grierson was greatly concerned by its linkage to the radical shifts in subjectivity promoted by the European avant-garde and to the radical shifts in political power promoted by the constructivist artists and Soviet filmmakers. He, in short, adapted film's radical potential to far less disturbing ends.

Modernist techniques of fragmentation and juxtaposition lent an artistic aura to documentary that helped distinguish it from the cruder form of early actualités or newsreels. These techniques contributed to documentary's good name, but they also threatened to distract from documentary's activist goals. The proximity and persistence of a modernist aesthetic in actual documentary film practice encouraged, most notably in the writings and speeches of John Grierson, a repression of the role of the 1920s avant-garde in the rise of documentary. Modernist elitism and textual difficulty were qualities to be avoided. The historical linkage of modernist technique and documentary oratory, evident since the early 1920s in much Soviet and some European work, failed to enter into Grierson's own writings. The same blind spot persists in subsequent histories of documentary film.

But even though the contribution of the avant-garde underwent repression in the public discourse of figures like Grierson, it returned in the actual form and style of early documentary itself. Repression conveys the force of a denial, and what documentary film history sought to deny was not simply an overly aesthetic lineage but the radically transformative potential of film pursued by a large segment of the international avant-garde. In its stead a more moderate rhetoric prevailed, tempered to the practical issues of the day. For advocates like Grierson the value of cinema lay in its

capacity to document, demonstrate, or, at most, enact the proper, or improper, terms of individual citizenship and state responsibility.

My primary thesis is that a wave of documentary activity takes shape at the point when cinema comes into the direct service of various, already active, efforts to build national identity during the 1920s and 1930s. Documentary film affirms, or contests, the power of the state; that is, it addresses issues of public importance and affirms or contests the role of the state in confronting these issues. These acts of contestation, more than affirmation, were what initially drew me to the documentary tradition that ran from the work of the Film and Photo League in the 1930s to Newsreel in the 1970s.³ The radical potential of film to contest the state and its law, as well as to affirm it, made documentary an unruly ally of those in power. Documentary, like avant-garde film, casts the familiar in a new light, not always that desired by the existing governments. The formation of a documentary film movement required the discipline that figures like Grierson in Great Britain, Pare Lorentz in the United States, Joseph Goebbels in Germany, and Anatoly Lunacharsky and Andrei Zhdanov in the Soviet Union provided for it to serve the political and ideological agenda of the existing nation-state.

The modernist avant-garde of Man Ray, Rene Clair, Hans Richter, Louis Delluc, Jean Vigo, Alberto Cavalcanti, Luis Buñuel, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and the Russian constructivists, among others, exceeded the terms of this binary opposition of affirmation and contestation centered on the bourgeois-democratic state. It proposed alternative subjects and subjectivities until the consolidation of socialist realism, the rise of fascism and Stalinism, the necessities of exile, and the exigencies of the Great Depression depleted its resources. From the vantage point of the avant-garde, the state and issues of citizenship were obscured by questions of perception and consciousness, aesthetics, the unconscious, actions, and desire. These questions were more challenging imperatives than those that preoccupied the custodians of state power.

THE STORY OF ORIGINS AND A QUESTION OF MODELS

By 1930, with the adoption of sound in the cinema and the onset of a global depression, documentary had gained recognition as a distinct form of filmmaking. What brought it into being? The standard histories assume the existence of a documentary tradition, or impulse, that long precedes the formation of a documentary movement or institutional practice. This ancestral pedigree guarantees documentary's birthright, but, as we will see,

it also poses a problem. If the documentary form was latent in cinema from the outset, why did it take some thirty years before Grierson would bestow the name *documentary* on it?

In the familiar story of documentary's ancestral origins it all begins with cinema's primal love for the surface of things, its uncanny ability to capture life as it is. Documentary represents the maturation of what was already manifest in early cinema with its immense catalogue of people, places, and things culled from around the world. British documentary filmmaker and historian Paul Rotha wrote in 1939 that documentary left the confines of fiction for "wider fields of actuality, where the spontaneity of natural behaviour has been recognized as a cinematic quality and sound is used creatively rather than reproductively. This attitude is, of course, the technical basis of the documentary film."⁴

Film historian Jack Ellis followed a similar line some fifty years later. Documentary "could be said to have begun with the birth of film itself. The filmed recordings of actuality in the experiments of technicians at the Edison laboratory in West Orange, N.J., might qualify."⁵ Erik Barnouw, author of the most widely used history of documentary film, opens his account with a reference to the early pioneers of the 1890s, who "felt a compelling need to document some phenomenon or action, and contrived a way to do it. In their work the documentary film had prenatal stirrings."⁶

In these origin stories Rotha, Ellis, and Barnouw associate nascent documentary film production with the photographic, or indexical, documentation of preexisting phenomena.⁷ The passage from document to documentary, then, follows an evolutionary progression. Prenatal stirrings become adult strides once we add an infusion of mature narrative stock in the form of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* and Grierson's robust organizing skills. According to Thompson and Bordwell, Grierson, like a Promethean hero, animates this slumbering giant all by himself: "The burgeoning of the documentary mode resulted largely from the efforts of Scottish-born John Grierson."⁸ As Grierson himself puts it, "There is money for films which will make box-office profits, and there is money for films which will create propaganda results. These only. They are the strict limits within which cinema has had to develop and will continue to develop."⁹ Documentary film form thus brings to life the cinema's unfulfilled propagandistic (or oratorical) potential. Put differently, this origin myth begs the question: if photography and film possessed the capacity to document from the outset, why must we wait three decades after the beginnings of cinema for an actual documentary film movement to appear? Is this not necessarily a decisive historical act rather than a natural evolutionary progression?¹⁰

The alternative history presented here underscores how the appearance of documentary film involves conditions peculiar to the moment of its inception after World War I rather than its purported ancestry. Well-established elements of cinema are brought into play. They only take documentary form in specific historical circumstances that function as “innovative spurs, movements that launch new energies.”¹¹ Apart from such circumstances, potentialities would remain dormant or contribute to quite different waves or genres.¹² Origin myths of distant ancestors and elaborate pedigree legitimate a new genre by equipping it with a distinctive lineage traceable to the birth of cinema itself. Not coincidentally, such myths deflect scrutiny from the similarity and overlap between 1920s documentary avant-garde. They also rationalize the enforcement of boundaries to separate documentary from “obviously” unrelated alternatives like the avant-garde.

In fact, of the four elements that contribute to the formation of a documentary film wave, only one had been in place since 1895: the capacity of cinema to record visible phenomena with great fidelity. To this capacity we must add three elements: (1) the gradual elaboration of narrative codes and conventions distinct to cinema (1905–15) that allow any film to utilize a storytelling structure capable of inspiring belief in its representational gestures, largely through emphasis on vivid characters, linear actions, and the cinematic organization of time and space via continuity, parallel, and point-of-view editing; (2) the least acknowledged element: a wide array of modernist, avant-garde filmmaking practices that flourish throughout the 1920s; and (3) a range of techniques intended to achieve persuasive, rhetorical engagement.

None of these elements alone leads to the appearance of documentary film. Each leads elsewhere as well. Rather than tracing a line of descent for documentary, it will be more profitable to describe each element briefly and to indicate how it came to contribute to the appearance of a documentary film form in the period between the wars.

PHOTOGRAPHIC REALISM

Like scientific documentation, the “cinema of attractions,” described by Tom Gunning as the prevalent pre-1906 mode of representation, relies on the authenticating effect of camera optics and photographic emulsions to generate images that bear a precise set of relations to that which they represent. Both scientific evidence and carnival-like attractions exhibit noteworthy aspects of the world with indexical precision. Such images readily serve as documents but not documentaries.¹³ In science they offer proofs or

record phenomena beyond what the eye can see. As “attractions” they solicit “spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself.”¹⁴

Unfettered from narrative structure or scientific analysis, a cinema of attractions is a form of excitation, exhibitionism, or spectacle. It engenders an effect comparable to the effect of reality TV shows such as *Cops* or *Survivor*, namely, “Isn’t this amazing!”¹⁵ We witness strange, violent, dangerous, or catastrophic events but receive only minimal analysis of them. A program on ABC in January 2000 entitled “Out of Control People” provided a latter-day Mondo Cane-like catalogue of soccer rioting, college-student rampages, prison uprisings, and other examples of its own title with small snippets of commentary from “experts” who make reference to mob behavior and group psychology. The intent of the program was clearly far more sensationalistic than educational. The sensationalism gained immeasurably from the use of “documentary” images of actual events.

As the surrealists were eager to demonstrate, the language of sensationalism could also readily insinuate itself into the protocols of science. Lisa Cartwright has carried this insight into the belly of scientific experimentation to chronicle the misuses of documentary images in work that purports to follow scientific procedure but detours toward issues of morbidity and spectacle.¹⁶ Such an effect underscores a sense of amazement, and sometimes outrage, rather than rational understanding. Allan Sekula notes that documentary work can amass a mountain of evidence, “and yet, in this pictorial presentation of scientific and legalistic ‘fact,’ the genre has simultaneously contributed much to spectacle, to retinal excitation, to voyeurism, to terror, envy and nostalgia, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world.”¹⁷

In classic surrealist/dadaist form the pretensions to knowledge that allow exotic travelogues to masquerade as scientific statement became the direct target of Luis Buñuel’s unsettling account of poverty in Spain’s Las Hurdes region, *Land without Bread* (1932), itself a work with a fascinating precursor in Adrian Brunel’s mock travelogue of a trek across the Sahara Desert, *Crossing the Great Sagrada* (1924). Buñuel’s film is heavily informed by a written ethnography of a poor region of Spain published a few years earlier, but it turns science on its head to underscore the sensationalism that surrounds “attractions” concocted from elements of everyday Hurdano life. *Land without Bread* condemns the very procedures of fieldwork, detailed description, and objective commentary that would form the backbone for ethnographic encounter in the decades to come.¹⁸

Spectacle in early cinema, like visual evidence in science, relied on an impression of photographic realism, the better to convince us of the authenticity of remarkable sights. One of the most vivid conjunctions of spectacle and photographic realism occurs in pornography. Markers of authenticity affirm that an actual sex act has occurred, even if this act occurred, like most fiction-based acts, solely for the purpose of being filmed. It is safe to conclude that the documentary potential of the photographic image does not lead directly to a documentary film practice. Neither spectacle and exhibition nor science and documentation guarantee the emergence of a documentary film form. Movements involve historical contingency, not genetic ancestry. Something more than the ability to generate visual documents, however useful this may be, is necessary. Much can be documented, but most documents are not documentaries.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

If the indexical image and cinematic document lends itself to multiple purposes, it may well be a necessary if not sufficient condition for the appearance of documentary film. Narrative enters into the equation in a similar fashion. Narrative clearly leads elsewhere, toward fiction, so much so that its value to documentary can be easily underestimated. Few would claim documentary as the evolutionary culmination of cinema's narrative endowment. What narrative does is make time something more than simple duration or sensation. Through the introduction of a temporal axis of actions and events involving characters or, more broadly, agents (animals, cities, invisible forces, collective masses, and so on), narrative imbues time with historical meaning. Narrative allows documentary to endow occurrences with the significance of historical events. Narrative overcomes the fetishizing lure of spectacle and the factual conclusiveness of science. It restores the mystery and power of historical consciousness.¹⁹

Narrative not only facilitates the representation of historical time; it also supplies techniques by which to introduce the moralizing perspective or social belief of an author and a structure of closure whereby initiating disturbances can receive satisfactory resolution. Such resolution gives an imprimatur of conclusiveness to the arguments, perspectives, and solutions advanced by the film. Typically centered on a main character or hero in classic narrative fiction, such a structure proves detachable from individualized agents or heroes; social issues such as inadequate housing, floods, the isolation of remote regions, or the exploitation of an entire class can establish the story's initiating disturbance. Resolution follows less from a hero's actions

than from the documentary's own solution to social problems: slum clearance in *Housing Problems* (Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton, 1935); the creation of the TVA in *The River* (Pare Lorentz, 1937); railroad construction in *Turksib* (Victor A. Turin, 1929); and a workers' strike in *Misère au Borinage* (Joris Ivens and Henri Storck, 1934).²⁰ The form of such films takes over the work customarily assigned to the heroic efforts of an individual protagonist.

MODERNIST PRACTICES

The modernist avant-garde of the 1920s introduces a third contribution to the appearance of a documentary film form. It is this milieu, with its own formal conventions and social purpose; its own amalgam of advocates and practitioners, institutions, and discourses; and its own array of assumptions and expectations on the part of audience and artists, that provides both representational techniques and a social context conducive to a documentary movement.

Individuals such as Buñuel, Vigo, Vertov, Richter, Delluc, and Ivens moved readily between an emphasis on the effects of form itself, in keeping with the modernist tradition, and an emphasis on social impact, in keeping with a documentary impulse.²¹ Films that shared an avant-garde emphasis such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's unrealized plan for a "city symphony film," *Dynamics of a Great City* (1921–22),²² *Fievre* (Delluc, 1921), *Retour à la maison* (Man Ray, 1923), *Ballet mécanique* (Fernand Léger, 1924), *Mechanics of the Brain* (Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1926), *Rien que les heures* (Cavalcanti, 1926), *A Sixth of the World* (Vertov, 1926), *The Bridge* (Ivens, 1927), *Emak-Bakia* (Ray, 1927), *Ghosts before Breakfast* (Richter, 1927), *Berlin: Symphony of a City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927), *Un chien andalou* (Buñuel and Salvador Dali, 1928), *Inflation* (Richter, 1928), *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929), *Rain* (Ivens, 1929), *À Propos de Nice* (Vigo, 1929), *L'Age d'or* (Buñuel, 1930), *Salt for Svanetia* (Mikhail Kalatozov, 1930), and *Land without Bread* (Buñuel, 1932) affirmed the close proximity of modernist exploration and documentary address.

Such a fusion of interests was particularly evident in Soviet Russia throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s before socialist realism gained dominance. Figures such as Aleksandr Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin, Vera Stepanova, Kazimir Malevich (in his late paintings), El Lissitzky, Alexei Gan, Lyubov Popova, Alexander and Victor Vesnin, the Stenberg brothers, and Vladimir Mayakovsky were among the many artists who contributed to a constructivist movement that combined formal innovation with social application.

Without the capacity to disrupt and make new, documentary filmmaking would not have been possible as a discrete rhetorical practice. It is the modernist avant-garde that fulfills Grierson's own call for the "creative treatment of actuality" most relentlessly.²³ The explosive power of avant-garde practices subverts and shatters the coherence, stability, and naturalness of the dominant world of realist representation. Documentaries from the interwar period cobble images together with remarkable abandon, fully in accord with the pioneering spirit of the avant-garde. (Voice-over commentary, poetic or expository, lends them a purposefulness the avant-garde typically eschewed.) Raul Ruiz reminds us of the fabulous heterogeneity of documentary images in *De grands événements et des gens ordinaires* (*Of Great Events and Ordinary People*, 1979) when his voice-over commentary describes this peculiar feature of the world presented by documentary as we witness a collage of isolated objects from everyday life cascade before us.

The "creative treatment of actuality" is authored, not recorded or registered. Creative treatment turns fact to fiction in the root sense of the Latin *fictio*, to shape or fashion. The concept of making, or authorship, moves us away from indexical documents of preexisting fact to the semiotics of constructed meaning and the address of the authorial I. As Ivens asserted, "It is the personality of the artist alone which distinguishes him from bodily reality and simple recording."²⁴ Or as Dziga Vertov, a figure claimed by documentary historians but himself rooted deeply in the theory and practice of the constructivist avant-garde, proclaimed in 1923, "My road is toward the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus, I decipher in a new way the world unknown to you."²⁵

In a similar spirit Rodchenko attacked the tradition of the painted portrait as a romantic mystification compared to the documentary power of the photograph or, preferably, a series of photographs: "Art has no place in modern life. . . . With the appearance of photographs, there can be no question of a single, immutable portrait. . . . The photograph presents a precise moment documentarily. . . . Crystallize man not by a single 'synthetic' portrait, but by a whole lot of snapshots taken at different times and in different conditions."²⁶

Modernist elements of fragmentation, defamiliarization (*ostranenie*, *Verfremdungseffekt*), collage, abstraction, relativity, anti-illusionism, and a general rejection of the transparency of realist representation all find their way into acts of documentary filmmaking. As Vertov wrote, "I am eye. I have created a man more perfect than Adam. . . . I take the most agile hands of one, the fastest and most graceful legs of another . . . and, by editing, I create an entirely new, perfect man."²⁷ Such techniques and aspirations

speak less to a flight from the social world into aesthetic reverie than to a critique of “an ideology of realism” designed to “perpetuate a preconceived notion of some external reality to be imitated, and indeed, to foster a belief in the existence of some such commonsense everyday shared secular reality in the first place.”²⁸ The 1920s avant-garde set out to revise the terms and conditions by which to construct representations of a shared secular reality.

The films mentioned above, from *Dynamics of a Great City* to *Land without Bread*, combine an avant-garde impulse with a documentary orientation. They disabuse their viewers of any commonsense reality. Such work constructs a new order of understanding. In the midst of upheaval, when, as the Russian Revolution seemed to confirm, “the bourgeoisie begins to decay as a class, in a world of social anomie and fragmentation, then that active and conquering mode of the representation of reality which is realism is no longer appropriate.”²⁹ For whom is it no longer appropriate? At the very least, for these filmmakers and other artists and activists who now saw things in a radically new way.

In France, Delluc introduced the concept of *photogenie* to describe how, in Richard Abel’s words, “cinema acted as a transformative, revelatory medium of absorption and de-familiarization.”³⁰ Meanwhile, anthropologists such as Michel Leiris and Marcel Griaule, modernists such as Robert Desnos and Georges Bataille, and scholars such as Carl Einstein and Andre Schaffner joined together at the journal *Documents* to demonstrate, in layout and text, that “to write ethnographies on the model of collage would be to avoid the portrayal of cultures as organic wholes or as unified, realistic worlds subject to a continuous explanatory discourse.”³¹

Hannah Hoch, John Heartfield, Moholy-Nagy, and Rodchenko drew on the technique of photomontage to subvert, reorder, and transform the face of photographic reality. Instead of the resolution-oriented structure of classic narrative, or the comparable problem-solution pattern of much documentary, modernist experimentation favored an open-ended, ambiguous play with time and space that did less to resolve real issues than to challenge the definition and priority of an issue per se. Modernist strategies remind us of the intractable kernel of potentially traumatic disturbance that makes the experience of history itself so different from its narrative representation. In what could be a justification for the radical transformations of an avant-garde, Slavoj Žižek asserts, “What emerges via distortions of the accurate representation of reality is the real—that is, the trauma around which social reality is structured.”³²

It was precisely the power of the combination of the indexical representations of the documentary image and the radical juxtapositions of time and

space allowed by montage that drew the attention of many avant-garde artists to film. Most turned away from conventional narrative structure, but many still chose to “relocate [a film’s] subject in ‘the image of the object,’ in the plastic and rhythmic conjunction or juxtaposition of representational ‘documentary’ images,”³³ a goal not unlike that of Bertolt Brecht, who challenged the theater director to adopt the new style and perspective of a “great epic and documentary theater.”³⁴ The modernist avant-garde contributed something vital to the appearance of documentary film; it imaginatively reconstructed the look of the world with images, or shots, taken of this world. As in the photographs of Atget, street scenes—from the backstreets of Paris in Ray’s *L’étoile de mer* (1928) to the puddles and umbrellas of Amsterdam in Ivens’s *Rain*—became a staple of modernist work.

The street, in fact, becomes a site of strange delights and bizarre discoveries: the mysterious box dropped by the woman in *Un chien andalou* and the “barbaric ritual” of tearing heads from chickens that Buñuel finds on the village streets of Los Hurdes in *Land without Bread*. These sights followed even earlier efforts to document life in the street such as the extraordinary footage generated for Albert Kahn’s *Archives de la planète*. One example is an extended long take of men entering and leaving a public urinal on a Paris street (*Les grands boulevards, Paris*, October 1913). The exchange of gazes between the camera and the urinal’s visitors attests to the surreal and complexly charged nature of this “archival” encounter.³⁵

Such images lent historical potential to images of everyday life, even as these images altered our ordinary perception of the world. They only require yoking to the oratorical voice of the filmmaker to make them fit for documentary representation. The street, along with the car, the machine, and the city—with their position halfway between the animate and the inanimate—provide a ready-made subject for the avant-garde as well as the documentarian. From Germaine Dulac’s harsh parody of male prerogative in *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923) to Vigo’s satiric view of the urban bourgeoisie at leisure in *À propos de Nice*, the avant-garde gave voice to the subversion of social convention. Although some avant-garde films, such as those of Viking Eggeling (*Symphonie diagonale*, 1921–24) or the early work of Richter (*Rhythmus 23*, 1923; *Rhythmus 25*, 1925) moved strongly toward abstraction, or “pure cinema,” a great many works began with images of a recognizable reality in order to transform it. On this point constructivist art, Soviet montage theory, and the European avant-garde stood in accord: the world as it offers itself to us provides the starting point for both political and aesthetic acts of transformation.

RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

Documentary took identifiable shape when photographic realism, narrative structure, and modernist fragmentation served the goal of social persuasion. Oration added another element of social consciousness to cinematic representation. It called on the audience to put itself at one with the social perspective of the film and to prepare itself to act accordingly. Rhetorical speech, in the form of editing patterns, intertitles, and voice-over commentary, channels techniques of defamiliarization toward preferred forms of social change. Like the other three elements, rhetoric does not necessarily lead to documentary film. As a persuasive strategy it also supports overt propaganda, all advertising, and some forms of journalism. But from the ecstatic celebration of the completion of the Turkestan-Siberian railroad with titles that shoot toward the viewer with increasing intensity over rapidly cut images of onrushing trains at the conclusion of Victor Turin's *Turksib* to the carefully choreographed images of masses and leaders, followers and their one Fuhrer in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1934), rhetorical strategies allowed documentary expression to achieve a distinctive voice of its own.

DOCUMENTARY'S HISTORICAL MOMENT

Over the course of the 1920s a wave of documentary filmmaking took shape that allowed differentiation between the modernist artist and the social orator. This new movement first took shape, however, not in the as yet unfounded British documentary, where the promotion of documentary film required the derogation of the modernist avant-garde, but in constructivist art and Soviet cinema, where avant-garde and documentary tendencies engaged in a lively interaction.

Grierson, like others, was well aware of the Soviet achievement and of its parallels with his own plans for a new film form. In fact, Grierson contributed the English titles to *Turksib*; he also played a key role in the American distribution of Eisenstein's first film, *Strike* (1925)—a work, like Flaherty's *Moana*, rich in documentary value.³⁶ The Soviet example, however, like the modernist avant-garde generally, represented a form of excess for Grierson. Its rhetorical exuberance and political radicalism spilled far beyond the bounds of what his government sponsors expected. Grierson's vision of the role of the artist differed from that of the Soviet filmmakers and constructivist artists in the 1920s. In each case two strands of modernist discourse become intertwined but in radical rather than conservative forms. Margaret

Olin describes these two discourses as “one ‘documentary,’ exhorting the reader to participate in, so as to ameliorate, the conditions it describes [which I have also termed oratorical], and the other ‘artistic,’ concerning itself with the problematics of selfhood and otherness.”³⁷ Documentary film in the 1920s and 1930s achieves this braiding by assigning amelioration—and all the other modalities of social intervention—to those categories of selfhood and otherness that revolve around issues of citizenship and the nation-state.

The principle of citizenship as self-realization, frequently invoked by constructivists and filmmakers in the Soviet Union in relation to the creation of a “new man,” became the singular *raison d’être* for Grierson’s conception of the documentary: not to foment revolution but to preserve the status quo. Grierson’s commitment to government and corporate sponsorship as the only viable means of institutional support required an act of separation from the more radical potentialities of the modernist avant-garde and the particular example of the Soviet cinema. Grierson campaigned long and hard for a documentary film practice that persuaded more than informed, guided more than observed. The social orator undertook the task of offering moral and political guidance to the confused masses by means of emotionally (rhetorically) compelling argument. Fulfillment lay in carrying out one’s responsibilities to the common goals embodied in the nation-state. Grierson’s discussions of meanings and values, virtues and models, never occurred in a realm of timeless contemplation. They played a crucial role in developing what Foucault would call “strategies of domination” in relation to the alternatives posed by the European avant-garde and the Soviet model.³⁸ How did he accomplish this?

Among other things, Grierson shifted the focus of his search for a model from the rhetorical and organizational example of Soviet cinema to the lone, romantic figure of Robert Flaherty, a semicommercial maverick specializing in heroic tales drawn from exotic locations.³⁹ Flaherty had the right sense of drama and conflict but the wrong sense of modernity. In a series of written commentaries, Grierson lamented that Flaherty—maker of, under Grierson’s sponsorship, *Industrial Britain* (1933), a film more about potters and glassblowers than the assembly line—harnessed his storytelling genius to an outmoded vision of “man against the sky” rather than to the needs of the modern day “documentary value” but not the documentarian’s voice of social consciousness. Flaherty gave no guidance to the man on the street; his was an escape to earlier times and distant pleasures. With this critique Grierson fabricated an ostensible issue: how to make Flaherty’s romanticism—one step removed from Hollywood

escapism—topical and propagandistic. This allowed him to sidestep the actual issue: how to make the Soviet cinema's radicalism palatable to non-radical, bourgeois-democratic ends?

To the extent that Grierson did address the model of Soviet cinema, he invoked the same convenient scapegoat he had already fashioned from Flaherty; he found Soviet films escapist and inadequately pragmatic, just as Flaherty did. Grierson wrote:

The great Russian directors . . . were begun in propaganda and were made by it. . . . One cannot do less when recording a world revolution than develop a tempo to take it. . . . But the whole effect was hectic and, in the last resort, romantic. . . . After the first flush of exciting cinema, the Russian talent faded. . . .

Russian directors are too bound up—too aesthetically vain—in what they call their “play films” to contribute to Russia's instructional cinema. They have, indeed, suffered greatly from the freedom given to artists in a first uncritical moment of revolutionary enthusiasm, for they have tended to isolate themselves more and more in private impression and private performance. . . . One's impression is that when some of the art and all of the bohemian self-indulgence have been knocked out of them, the Russian cinema will fulfil its high promise of the late twenties.⁴⁰

Grierson thus aligns himself with the advocates of socialist realism, who, by 1932, had the political power to label the politically radical and formally experimental directions in Soviet cinema unproductive trickery. The clear and decisive harnessing of creative energies to a specific form of social purpose took top priority for Grierson. Artistic license must be consistently subordinated to the propagandistic goal of giving citizens their proper orientation to the state.

And what did Grierson have to say of the European avant-garde? Its private, rather than public, sponsorship proved dilettantish, if not decadent. Or in Grierson's own words:

Documentary was from the beginning—when we first separated our public purpose theories from those of Flaherty [read: Soviet cinema]—an ‘anti-aesthetic’ movement.⁴¹

There has grown up another more independent cinema. I do not mean here the avant garde cinema which for a while flourished in France and has raised its head wherever family fortune and youthful enthusiasm have allowed it. The French avant garde with Rene Clair . . . Cavalcanti, Epstein and Jean Renoir, made its dash for liberty by exploiting its friends. . . . All the requisites of an independent cinema were there except principle, and the loyalty which goes with principle. . . .

Something more solidly founded than the avant garde there has been, and that is the propagandist cinema.⁴²

By 1930–32 a documentary film movement existed but with its radical potential harnessed by figures like Grierson to the specific needs of the nation-state. As Grierson put it:

The State is the machinery by which the best interests of the people are secured. Since the needs of the State come first, understanding of these needs comes first in education. . . . The needs of the State in this great period of revolutionary change are urgent; and the citizen has neither the leisure nor the equipment for the promiscuous exercise of his mental and emotional interests.⁴³

I suggest, in fact, that the problems of education and art, and their inevitable interest today, lie in the realm of the imaginative training for modern citizenship and not anywhere else.⁴⁴

There it is . . . from the dramatization of modern organization and the new corporate elements in society to the dramatization of social problems: each a step in the attempt to understand the stubborn raw material of our modern citizenship and wake the heart and the will to their mastery.⁴⁵

These remarks expose the tip of Grierson's larger social and aesthetic orientation. Although documentary filmmaking in the 1920s generally shares in the progressive politics of that period and represents one of the prime examples of a turn toward what William Stott called "documentary expression," Grierson's own position more closely resembles neoconservative political theory and the elitist aesthetics of the Bloomsbury group. Grierson's neoconservatism draws from (1) Benedetto Croce's and Graham Wallas's prewar emphasis on intuition and the irrational as vital forces that discredit liberal trust in reason (Grierson himself concluded that the state had to move and persuade rather than inform and explain); (2) a Hegelian idealist view of the state that privileged the technocratic vision of a governing elite over the strategic maneuvering of political parties; and (3) a corporatist model of state organization in which a civil service mandarin arbitrated conflict and dispensed wisdom rather than awaited the outcome of tedious parliamentary debates. Grierson placed himself among the elite and drew few distinctions between his views and more virulent forms of totalitarianism. In 1942, for example, Grierson opined to a friend that Britain had two choices: make an alliance with Russia or make an alliance with Germany. England "could do a deal with Germany that would save more of England's world privileges than can be saved any other way."⁴⁶

Grierson's affinity with the aesthetics of the Bloomsbury group involved, first, a rejection of realism as a transparent style. To give the impression of observing lived reality mattered less than utilizing more innovative techniques, including those of the avant-garde, to urge preferred solutions to social problems. Second, it evidenced a distrust of the rise of a mass or popular audience since such audiences could not be counted on for reasoned, political judgment. Grierson coupled his neoconservative view of public "service," or propaganda, to an aesthetic of art as a "hammer" to hit nerves and guide actions. Clive Bell's comment—"Society must be permeated and, what is more, continually nourished by the unconscious influence of this civilizing elite. . . . The majority must be told that the world of thought and feeling exists. . . . To point the road is the task of the few"⁴⁷—could easily be Grierson's own. To warrant sponsorship, art must be useful to the needs of an idealist model of the state. Guiding the masses toward the fulfillment of their civic responsibility and national patrimony is paramount. This aesthetic's mechanisms may seem totalitarian, but idealist principles and distrust of the masses justifies it. If we are to locate Grierson's attacks on the modernist avant-garde effectively, his famous definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" must be coupled with his less-well-known definition of propaganda as "the constructive management of public affairs."⁴⁸

Documentary gains a definition and institutional base as it fulfills its potential to be what Lenin once called it, "the most important art."⁴⁹ It is the art most fully equipped to engage a mass audience via the mediations of the new technologies of photographic fidelity and mechanical reproduction. As Peter Galassi notes in his essay for the Museum of Modern Art's Rodchenko catalogue, "the adaptation of the modernist aesthetic to hortatory functions was an international phenomenon of the 1930s, blind to ideological distinctions. . . . [One thing that Stalin, Hitler, and Henry Luce shared] was a talent for persuading a massive audience that life was as good as their picture of it. To achieve this, their artists did not overthrow modernism; they adapted it."⁵⁰

Like newspapers and radio before it, cinema contributed a powerful rhetorical voice to the needs of the modern state, which had to find ways to enact popular, compelling representations of the state's policies and programs. Such enactments would engage its members in ritual, participatory acts of citizenship. Documentary film practice became one such form of ritual participation.

Although shadowed by elitism, and hence vulnerable to critique, the modernist avant-garde's greatest threat was not a failure to pay off but the risk of paying off too well. The very techniques of fragmentation, defamil-

iarization, suspended belief and activated disbelief, radical heterogeneity and arbitrary closure that characterize avant-garde film destabilized the institutional solidity and civic respectability with which Grierson sought to endow the documentary. The modernist avant-garde provided a way to represent traumatic events in a manner less fetishistic "than any traditional representation of them could ever be."⁵¹ Solutions, not traumas, however, were what Grierson and others like him sought. Richter's inflation, for example, pans across scores of bewildered faces as money loses value and disaster looms. His abstracted, lateral shots of real faces in an unreal space unfurl like a scroll of indefinite length; the traumas of technological modernity defy the fiscal policies of the nation-state. Inflation fetishizes no heroes, no managerial elite, no solution, no story of good cheer.

Griersonian documentary promises the mastery of events through participatory rituals suited to the citizen-subject. Modernism exposes such participatory rituals as just that: rituals. The modernist avant-garde thwarted the illusion of mastery that comes with realism and narrative. Modernism refused to render events such as the Depression, war, political revolution, or, later, the Holocaust "clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning" or to liberate us from the shadow they cast over our desire to "envision a future free from their debilitating effects."⁵²

From this perspective Grierson's strategy for documentary film production asked of audiences what John F. Kennedy so famously asked of his fellow citizens: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." The orator not only reaches citizens but also contributes to the construction of the sense of identity necessary for citizenship in the first place. Films of ritual participation mark the dominant tradition, be they investitures of monumental fascism in Nazi Germany (*Triumph of the Will*), the "people's" communism of Soviet Russia (*Old and New*, Eisenstein, 1929; *Salt for Svanetia*; *Three Songs of Lenin*, Vertov, 1934), the Labor-Conservative coalitions of 1930s Britain (*Housing Problems*; *Coal Face*, Cavalcanti, 1935; *Smoke Menace*, John Taylor, 1937), or the New Deal interventionism of Rooseveltian America (*The Plow That Broke the Plains*, Pare Lorentz, 1936; *The River*).

Not all documentary was state or corporate sponsored. Some filmmakers chose to contest the power of the state, often in alliance with various social-democratic or national communist parties outside the U.S.S.R. The Film and Photo leagues that appeared in numerous countries, with their photo documentation and film newsreels of hunger marches, strikes, and social protests were prime examples of oppositional effort.⁵³ But rather than return to the radical potentiality of modernist technique, oppositional

documentary endorsed the more realist tone of dominant documentary production and the issues of self and other that fell within the circumscribed limits of the citizen in relation to the state. The New York Film and Photo League, for example, allowed a contingent of artistically ambitious members to split off to make more full-blown documentaries on larger issues, such as the background to the Spanish Civil War, while the majority insisted on the primacy of news-oriented topical reports or newsreels. Neither group seriously entertained the stratagems of the avant-garde.

Ivens exemplifies the avant-garde filmmaker turned leftist documentarian who offered relentless opposition to the bourgeois-democratic state.⁵⁴ Ivens made films in eight countries between 1927 and 1946 (The Netherlands, Belgium, U.S.S.R., Spain, China, the United States, Canada, and Australia). His alliance with the Soviet Union and the Comintern's shifting policies of militancy and popular-front unity make him a vivid representative of the radical left's combination of attacks on capitalism, on the one hand, and a defense of the Soviet Union, on the other, even when the latter defense called for a suppression of the former attacks.

Ivens also went further than his American counterparts in keeping modernist techniques alive. The gradual shift from the modernist aesthetic of *The Bridge and Rain* to the social activism of *The Spanish Earth* (1937), in support of the Republican cause, and *Song of the Rivers* (1953), a tribute to dockworkers and longshoremen around the world, also takes condensed form in Ivens's remake of *Zuiderzee* (1930). *Zuiderzee* is a loving chronicle of the state's reclamation of fertile land from an inland sea. It stresses the remarkable feats of engineering skill and physical labor, however, rather than the role of government. But in *New Earth* (1934), Ivens uses a shortened version of the same footage with a new conclusion: he adds a virulent denunciation of an unregulated, international stock market and the social indifference of rich investors who allow the fruit of the land to go to waste when no profit can be made from its sale. Ivens shows the wholesale dumping of grain into the sea. In *New Earth* a voice-over commentary of moral denunciation replaces *Zuiderzee*'s tone of poetic observation. The state has failed to live up to its responsibilities to regulate markets; ordinary people must pay the price. Ivens employs reenactment and defamiliarizing juxtapositions to make his point. He vividly adopts the modernist strategies Grierson disparaged and undermines the sense of sacrifice Grierson prized. It is, however, precisely the adaptation of modernist technique to a hortatory function still revolving around the nation-state that makes Ivens into Grierson's opponent. They face each other on common ground but from opposite sides of the battle lines.

In the period after 1930, when he took his first trip to the Soviet Union, Ivens clearly adopts the perspective of the left with a focus that remains concerned primarily with the role of the state. This perspective leads Ivens to produce work that addresses the failure of the state to ensure decent living conditions and a fair wage (*Misère au Borinage*); the ability of the people (*Komsomol*, 1932); the failure of the world's governments to respond to the cries for aid by the Spanish government in its battle against a military coup (*The Spanish Earth*); and a failure by his own Dutch government to heed the demands of a colonized people for their independence (*Indonesia Calling*, 1946). Like other members of the great tradition of the oppositional documentary, Joris Ivens remains centrally preoccupied with the power of the state and the rights of its citizens. Rather than join the harassed left-wing opposition to Western governments in the postwar years, however, Ivens moved behind the Iron Curtain, where he remained an active filmmaker until his death in 1989. His later career, however, as a propagandist for the "wrong" side essentially disappears from all Western film history books.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

Not until the 1970s does an opposition of a different kind displace the state from its central position in documentary rhetoric. Since then, these have been the central issues and debates: (1) the ethical, political, and ideological implications of the different modes of documentary production; (2) the quality and value of individual filmmaking oeuvres; (3) the usefulness of documentary film as a disciplinary (anthropological, sociological) or personal (autobiographical, poetic) form of knowledge and power; (4) the social efficacy of specific films and different modes; and (5) the challenges of historical representation and contemporary observation.

Reacting against the small-scale, observational quality of documentaries in the 1960s that began to shift attention from the state to facets of everyday life and lived experience—be they those of candidates (*Primary*, Drew Associates, 1960) or high school students (*High School*, Frederick Wiseman, 1968)—work in the 1970s returned to the modernist techniques that observational cinema rejected. *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (Connie Field, 1980) reinvents the intertextual compilation techniques of Esther Shub. *Union Maids* (Julia Reichert and James Klein, 1976) and *With Babies and Banners* (Lyn Goldfarb, Lorraine Gray, and Ann Bohlen, 1979) revive the use of the interview to recount historical events and personal experience. Staged reenactments return in *David Holzman's Diary* (Jim McBride,

1967) and *Daughter Rite* (Michelle Citron, 1979). Collage techniques gain new currency in Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1969) and Santiago Alvarez's *The 79 Springtimes of Ho Chi Minh* (1969). Together with works such as *The Woman's Film* (San Francisco Newsreel, 1971), *Word Is Out* (Mariposa Film Group, 1977), *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (Christine Choy and Renee Tajima, 1988), *I'm British but . . .* (Gurinder Chadha, 1989), *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1989), *Sink or Swim* (Su Friedrich, 1990), *Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1991), *Isle of Flowers* (Jorge Furtado, 1990), *History and Memory* (Rea Tajiri, 1991), *Bontoc Eulogy* (Marlon Fuentes, 1997), and *Free Fall* (Péter Forgács, 1998), these films take up alternative subjectivities and identities involving issues of sex and gender, ethnicity and race, personal memory and public history.

The approach to documentary representation adopted by these works no longer requires a strategic separation from modernist techniques. The power of the state, along with its achievements and failures, is secondary to the development of a heightened sense of solidarity among specific subcultures and minority groups. The perspectives, histories, and initiatives of such previously unheeded groups command attention. Collaboration between filmmakers and their subjects replaces collaboration between filmmakers and government agencies. With this shift the form and style of documentary representations expand to encompass a breadth of perspectives and voices, attitudes and subjectivities, positions and values that exceed the universal subject of an idealized nation-state.

The emergence of a documentary film practice in the 1920s and 1930s drew together various elements of photographic realism, narrative, modernism, and rhetoric at a historical moment when the technology of cinema and the techniques of persuasion could serve the needs of the modern nation-state. In Grierson's hands this involved an act of separation between the self-indulgent avant-garde of modernist expression and a down-to-earth documentary movement of realist persuasion. This separation proved, in fact, partial, if not mythic, however much film histories have perpetuated it.

Vestiges of avant-garde radicalism persisted in some forms of documentary expression throughout the period between the wars, as we can see in Brecht's theater and in films such as Richter's *Inflation*, Turin's *Turksib*, and Ivens's *New Earth*. And as the work of the later 1960s and the 1970s attests, these elements of formal innovation, coupled with social purpose, lend distinction to documentary as an art form capable of envisioning a transformed world. But the myth of separation persists. This myth demands an origin story for documentary film that legitimates its persuasive powers in the objectivity of the photographic image rather than in the aims of the

orator. Documentary film histories have perpetuated this origin myth.⁵⁶ They continue to circumscribe documentary film within the framework of a sobering ritual of civic participation.

This frame demands enlargement to include a revised sense of ritual that no longer encircles the citizen-subject and nation-state. This revised concept of ritual and performance does away with the traditional center of political power. It dissolves the fixed, central place of the state in favor of a more fluid, affinity-based collectivity of variable needs, shifting alliances, and mutable powers. The newer, post-1970s "wave" of documentary film, like the modernist avant-garde before it, revises our understanding of the subject; it displaces the individual from the stable position of correspondent with the state as suppressed subjectivities claim a voice and image of their own.

Maya Deren, the key figure in the emergence of a postwar American avant-garde, envisioned radical possibilities of these kinds for film form. She championed a vigorous program of ethical engagement and a revised sense of ritual enactment.⁵⁷ In her extraordinary publication of 1947, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*, Deren tries to clear a socially engaged, ethically informed space for a new avant-garde. She restores ethics and the prospect of ritual redemption to the project of the avant-garde, but this restoration comes at the price of stealing back from documentary what all "creative treatments of actuality" share despite the names and limits placed on them. (Deren scorns documentary literalism as much as Grierson mocked avant-garde elitism.) Deren's call for a renewal of the avant-garde, in fact, is of a piece with the post-1970s wave of documentary described here. A rigid sense of separation no longer obtains, and Deren's notion of ritual as a socially transformative act achieves considerable cogency: "The ritualistic form treats the human being not as the source of the dramatic action, but as a somewhat depersonalized element in a dramatic whole. The intent of such depersonalization is not the destruction of the individual; on the contrary, it enlarges him beyond the personal dimension and frees him from the specializations and confines of the personality. He becomes part of a dynamic whole which, like all such creative relationships, in turn, endows its parts with a measure of its larger meaning."⁵⁸ I began with historical revisionism, and I conclude with a utopian invocation. I return to the past to change our understanding of it and to make that understanding available to the cinema we have yet to achieve.

2 Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject

“Could you do the kiss again?”

Lonely Boy (Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroitor, 1962)

Reenactments, the more or less authentic recreation of prior events, were a staple of documentary representation until they were slain by the “verité boys” of the 1960s (Robert Drew, Ricky Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, David and Albert Maysles, Frederick Wiseman, and others) who proclaimed everything except what took place in front of the camera without rehearsal or prompting to be a fabrication, inauthentic. Observational or direct cinema generated an honest record of what would have happened had the camera not been there or what does happen as a result of the camera recording people who know they are being filmed. Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) might be admired for the evidence it provides of Flaherty’s patience, exquisite eye, and apparent lack of preconceptions, but his entire salvage anthropology model of coaxing Allakariallak to do what “Nanook” would have done some thirty years earlier, without motorized vehicles, rifles, canned food, wood-frame homes, or filmmakers along for the ride, amounted to one colossal, unacknowledged reenactment and, therefore, fraud.

Times have changed. Reenactments once again play a vital role in documentary, be it of a solidarity movement that cannot be filmed in *Far from Poland* (Jill Godmilow, 1984); a murder for which radically disparate accounts exist in *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988); the schematic simulation of a harrowing escape from captivity in *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (Werner Herzog 1997); events during the final days of Salvador Allende’s socialist government in *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (Patrizio Guzmán, 1997); or an LSD-inspired drug trip by the drug’s inventor in *Dying to Know* (Gay Dillingham, 2014). Apart from the occasional charges of deceit that surround the use of reenactments indistinguishable from actual footage of a historical event, reenactments are once again taken for

granted. They pose, however, a number of fascinating questions about the experience of temporality and the presence of fantasy in documentary. Although all aspects of documentary representation possess fantasmatic elements, it is the distinctive quality of these elements in reenacted scenes that provides the primary focus of this discussion.

Reenactments occupy a strange status in which it is crucial that they be recognized as a representation of a prior event while also signaling that they are not a representation of a contemporaneous event. Gregory Bateson argued that when representations take on a meaning that is not their usual meaning, the revised semantics may signify a shift from one discursive frame to another rather than the simple addition of connotations. Such shifts occur when, as he put it in a discussion of how animals distinguish play from fighting, “these actions, in which we now engage do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote.”¹ A shift in signification changes the name of the game. The reenacted event introduces a fantasmatic element that an initial representation of the same event lacks. Put simply, history does not repeat itself, except in mediated transformations such as memory, representation, reenactment, or fantasy—categories that coil around each other in complex, moiré-like patterns.

When the distinction between reenactment and enactment goes unnoticed or unrecognized, the question of deceit arises. The controversy surrounding the 2004 Academy Award short documentary winner, *Mighty Times: The Children’s March* (Robert Houston, 2004), involved charges that reenactments blended imperceptibly with authentic footage of civil rights activity in the 1960s South. Archival footage of visually similar but very different events, such as the Watts Riot in Los Angeles, added to the deception. Viewers must recognize a reenactment as a reenactment even if this recognition also dooms the reenactment to its status as a fictionalized repetition of something that has already occurred. Unlike the contemporaneous representation of an event—the classic documentary image, where an indexical link between image and historical occurrence exists—the reenactment forfeits its indexical bond to the original event. It draws its fantasmatic power from this very fact. The shift of levels engenders an impossible task for the reenactment: to retrieve a lost object in its original form even as the very act of retrieval generates a new object and a new pleasure. The viewer experiences the uncanny sense of a repetition of what remains historically unique. A specter haunts the text.

This specter is a variation on the ghost of the absent subject. Numerous documentaries, outside the observational mode, attempt to resurrect people and lives no longer available to the camera. The person may be unavailable or

in hiding (*Waiting for Fidel* [Michael Rubbo, 1974]; *Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie* [Marcel Ophüls, 1988]) or, more often, deceased (*Salvador Allende* [Patrizio Guzmán, 2004]; *Ryan* [Chris Landreth, 2004, on Canadian animator Ryan Larkin]; *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* [Todd Haynes, 1987]; *An Injury to One* [Travis Wilkerson, 2002, on Wobbly organizer Frank Little]; or *Steve Jobs: The Man in the Machine* [Alex Gibney, 2015]). In some cases the person is deceased, but his or her trace remains in the form of footage the subject him- or herself had previously shot. In *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005), *Capturing the Friedmans* (Andrew Jarecki, 2003), *The Maelstrom* (Péter Forgács, 1997), and *Free Fall* (Péter Forgács, 1997), for example, we see home-movie footage of someone who had died prior to the making of the film about them, and in *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (Mark Rappaport, 1992) and *From the Journals of Jean Seberg* (Mark Rappaport, 1995) we see the feature-film roles and images of stars whose private lives are deciphered from these images. In Adam Curtis's *It Felt like a Kiss* (2009), footage of Rock Hudson playing the suave heterosexual man of distinction again appears, but this time it is used as one of many images to convey the sanitized dream world the United States conjured for itself during its post–World War II ascendancy.

In each case the subject must be reconstituted from available resources. A lost object haunts the film. The attempt to conjure that specter, to make good that loss, or, for Adam Curtis, to identify its fantasmatic dimension signals the mark of desire. What constitutes a lost object is as various as all the objects toward which desire may flow. Such efforts would encompass attempts to make good a trauma, perhaps a death or catastrophe, which Michael Renov sees as the “work of mourning” that documentary can perform for the viewer.² But attempts to come to terms with death, catastrophe, and trauma would be an extreme or limit case of the more general desire to come to terms with loss. In other cases the working through of loss need not entail mourning; it can also offer, via what we might call the fantasmatic project, gratification of a highly distinct kind.

A stunning example of this process unfolds in *Capturing the Friedmans*. The film explores the complex web of family relations and submerged desires that lie behind the criminal charges of pedophilia brought against the father, Arnold Friedman, and his teenage son, Jesse. They are alleged to have fondled, seduced, abused, and sodomized dozens of young boys who took computer classes in the family's home. Andrew Jarecki draws on home movies, shot over the course of the family's lifetime; video diaries, shot mainly during the period of tumult precipitated by Arnold and Jesse's arrest; television news reports; and Jarecki's own interviews with most of

the involved parties. If the trial of Arnold and Jesse sought to achieve the either/or clarity of guilt or innocence, Jarecki is far more concerned to capture the ambiguity, confusion, and anger that this very process produces within one family.

A fantasmatic power radiates from some of the family's video diaries. These are scenes shot by Jesse or David, two of the sons, as they attempt, with their father, to reenact the form of spontaneous family togetherness that has become the lost object captured in the old 8 mm home movies. This film footage has shown the boys and their father in moments of carefree bliss, dancing, singing, and generally cavorting together with a casual acceptance of the camera as both documenting device and prosthetic extension of another family member. The video or digital footage—distinguishable from the home movies by its absence of film grain, lack of color fading, higher degree of contrast, presence of sync sound, and evidence of the filmed subjects' clear awareness of the recording process as a form of confession or testimonial—however, demonstrates the impossibility of stepping into a temporal river for the first time twice. The boys and their father are markedly older, their dancing and clowning slightly forced, the father visibly burdened by the weight of his arrest and trial, and their mother emphatically excluded rather than simply absent.

The video footage represents the sons' attempt to reenact their own past. They are clearly aware of their attempt as a reenactment rather than a genuine return to a lost object and irretrievable moment: the video footage stands as a sign that describes both the lost object (the unqualified pleasure of physical cavorting that once was theirs) and its absence (the effort that must now be made to reenact what was once spontaneous exuberance). This is nowhere more evident than in the refusal of Arnold's sons to recognize the depressed, inexpressive, nearly stunned expression that haunts their father, an expression that, if acknowledged, would thwart their desire to go through the motions that will generate the compensatory pleasures they desire.

These extraordinary moments, in which the participants attempt to will themselves back to the past and yet know very well that the effort must fail, border on the work of mourning that cinema, and video, makes possible. They compound that semiacknowledged work with the production of a fantasmatic pleasure, for the sons at least, that lessens the sting of that which is lost and cannot be retrieved. They go through the motions that locate them within a *mise-en-scène* of desire, a *fantasmatique* their mother can no longer share. (She feels profoundly betrayed by Arnold's deceptions, stemming back to the time of the original home-movie footage but never fully admitted before the trial.) The sons and father do, once again, now,

what they once did, then, and derive from this act not the original satisfaction of a need but the gratification of a desire that stems from the sequence of images, or signifiers, they fabricate for themselves.

Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis stress the importance of the temporal convolution that weaves past and present together. Fantasy is not the mere retrieval of something past, not the recovery of a real object, or, as in the example they adopt, not the milk a baby may have ingested but “the breast as a *signifier*” (my italics).³ What was once an external object transforms into an image or signifier. The signifier bears an emotional weight. What fantasy restores in this example is not the act of actually obtaining the mother’s milk, “not the act of sucking, but the enjoyment of going through the motions of sucking.”⁴ Such motions, separated from the substance they once yielded (milk), but coupled to the object as signifier (“breast”), produce, when successful, a distinct pleasure.

This pleasure is entirely real. It derives from the corporeal activity of going through the necessary motions, but it is also entirely psychic. Like the reenactment, it involves a pleasure associated with a past event that is transposed into a distinctly different, fantasmatic domain. Pleasure flows from an act of imaginary engagement in which the subject knows that this act stands for a prior act, or event, with which it is not one. A separation that entails a shift from physical needs and their pacification to psychical desires and their gratification, from before to after, from then to now, from object to subject is as integral to the fantasmatic experience as it is to the efficacy of ideology.

A telling moment of this sort occurs in *Chile, Obstinate Memory* when four of President Allende’s bodyguards reenact their role in a presidential motorcade prior to the military coup d’état that toppled his government on September 11, 1973. Guzmán cuts between the footage of the men reenacting what they used to do and shots of them actually guarding Allende some thirty-five years ago. Then, Allende and others sit inside a large, black convertible limousine, crowds line the way, and the four men trot alongside, eyes scanning the surrounding scene, as each keeps a hand in contact with one of the four fenders of the car. Now, the men walk alongside an economy size, red, hardtop sedan, on a deserted country road, with no crowd in sight, but each with a hand in contact with the car and their eyes once again scanning the surroundings.

At one point Guzmán freezes the image of the motorcade “then” as the guards identify themselves and compatriots from the still image. The authentic image becomes remote, an instigation for memory and identification, whereas the reenacted image allows the men to “go through the

motions" of guarding the (absent) president one more time. The reenactment clearly does not fulfill an official state need this time; instead, it gratifies a personal desire, making possible "the enjoyment of going through the motions of guarding," as it were, when guarding itself remains squarely lodged in the past. Nothing captures this temporal knotting of past and present better than a close-up of the hand of one of the guards slowly fluttering up and down on one of the half-open car windows: the rhythm follows from the cadence of his gait beside the car, but the camera's close-up view of his delicate grip, the rise and fall of his fingers, and the overt absence of an engulfing crowd attest to the psychically real but fantasmatic linkage of now and then.

Despite the gulf between now and then, and as a precondition for the gratification reenactment can provide, the subject becomes "caught up in the sequence of images," which, as Laplanche and Pontalis put it, populate the *mise-en-scène* of desire. This holds for the bodyguards in this striking scene from *Chile, Obstinate Memory*, just as it does for the Friedman boys in their video reenactments, but it is also true of the viewer, immersed in an experience in which she or he knows very well that the reenactment is not that which it represents and yet, all the same, allows it to function as if it were. Above all, however, the filmmaker is the one caught up in the sequence of images; it is his or her fantasy that these images embody. The filmmaker need not be physically present in the image, as she or he is in many participatory documentaries. "The subject, although always present in the fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivized form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question."⁵

This desubjectivization is acutely true of the video recordings by David and Jesse Friedman in *Capturing the Friedmans*. Their former selves haunt the footage in the desubjectivized form of syntactical parallelisms their present selves construct in keeping with the home movies of a decade or more before. The camera functions not as an omniscient observer or third person narrator but as a means of reiterating the function of the home-movie camera generally as familial participant and active instigator in scenes, in this case, of camaraderie and high jinks. These same images subsequently double-up to become part of the fantasmatic structured by Andrew Jarecki. In his case psychic pleasure seems to stem from the construction of ambiguity about what happened in the past, what these social actors have said and done, how they understand the actions and how they wish others to understand them. Jarecki complicates the literal linear and binary logic of the judicial system that sets out to determine "what really happened" and who is guilty and who innocent. He reinscribes the

ambiguity of perspective, and voice, that separates such judicial determinations from the plain of fantasy.

Patricio Guzmán, too, in his reenactment of guarding the presidential car, inhabits the syntax of a sequence that he causes to flutter between past and present. He restores specificity (names, relationships) to the past and brings fantasmatic gratification to the present as he goes through the motions of reenacting the past to new ends. This makes the subject's presence, in reenactments, and documentaries more generally, a function of what I have described as the documentary voice of the filmmaker rather than his or her corporeal appearance before the camera.⁶ The documentary voice speaks through the body of the film: through editing; through subtle and strange juxtapositions; through music, lighting, composition, and *mise-en-scène*; through dialogue overheard and commentary delivered; through silence, as well as speech; and through sounds and images, as well as words. This dispersed and polymorphous voice possesses an intrinsically desubjectivized form. The workings of a fantasmatic arise through it.

The voice of an orator, or documentarian, enlists and reveals desires and lacks. It charts a path through the stuff of the world that gives body to dreams and substance to principles. Speaking, giving voice to a view of the world, makes possible the necessary conditions of visibility to see things anew, to see as if for the first time what had until now escaped notice. This is not objective sight but seeing in that precarious, fleeting moment of insight when a gestalt clicks into place and meanings arise from what had seemed to lack meaning or to be already filled to capacity with all the meaning that sight could bear.⁷ Such insight does not occur, however, until given external shape, the shape provided by the film's voice as it addresses others.⁸

Voicelessness or speechlessness, as the opposite of voice or speech, is hardly equivalent to objectivity. Just as, according to Laplanche and Pontalis, the distinction between subject and object dissolves in fantasy, so voice, like fantasy, dissolves the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. In this sense, voicelessness is the absence of an *I* that speaks, an *I* that sets out to encounter a *You* in Martin Buber's famous formulation. Voicelessness is an *I* stripped of the desire that brings a fantasmatic into being. Speechlessness is a condition of the disembodied *I*, which may well make use of language but that speaks in and from a place where instrumentality overwhelms the force of desire.

The documentary voice is the embodied speech of the historical person—the filmmaker—caught up in the syntax of enacted or reenacted images through which the past rejoins the present. Voice, given in reenactments partially as an awareness of the gap between that which was and the

effort to return to it, also affirms the presence of a gap between the objectivity/subjectivity binary and the workings of the fantasmatic. Subjectivity suggests it is added to something and could also be subtracted. Objectivity implies the suppression of subjectivity. Voice is the means and “grain” with which we speak and can never be added or subtracted from what is said by the embodied self.

Objectivity desires a fixed relation to a determinate past, the type of relation that permits “guilty/not guilty” verdicts or other definitive answers to the question of “what really happened.” Voice, in the form of reenactments that embody the “I know very well but all the same” formulation at the heart of psychic reality, imposes recognition of the relentless march of a temporality that makes the dream of both a pure repetition and an omniscient perspective impossible. The very syntax of reenactments affirms the having-been-thereness of what can never, quite, be here again. Facts remain facts, their verification possible, but the iterative effort of going through the motions of reenacting them imbues such facts with the lived stuff of immediate and situated experience.

Reenactments also foil the desire to preserve the past in the amber of an omniscient wholeness, the comprehensive view we like to think we have that accounts for what has come to pass. The partialness and constructed quality of the reenactment can be the source of a sense of dissatisfaction: the view is too incomplete or too cluttered (it may contain a body or bodies too many as contemporary figures fill in for their historical counterparts). Reenactments are clearly *a* view rather than *the* view from which the past yields up its truth. Reenactments produce an iterability to that which belongs to the singularity of historical occurrence. They reconcile this apparent contradiction by acknowledging the adoption of a distinct perspective, point of view, or voice. Such perspectives can proliferate indefinitely, but each of them can also intensify an awareness of the separation between the lost object and its reenactment. Reenactments belong to a situated fantasmatic that nullifies the status of that other fantasmatic of objectivity, omniscience, and finality that haunts the documentary film and its kindred discourses of sobriety.⁹

In Marlon Riggs’s extraordinary autobiographical testament and portrait of black, gay culture, *Tongues Untied* (1989), Riggs recounts an incident from his youth. He is attacked by a gang of white youths who beat him and leave him lying in the street. Riggs relies on a reenactment to represent the incident, but unlike other scenes in the film, in this scene Riggs does not play himself. We encounter a body-too-many, the body of another black male who plays the Marlon Riggs who was attacked on this fateful occasion.

I say fateful because, as Riggs tells us, he was rescued by a young white man. "What a blessing," Riggs exclaims. "What a curse," he adds.

The incident invokes not only racism in its rawest form but also a dynamic of identification and desire that Riggs understands as his own internal burden: to revile his own blackness and to be drawn to those whites, who, like his rescuer, offer some respite from the crude brutality of racism. As such the incident is an iteration of the complex patterns of identification and disavowal that Frantz Fanon described in greater detail.¹⁰ The absence of Riggs's own body from the reenactment strengthens the sense in which this representation of the past is a citation, an iteration, a link in a much longer chain of racist acts where the doer gains his power from the power of iteration itself.¹¹ Riggs addresses this event and this history in his own voice, from his own perspective, one in which his story and the reenactment that embodies it open onto a larger pattern that can be understood neither in the abstract—seen from an omniscient point of view—nor purely in the concrete—represented as simply one man's experience. The body-too-many of the reenactment displaces Riggs's presence and the racism visited upon him from the polarity of subject/object relations into the very syntax of the sequence. Still situated, still embodied, still spoken through the voice of the film, the reenacted incident folds past over present in those fantasmatic terms that make the psychic reverberations of racism not only a conceptual problem but a "curse," as Riggs so aptly puts it, as well. Here, too, a specter haunts the text, and it is the reenactment that brings it to visibility.

This reenactment of a traumatic event in *Tongues Untied* functions less to carry out the work of mourning that follows trauma than to register an apprehension of the power of a past event, a power Riggs contests. In a striking contrast, Irene Lusztig's film *Reconstruction* (2002) cites the Romanian government's reenactment of a crime, in which her grandmother was one of four individuals who robbed a state bank, to reaffirm the power of what was at that time a communist state to write and control the past. In this case the fantasmatic quality of the reenactment pursues what is more clearly than usual an ideological issue: the at least temporarily lost object of state power. It seeks the gratification of going through the motions of staging a mise-en-scène within which that power can reconstitute itself. The robbers, once caught, are compelled to reenact their planning, the robbery, their confessions, trial, and sentencing. They must once again go through the motions of their defiance of the state but, this time, with no hope of success: the motions are choreographed by others.

The state-made film, also entitled *Reconstruction*, had apparently been intended to demonstrate the folly of breaking the law, but it was never

shown publicly for reasons that remain unclear. Lusztig, however, found the film and includes significant portions of it in her own. In it the suspects exhibit a decidedly despondent manner, a sign that they know the pleasure of this reenactment will not be theirs. It is a look akin to that of the older Arnold Friedman in his sons' videos as they go through the motions associated with their earlier home movies—eyes vacant, gaze unfocused, words slow in coming and stilted in tone. In one scene a prosecutor attempts to pry a confession from one of the men (Lusztig's grandmother was the only woman involved). The suspect resists; he knows nothing of the crime. Then the prosecutor produces a rifle and two pistols. "Do you recognize these?" "You have those too? I see we've been discovered. Until now I've been hiding the truth." The game is up, and the suspect, in the same hopeless tone, promptly admits his guilt and confesses his crime.

As in the racist incident in *Tongues Untied*, the reenactment introduces a sense of the ritualistic quality that often characterizes reenactments of past events. In this ritual the robbery must be represented as an exception and the power of the state affirmed in another iteration of the eternal ritual of justice fulfilled. The culprits' own bodies serve as the surface for a textual rewriting in which agency reverts entirely to the state. The triumph of judicial invulnerability, however, betrays the very condition of its being in the barely animated bodies of the criminals who must go through the motions of a past event in a context where need and pleasure, desire and gratification accrue only to the state. A "curse" continues to haunt the text in the form of a repressive act that Lusztig exposes by recontextualizing the original reenactment from a distinct perspective or voice of her own. Whereas reenactment for Riggs allows for an owning or owning up to the past, in *Reconstruction* the owning of the past takes the more literal form of the state coming into physical control, or ownership, of the bodies and minds of those who defied it.

Reenactment takes another fascinating turn in Werner Herzog's *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*. Shot down on a bombing run over Laos and captured, Dieter Dengler, after a series of extraordinary adventures, escapes his captors and returns to the United States. This is the story he tells to Herzog, but in the course of doing so he decides to reenact what he first recounts. Dengler and Herzog return to Laos, where local villagers play his captors and Dieter plays his former self.

Unlike the bank robbery reenactment in *Reconstruction*, the walrus hunt in *Nanook of the North*, the reenactments of detention at Guantanamo in *The Road to Guantanamo* (Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross, 2006), or the "pre-enactments" of what might happen in the event of nuclear

attack in Peter Watkins's *The War Game* (1965)—all of which adopt the performative qualities of suspenseful, dramatic intensity—the reenacted scenes in *Little Dieter* exhibit a Brechtian sense of distanciation. In one scene, for example, recruited Laotian villagers stand listlessly around Dengler as they “go through the motions” of guarding him by wearing uniforms or displaying weapons. Their halfhearted, good-natured performance clearly conjures what Dengler went through without compelling prisoner or guards to reenter the psychic and emotional space of the original event. Neither Dieter nor Herzog seek to render suspense dramatically or verisimilitude perfectly. The necessary awareness of a gap between past event and present reenactment remains altogether vivid, as it gradually does in *The Thin Blue Line*, where the series of reenactments of the original murder of a policeman construct an Escher-like impossible space of conflicting narratives.

Dieter transports himself back to that which now functions as a lost object through the social gests he puts into motion.¹² It allows him to own his past in a corporeal but fantasmatic form that does not require the presumably therapeutic dramaturgy that Charcot inaugurated in his treatment of hysterics and that so many reenactments imitate. The sense of mastery that arises from this iteration in which the outcome is now known allows him to go through the motions of a triumphant passage that he has, in fact, already completed. It is this passage that the film within a film in *Reconstruction* denies to those whose bank robbery attempt failed. Dieter Dengler, the one who survived what once put his survival in question, now occupies a fantasmatic mise-en-scène that affirms his very survival. “Going through the motions” takes on a formal, ritualistic quality that nonetheless spans the moment between before, when need prevailed, and after, when these social gests function as signifiers of what was but is now, at the moment of signification, past. The gests or signifiers both embody the lost object of a former experience and gratify the force of desire. That they can do both is a result of the fact that they no longer signify what the experience to which they refer signified.

These various reenactments begin to suggest some ways in which reenactments tend to cluster into different types. Some are highly affective, some far less so. Some make their status as reenactment obvious; some do not. These differences do not establish hard-and-fast divisions but do suggest different nodal points within a diffuse and overlapping universe of possibilities. Some particularly common variations include the following.

Realist dramatization. The most contentious, because it is the least distinguishable from both that which it reenacts and the conventional representa-

tion of past events in fiction—be it in the form of a historical drama, “true story,” docudrama, or flashback—is the suspenseful, dramatic reenactment in a realist style. Such dramatizations have become a staple of reality TV shows that follow in the mold of *Cops* or *America’s Unsolved Mysteries*, but their lineage can be traced back to *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (a.k.a. *In the Land of the War Canoes*), Edward Curtis’s fascinating attempt to mix ethnographic detail with melodrama among the Kwakiutl in the Pacific Northwest of 1914; *Nanook of the North*; and many early newsreels or *actualités*. An important model for many of the recent uses of this type of reenactment occurs in the powerful documentary about those who disappeared during Argentina’s “dirty war,” *Las madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (Susana Blaustein Muñoz and Lourdes Portillo, 1985). As one of the mothers who meet every day at the Argentine White House, La Casa Rosada, recounts how armed men abducted her son in the dead of night, the film cuts to a reenactment of this event. The reenactment possesses the surreal tones of a nightmare with its grainy, high-contrast, and slow-motion imagery in which individual figures are unrecognizable. The distortions work to impede realist transparency. These formal devices shift the reenactment toward the fourth category here, stylized reenactment (see below), but Muñoz and Portillo’s expressive rendering of what happened underscores its emotional impact on the mother as something that was not part of the event itself but has been part of its affective reverberation ever since.

Typifications. In this case there is no specific event to which the reenactment refers, and the sense of separation between event and reenactment fades as a sense of typifying past patterns, rituals, and routines increases. Such reenactments characterized many early documentaries, including *Nanook of the North*, where the suspenseful dramatization of events, presented as if they were present-day, reenacted the typical processes of the Inuit’s precontact past. The walrus hunt, seal hunt, fur trapping, and igloo building did not reenact specific historical occurrences as much as characteristic ones. To the extent that the viewer recognizes that the claim to authenticity of these scenes resides not in their depiction of present-day activity, carried out despite the presence of the camera, but in their reenactment of precontact activity, staged for the sake of the camera, this very claim of authenticity undergoes erosion. The indexical quality of the image anchors it in the *mise-en-scène* of the filmmaker’s desire, as it does in fiction, but without reference to any specific historical occurrence.

John Grierson adopted this technique wholesale for the British documentary movement of the 1930s. Reenactments, as typifications, proliferated.

Coal Face (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1935) has several sequences of coal miners mining, or taking their lunch break, that possess a similar aura of present-day reality simply observed when they are, in fact, staged. *Night Mail* (Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936) is the most famous example, with its scenes of postal workers sorting mail on the Postal Express as it makes its overnight journey from London to Glasgow. These scenes took place on a sound stage. They reenact, cite, or reiterate the typical, and quotidian, quality of this labor and clearly exhibit a desire to idealize the common working man as a vital part of a larger social whole, despite the less fully acknowledged tensions stemming from class hierarchy.

Such scenes in *Coal Face*, *Night Mail*, *Listen to Britain* (Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAllister, 1942), *Fires Were Started* (Humphrey Jennings, 1943), and other films function as “typical particulars” in precisely the way Vivian Sobchack applies this term to film. The specific actions and objects viewed in a fiction may be highly concrete as relayed by indexical images, but they are not usually understood to have a concrete historical referent: “unless something happens to *specifically* particularize these existential entities as in some way singular, they will be engaged as what philosophers call *typical particulars*—a form of generalization in which a single entity is taken as exemplary of an entire class.”¹³ This displacement from the singular to the exemplary, if recognized as such, forfeits some of the distinctive peculiarities of the documentary reenactment, perhaps most specifically the heightened sense of viewer responsibility that attends to the historical instead of a fictive world.¹⁴

Brechtian distanciation. The reenactment of social gestures (such as those in the pioneering *Far from Poland* but also abundantly evident in *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*) greatly increases the separation of the reenactment from the specific historical moment it reenacts, creating a greater likelihood that the fantasmatic effect will come into play. Actions reenacted may possess the qualities of a typification, but shorn of their realist dimension, they simultaneously stand out more boldly as social gestures in Brecht’s sense of the term. The deflection away from realist representation allows, paradoxically, a stronger link to historical specificity to come into play through the filmmaker’s choice to go through the motions of gesturing to the historical rather than representing it as illusion. This quality is also true of the remaining categories.

Stylization. Highly stylized reenactments—such as those in *The Thin Blue Line* of Randall Adams’s interrogation or of the Dallas police officer’s

murder, in which, most memorably, a perfectly lit container of malted milk shake tumbles through the night air in slow motion as if to blatantly overdramatize one subject's account—also achieve a sense of separation. This need not be in the ironic key so prevalent in Morris's work. For example, Denis Tupicoff's *His Mother's Voice* (1997), an animated documentary from Australia, couples the radio interview of a bereaved mother as she is asked how she learned of her son's shooting with two different animated versions of the event. In one case the images show her journey to the house where her son had just been shot; in the other they render her now-altered perception of her own family's home. These animated sequences sever any indexical linkage to the actual event but give voice to the acutely selective and pained perspective from which she experienced it. This is akin to the acute pain that haunts Ari Folman as he attempts to grasp his actual role, and individual responsibility, for a massacre during Israel's attack on Lebanon in 1982 in his animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008). These animated works function in their totality in a manner not unlike the scene of abduction or disappearance reenacted in *Las madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, but they carry the elements of stylization much further and diminish the elements of realist dramatization. The viewer remains vividly suspended in that moment between before and after embodied in signifiers that possess an iconic rather than indexical relation to what has already happened.

Parody and Irony. Other reenactments adopt a parodic tone that may call the convention of the reenactment itself into question or treat a past occurrence in a comic light. Errol Morris skirts the edges of this characteristic in *The Thin Blue Line*, but his ironic perspective takes aim more at the subjectivity of his interviewees than at the capacity of the reenactment to capture the authenticity of past events. In *Cane Toads: An Unnatural History* (1988) Mark Lewis parodies the nature documentary's typical representation of other species, in this case the large, ugly toads that threaten to run rampant across Australia, through multiple reenactments that are more melodramatic and humorous than sober.

Caveh Zahedi also adopts the parodic reenactment wholeheartedly in *I Am a Sex Addict* (2005), a semiserious account of his struggles with sex addiction and the confusion it wreaks on his longer-term relationships and attempts at marriage. At one point, speaking to the camera, he tells the viewer that he lacked money to go back to Paris to reenact his first encounters with prostitutes, so "this street" in San Francisco (the street on which he stands) will have to stand for a Parisian street. The film cuts to another

view and an evenly spaced line of about eight young prostitutes in front of a red brick wall as Zahedi walks past, asking each of them the same questions about what they will do and how much she will charge, before hesitating, almost ready to take up the offer, but then deciding against it and going on to the next woman.

Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story, an underground cult favorite that cannot circulate legally because director Todd Haynes failed to secure permission for the sound track of Carpenter songs, tells the story of the titular heroine's eating disorders, dysfunctional family dynamics, addictions, and death by reenacting via Ken and Barbie dolls key scenes from her short life. For the most part these scenes have the quality of typical particulars, exemplifying hypothetically pivotal moments without reference to historically singular events. The posed shots of dolls, however, add a powerfully ironic edge to the representations: as with *His Mother's Voice*, this decision forfeits the impression of indexical authenticity in the image. At the same time, it compels the viewer to assess this tragedy both as something beyond the reach of any reenactment and as something typically reduced to a cautionary tale about the perils of anorexia and bulimia. The parodic edge puts the mass media's penchant for the realist dramatization of tragedy on display as a potentially exploitative trope. The doll figures, by maintaining a clear separation between reenactment and prior event, may actually mobilize a more complex form of understanding of what this tragedy actually entails than more straightforward representations that confuse the boundary between the two.

Similar points might be made about *The Eternal Frame* (1975), the Ant Farm collective's parodic reenactment of the Kennedy assassination. This video documents the reenactment process, including the behind-the-scenes preparations, far more than it purports to be a documentary about the assassination itself. Unlike *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), *The Eternal Frame* calls the very act of reenactment into question. By exaggerating the separation between then and now, before and after, the video functions to bare the device of reenactment itself rather than rely on this peculiar form to present any final answer to the question of what really happened or generate a mise-en-scène in which the desire for a lost object might find gratification. This is acutely true of Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) as well, where the reenacted executions by members of Indonesian death squads have the ironic quality of being modeled on movie genres, of being reenacted with a triumphant but deeply disturbing sense of moral indifference to these crimes, and of placing killers who show no remorse into the

confessional position normally reserved for victims of such events. (I discuss this film further in "Irony, Paradox, and the Documentary: Double Meanings and Double Binds," in part 4 below.)

Reenactments within these overlapping and fuzzy categories do not do what archival footage and other images of illustration do.¹⁵ They do not provide evidentiary images of situations and events in the historical world. If they allow viewers to think that they do, they lay the groundwork for feelings of deception. The indexical bond, which can guarantee evidentiary status—but not the meaning or interpretation of images taken as evidence—no longer joins the reenactment to that for which it stands. Instead, this indexical bond joins the image to the production of the reenactment: it is evidence of an iterative gesture but not evidence of that for which the reenactment stands. It is, in fact, not historical evidence but an artistic interpretation, always offered from a distinct perspective and carrying, embedded within it, further evidence of the voice of the filmmaker.

Although it is possible, especially with realist dramatizations and typifications, to think that reenactments contribute historical evidence, what they more commonly contribute is persuasion. They fulfill an affective function. For documentaries belonging to the rhetorical tradition, reenactments intensify the degree to which a given argument or perspective appears compelling, contributing to the work's emotional appeal, or convincing, contributing to its rational appeal by means of real or apparent proof. (Ironical uses of reenactment may reverse this tendency toward compellingness.)

As pathos or logos, reenactments enhance or amplify affective engagement. Reenactments contribute to a vivification of that for which they stand. They make what it feels like to occupy a certain situation, to perform a certain action, to adopt a particular perspective visible and more vivid. Vivification is neither evidence nor explanation. It is, though, a form of interpretation, an inflection that resurrects the past to reanimate it with the force of a desire.

Inasmuch as reenactments do not stand for that for which they stand would stand, they effect a fold in time. Reenactments vivify the sense of the lived experience, the *vécu*, of others. They take past time and make it present. They take present time and fold it over onto what has already happened. They resurrect a sense of a previous moment that is now seen through a fold that incorporates the embodied perspective of the filmmaker and the emotional investment of the viewer. In this way reenactments effect a temporal vivification in which past and present coexist in the

impossible space of a fantasmatic. This form of coexistence revolves around a lost object and the signifiers that serve as resurrected ghosts that both haunt and endow the present with psychic intensity. Reenactments, like other poetic and rhetorical tropes, bring desire itself into being and with it the fantasmatic domain wherein the temporality of lived experience and the efficacy of ideology find embodiment.

3 **Letter to Lynne Sachs on *Investigation of a Flame***

Dear Lynne,

It was such a very pleasant surprise to see you again after so many years at the benefit for the Anthology Film Archives and to see Philip Glass there as well. Your work has clearly gelled into an oeuvre of some note since we were both, passingly, at San Francisco State University in the late eighties. (Is that when it was? So far away and long ago?)

I am very glad you were able to send me a copy of *Investigation of a Flame*, your film about the destruction of draft records by Daniel and Philip Berrigan and seven others in Catonsville, Maryland. It is quite a compelling work. I think it is extremely revealing in terms of the motivations for and consequences of what took place. This was a part of the history of the 1960s that was mediated to us by newspapers and TV networks that were in a near hysteria, fueled partly by a fear that the social fabric, and the social contract, was being torn asunder by people who would not accept lies and hypocrisy, and partly by a government determined to impose its will through a relentless rhetoric of fear—the specter of Communism back then, the specter of terrorism now. The past does return, doesn't it, but not always as farce.

I was just getting back from two years in Kenya, where I had gone to teach in a secondary school and to rethink my trajectory toward a medical career (I had finished one year at Stanford Medical School), when that and other events occurred. The assassination of Martin Luther King had taken place just before I was due to leave Kenya and the May-June '68 events in France were at their height. I came back partly with the optimistic thought of resuming my

studies, but now in cinema, and partly with the pessimistic dread that my plans would be postponed by the draft. I was due to report for induction soon after returning and a bit clueless about what my options were. I had heard news of draft resisters and had friends in Paris who worked with draft deserters; I knew I could go to Paris instead of being inducted, but I also knew it would alter the rest of my life more than I could imagine and what other options existed were yet to be discovered.

Events like the one you reexamine flickered past on the limited news that reached my remote village just as I was preparing to leave. Their function on an ethical plane of giving witness to an alternative view of community and relationships was not lost on me, not after having followed Martin Luther King's efforts in some detail. But this had to be filtered out from the general hysteria, scapegoating, and demonizing. The model they enacted of ethical resistance helped lead me to the conscientious objector movement in New York City and a Quaker-based information center, in particular, that set me on the road to freedom from the draft and that painful, divisive war in Vietnam.

I never had access to the interiority of the event, certainly not with [the] complexity that you make available through your film. You give a density and delicacy to the representation of what happened that really enlivens memory and enriches history. The sensitivity and strength, together, of these nine individuals emerges quite vividly. They know what they are doing and why, and have given it very careful thought. They possess an intense awareness of what they need to do, of how strongly they wish to cause no physical harm to anyone who may work at the Catonsville draft center, and how crucial it was for the symbolic level of their actions to take concrete and visible form.

You give their thoughts and actions—through the archival footage and the very personal, moving testimony of those who participated—an exemplary power: they come to stand for all those who undertake symbolic and personally costly actions when driven by conscience and a compelling need to give witness to an alternative sense of social responsibility.

I felt at times that *Investigation of a Flame* bears similarity to *The Thin Blue Line* with the poetic, evocative quality Morris instills, but without the haunting somewhat mysterious overtone that his use of Philip Glass's music imparts. You withhold that kind of

musical dramatization; your film remains within a realm of historical witness and quotidian action that is not now, as it was not then, embroidered with the richness of musical tapestry. The actuality of the event, which in *The Thin Blue Line* remains invisible since no one saw the murder that is at the heart of the film, takes visible shape once again. The rapid pans of flowers and other objects, in an evocative color that evokes the past more than a photorealist present, have an austere, provocative quality to them. Unlike Glass's music, whose "work" for Morris's film is clear and highly effective, in that context, the images of gardens and flowers challenge us to determine what "work" they do here, for your film. They do not soften the sharpness of a still vital historical past. They may reduce the pleasures that one anticipates upon stepping up to the box office window (vivid reenactments, dramatic music, suspenseful storytelling), but they reward in ways I am still in the process of contemplating.

What I don't need to contemplate but to remember is that the efforts of people like the ones you feature had a profound impact on me. What to do about the draft? With a "Greetings" letter already in hand telling me to report for induction a few weeks hence, in June 1968 I went back to the courses in theology I had taken at Duke and to the questions of a just war that St. Augustine raised so long ago. I wrote an extremely long appeal to my draft board on Long Island. I requested a change of status to conscientious objector. Remarkably (because very few boards paid much heed to such requests), they granted me a hearing, posed some classic questions like what would I do if my mother were attacked by a robber, and then granted my request. Through a series of additional vicissitudes, I was able to resume my studies and continue my opposition to the war in Vietnam without having to enter the Army. People like the Catonsville 9 had a direct influence on the shape of my life, it turns out, and you have now given the shape of their actions and the clarity of their thoughts a brilliant frame. It is a better world now that your film exists within it. Thanks again, so much, for sending it to me.

Best wishes,
Bill

4 ***Breaking the Frame***

Gender, Violation, and the Avant-Garde

Most film people know Carolee Schneemann as the creator of a pioneering piece of avant-garde filmmaking: *Fuses* (1967). She used a handheld camera, striking color effects, expressive editing, hand-etched frames, evocative sound, and her own naked body, together with that of her boyfriend at the time, the composer James Tenney, to celebrate sexuality in a direct, sensuous way. Throughout the short film she and Tenney make love, and the film captures the joy more than the graphic physicality of it. Far from pornographic, it is a loving, engaging tribute to the body, the act of making love, and the power of cinema to evoke the sensual and fuel the imagination. James Tenney remained a major part of her life for some time but not without considerable tumult, some of which finds its way into her subsequent work, work that, on the whole, is conceptually complex, intensely personal, and focused on the body (usually her own as in the taboo-shattering performance piece “Interior Scroll,” in which she pulls a tape from her vagina and reads its message about female power).

But Carolee Schneemann is not very well known, at least to the average filmgoer. She didn’t cultivate a following the way Maya Deren did. She didn’t champion the film medium the way Deren and other filmmakers and critics of the 1940s to the 1960s did. And her other art work drew her more into the orbit of the museum and art gallery than the movie theater. But now we have Marielle Nitoslawska’s *Breaking the Frame* (2012), a feature-length profile of Schneemann and her massive achievements as a performance and installation artist, painter, and filmmaker over the course of five decades.

Schneemann proves a highly articulate guide to her own work and life. Her own commentary and read statements figure significantly in the film. She has clearly lived a fascinating life. Her primary base has been a farm

where her groundbreaking ideas germinate before she then realizes them in various formats and introduces them to the world.

She went further, sooner, more often, and more daringly in her explorations than many of those in the hothouse climate of the great art cities of New York, Berlin, and Paris. She described one performance piece this way: "I wore farmers overalls," she says, "and I had lots of oranges stuffed everywhere. It was about Cézanne, so I showed slides and talked about his influence—and I kept undressing and dressing. I was naked under my overalls and I'd throw these oranges into the audience, like a still life escaping. Then I'd do my overalls back up and continue the lecture."¹

A close friend of Stan Brakhage and a generation behind Maya Deren, she has been a true pioneer since the 1960s but remains overshadowed by both of them and by the more ironic, wry film and photography of figures like Andy Warhol and Cindy Sherman. She didn't write the kind of personal, insightful commentary that helped make Deren and Brakhage such central figures; she took more pride and pleasure in the doing of her work than in its promotion, and she slipped between media and conventions more freely and iconoclastically than many potential followers could accommodate. Her famous, or infamous, performance piece "Meat Joy"—loved in Paris, reviled in London—featured four couples writhing on the floor amid fresh paint, raw fish, chickens, and sausage and was, for her, a paean to ecstatic transformation but to her detractors was many other, less transcendent things. Like Bataille she treated taboos as something to be violated, and both reaped the reward and paid the price for doing so.

Breaking the Frame will help her gain the recognition she is clearly due, although the film has also enjoyed only marginal circulation and attention. It has an ethereal, mystique-laden air that runs counter to the didacticism that most often passes for informed biography. Some background knowledge definitely helps, and thus armed, the film offers an enriching sense of Schneemann's life and work and how the two so elaborately intertwine.

Films on the rich and famous, however adulatory or critical, fare better than work drawing our attention to the neglected and overlooked. It is an uphill challenge, and this film does not make it as easy as possible, smoothing over the difficulty and disturbance in Schneemann's work, but in the final analysis this is what makes it a challenge well worth accepting.



PART II

The Audio in *Audiovisual*



AS ANYONE WHO HAS MORE THAN A PASSING INTEREST in sound in all its forms will readily attest, often with more than a hint of exasperation, the *audio* half of *audiovisual* has never received the same degree of attention as the *visual* half. Early film was silent, save for live accompaniment, which was common, and although sound film taught us to respect the power of speech, sound effects, and music more fully, this lesson remained subordinate to confronting the power of the image. My own work has followed this familiar path for the most part, but the essays here attempt to provide some compensation aimed at our understanding of the documentary film in particular.

The first essay, "Documentary Film and the Coming of Sound," discusses how voice-over commentary replaced reliance on intertitles in silent documentaries. But voice-over did more than that. It offered viewers a point of identification with the film, a guide to take us through the succession of images, a moralizing center around which a particular view of the world revolved. These qualities, I suggest, established the voice-over as a primary point of identification for the viewer, an alternative to the actor and the star system in particular, which is the locus of emotional engagement for mainstream narrative cinema. Voice-over commentary aligns documentary with epistophilia more than scopophilia (love of knowledge over love of gazing). Voice-over remains extremely common and comes in a wide variety of forms, but its crucial significance may seem overshadowed by the sync sound comments of social actors (people), music, and the dynamic play of power in interviews. This essay traces the rise of voice-over commentary and suggests reasons for its continuing importance.

The second essay, "To See the World Anew: Revisiting the Voice of Documentary," in which I revisit the essay on the voice of documentary

that I originally published in 1983,¹ focuses on the sense of address we experience with documentary films. They speak to us. They invite our consent and want us to understand them as part and parcel of the world outside the movie theater, as part of our lives as more than viewers looking at a screen. This distinguishes the documentary not only from documents, which remain inert and unaddressed—until taken up into speech directed to us—but also from most fiction and avant-garde work, where we oversee, overhear, or witness but have less sense of being addressed as living social actors. The sense of address is a basic element of rhetoric (and ideology). This essay reflects on the relation of the documentary voice to classical rhetoric. Voice as discussed here also clearly relates to the role of sound, and voice-over in particular, but expands the notion to include the meaning of voice as the distinctive tone and perspective of a film's maker.

The essay in "Further Reflections," "The Sound of Music," arose as a prefatory essay to a book devoted to music in documentary.² It tries to set the stage for further investigation and reflection, less by offering an analysis of any particular quality of music in documentary than by personal testimony to the power I have seen it display in various screenings of specific films. The careful design of a musical score for documentaries remains a great challenge for many filmmakers—many a work clutters the cinematic graveyard of films that failed to survive the test of time owing to an unfortunate choice of musical score. Of course, using preexisting music can quickly become a legal minefield and original compositions unpredictable in their fit. Those films that succeed in achieving a resonant, compelling affect as a result of their musical accompaniment offer potent inspiration for films that have yet to come.

5 **Documentary Film and the Coming of Sound**

Nowhere in the world does the coming of sound to documentary film correspond exactly to the coming of sound to the feature fiction film (1926–28). Like CinemaScope, color, and most optical effects, sound films were a possibility long before they were a reality. If the exact moment when sound comes to the feature fiction film is a matter of technology, financing, aesthetics, marketing, and audience expectations, it is no less a matter of similar issues, resolved differently, for documentary film. The coming of sound is one of the crucial transitions for documentary and belongs to the early 1930s. The 1960s and 1980s bear similar significance for other reasons. The focus here is on the coming of sound in the 1930s, with brief mention of these later dates.

Just as the advent of sound for the feature-film industry in the late 1920s prompted lively debate (principally about synchronous or nonsynchronous uses of sound and about subordinate or contrapuntal relationships between character and image), so the advent of sound in documentary proposed an array of alternatives. These ranged from poetic narratives to evocative portraits and from professional, studio-produced commentary to the actual speech of people recorded in their everyday life. The choices made among these alternatives are part of a larger story of the nature and function of documentary film in the period from the late 1920s to the late 1930s, when a dominant mode—expository documentary—took hold and became the equivalent of the classic Hollywood mode of production.¹

Two notable features of this period are the extremely fluid boundary between a documentary and an avant-garde impulse and the refusal of documentary filmmakers to rely on the strategy of using synchronous speech, recorded, of necessity, on sound stages, and accompanied by elaborate musical scores, that the Hollywood studios embraced. It would have meant

plucking social actors from their environment, rehearsing what they said and did, and forfeiting the huge appeal of filming on location. A fluid mix of surreal/defamiliarizing and anthropological/descriptive tendencies in nonfiction films fostered considerable experimentation with nonsynchronous music and commentary while the rejection of studio-based recording delayed the wholesale adoption of testimony and interviews until the great flowering of sync-sound options in real-world locations, rather than on sound stages, took place in the 1960s.²

In the silent film era, documentary as a mode of representation that offers perspectives on the historical world—sustained by an institutional framework and a community of practitioners and armed with specific conventions corresponding to distinct audience expectations—did not yet exist. We now write about this early history with a retrospective knowledge that we cannot deny but that we also cannot project back onto a time that precedes its arrival. Cinema lacked the taxonomic divisions we may now think natural or inevitable. Early cinema casually blended the staged and unstaged, actors and nonactors, fact and fiction. The factual and fictional made easy bedfellows, as did a desire to surprise, amuse, and entertain as much or more than to inform or enlighten. Only as feature fiction films gained a dominant position did all other cinematic forms become relegated to a subordinate or marginal status, which still did not necessarily mean any kind of careful differentiation among these alternative forms.³

From the vast array of possibilities that early cinema offered, some have been remembered, others forgotten; some adopted, others ignored; some praised, others ridiculed or suppressed. Every new history opens the possibility of reconstructing this array of the remembered, adopted, and praised, or the lost, forgotten, or suppressed and of deconstructing the histories that have come before. Each must do so, however, on the terrain of what has survived (and very little survives by accident).

Compared to the amount of material that has survived and earned praise in the history of narrative cinema, it is striking how few examples of what we now call documentary are commonly identified from the period before 1930. Jack C. Ellis, in his standard history of documentary, for example, cites only twenty-six titles from the 1920s in America, Europe, and the Soviet Union as significant works,⁴ while Lewis Jacobs lists only twenty-two significant titles from the 1920s.⁵ Some of these, such as Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (1926), could easily be classified as part of the early history of experimental cinema, but, given the vague state in which all nonfeature films existed, it can just as properly be considered an early example of the documentary tradition. These lists suggest how severely limited the field

of reference has become. It is also noteworthy that not a single one of these films from the 1920s makes use of sound (though some may well have had live musical accompaniment during their theatrical presentations).

When Louis Lumière privately demonstrated his new invention, the *cinématographe*, in March 1895 by showing *La sortie des usines*, the film produced the shock of apparently putting life itself on a screen. Erik Barnouw describes the effect this way: "The familiar, seen anew in this way, brought astonishment."⁶ Lumière may have acted out of convenience or from insight when he chose to film his own workers leaving the Lumière factory for his demonstration, but the basic familiarity of the scene astonishes all the more. Viewers could attest that what they now saw on a screen was what they could have already seen in reality. If there was a trick, it was the trick of appearing to duplicate reality. What could have been more overwhelmingly convincing of the powers of the *cinématographe* than to see something already recognizable and familiar re-presented in a totally unfamiliar but remarkably recognizable manner? A similar astonishment accompanied the invention of the phonograph, with its uncanny ability to mechanically reproduce any audible sound.

Clearly, a central aspect of the early fascination with cinema is based on our ability to recognize the world we already inhabit. The extraordinary power of the photographic camera to take slices of reality and freeze them within an illusionistic frame rises exponentially in this breathtaking succession of cinematographic images that restores motion, and life, to the frozen image. The living, seemingly embalmed on a strip of film, suddenly comes back to life, repeating actions and restoring events that had, until that moment, belonged to the domain of the irretrievable: the historical past.

Cinema made possible an archive of reality distinct from any that preceded it. But this was not the same as a documentary tradition. Erik Barnouw devotes his entire first chapter of *Documentary*, his valuable history of the form, to early *actualités* that captured some aspect of the historical world, such as another famous Lumière brothers short, *Arrival of a Train* (1895). To me, however, these are not documentaries in a meaningful sense and are but one contributing factor to the appearance of documentary films in the 1920s and 1930s. Most important, they bore traces of the historical world, as scientific images, X-rays, and fiction films (in the bodies and faces of real actors) all do, but they lacked the distinct voice of a filmmaker who brought an illuminating perspective to these traces. Yet they were recognizable traces. This alone, like the sound of a familiar voice, possesses considerable power but does not constitute a distinct form of cinematic expression.

The act of recognition, though, gives this archive of reality a remarkable hold on the viewer. In moving images a viewer distinguishes human figures on three levels: (1) typical inhabitants of a specific historical period (based largely on popular fashions and familiar locations); (2) well-known public figures not personally known to the viewer but familiar from multiple forms of source material, including records of their speech during the twentieth century and after (Roosevelt, Lenin, or Hitler, for example); and (3) individuals already personally known to the viewer but never seen in the form of moving pictures before, a vital aspect of home movies, and of the discovery of familiar faces in otherwise impersonal crowds and gatherings.⁷

The impression of reality that film conveys depends heavily on these levels of recognition. They give early cinema a distinctiveness that would remain at the heart of the documentary tradition thereafter. Sound—be it speech, sound effects, or music—enhances this distinctiveness, especially when the sound appears to emanate from the same historical source as the image itself (the sound of Churchill's voice or of horses' hooves on a cobblestone street). Situation-specific sound anchors the image in its acoustic reality. Such sound may signal generic aspects of the historical world (gunfire, running water, and so on, such as we hear, in discreet dabs, in the historical films of Ken Burns), recognizable aspects of that world (a familiar tune or a well-known voice such as a music video by Lady Gaga or a speech by Martin Luther King), or something more intimately familiar (the voice of a friend or family member, for example).

Fiction films seized on the viewer's desire to recognize familiar aspects of historical reality to create a pantheon of famous figures. They were not recognizable for their historical significance and not personally known to the viewer, but they became familiar thanks to their featured appearance in film after film. Such figures, or featured actors, became known as stars. With rare exceptions, like *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922)—which, we should bear in mind, arrived before the term *documentary* was in common use and was, instead, promoted as “a story of life and love in the actual Arctic”⁸—early documentary films, especially in the Soviet Union and Great Britain, stressed emotional tone and social issues, common causes and typical people over the charismatic individual. Montage, or collage, to convey concepts and create emotion, more than character, was the order of the day. Documentaries invited recognition of familiar, recognizable social problems and topical issues rather than of charismatic individuals who carried the day.

The use of stars as a powerful form of recognition (and identification by a complex of means such as acting style, plot structure, and editing—

matched movement, eyeline matches, point of view) began to center the fiction film on the singular body and voice of an individual actor, the specific character she or he plays, and the ineffable aura they generated. It simultaneously began a movement in the fiction film away from equally plausible figures of common causes and social issues, coalitions and collectivities, cultures and their transformation. It became increasingly taken for granted that a drama must revolve around actions and dilemmas involving a single individual, or hero, who undergoes a change and is represented by a star.

The representation of real workers, begun perhaps inadvertently by the Lumière brothers, remained central to the tradition of social representation in the Soviet Union and, in an equally hagiographic way, in Great Britain but seldom elsewhere. The worker could appear as hero, the driving force of revolution or the noble cornerstone of social progress, but the economic hardships and political turmoil of the 1930s undercut this image. Most working people were much more hard-pressed than the determined and triumphant builders of roads celebrated in the Soviet film *Turksib* (Victor Turin, 1929) or the good-natured railway postal workers in the British one *Night Mail* (Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936). And even when lionized, workers remained generic and unfamiliar, recognizable only as historical types—types whose faith in the economic system they represented most often seemed highly optimistic, if not fabricated, as it might be in a fiction film. They were seen but not heard, their value, and sometimes needs, articulated in voice-over and in powerful musical scores, an image somewhat hard to fathom amid hunger strikes, extreme poverty, and unemployment throughout the 1930s.

Alternative, more charismatic, figures were needed. Such figures could provide the necessary element of social guidance or political perspective. And soon the documentary film found its equivalent to the star: the unseen commentator—a distinctive, disembodied, self-assured if not omniscient, professional voice whose pronouncements guide us through the course of the film and the issues of the day. Through the 1930s men (commentators were always men) like Westbrook van Voorhis and Ed Herlihy conveyed certainty and authority, without the overbearing manner of a pedant. They were to become the models for pioneer television commentators like Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite, who continued to embody the idea of a heroic, knowledgeable figure, now visible but usually sequestered in a studio, away from all the tumult on which they reported. Theirs was the well-modulated voice that could guide us through the mass of images and events that constituted the news of the day.

Throughout the 1930s and beyond, spoken commentary, in its myriad forms, served as the telltale sign of a documentary. The avant-garde generally rejected this device or utilized it ironically, as Luis Buñuel did in *Land without Bread* (1932). Commentary is a decisive element in the splitting off of documentary from the broader, more open-ended exploration of sound and voice in experimental film.⁹

The early use of sound in documentary emphasizes the representation of the familiar historical world, populated with typical representatives and expressed through a powerful collage of sound and images. Creating or gathering such images and assembling them in a compelling manner gave great creative license to the documentary filmmaker, seldom more so than in the Soviet Union and within the avant-garde. Most documentaries, however, edited together images to support the message delivered by the commentary without letting them become a vividly independent source of meaning on their own, what I elsewhere describe as “strange juxtapositions.”¹⁰

Meanwhile, the unique individual occupies a far more marginal position and social issues a far more vital one than in the flourishing feature fiction film. The star, or central point of identification, becomes, for documentary, the spoken word and the commentator who delivers it. It is the literal voice of the film, and it arrives in the form of “He Who Already Knows,” a voice that marshals sounds and images in support of a carefully crafted perspective known from the outset. The film conveys this perspective movingly and convincingly. The spoken word stands for the disembodied, omniscient, invulnerable filmmaker who retains full control over the assembly of images and the rhythm of the film. Its persistence is vividly demonstrated in the work of Ken Burns, whose voice-over commentators, from David McCullough in *The Civil War* (1990) to Peter Coyote in *The Roosevelts* (2014), hark back to this classic—if not overused and often tedious—model (the voice-overs tend to drone on in the later Burns films).

Documentary relies on the viewer’s recognition of images that refer back to the historical world. To this quality documentary filmmakers add their own voice, or perspective, most crucially in the 1930s by commentary; but editing, composition, depth of field, lighting, music, and reenactments can all contribute to a distinct perspective or “voice” in a more general sense.¹¹ Documentary therefore occupies a complex zone of representation in which the art of observing, responding, and listening must be combined with the art of shaping, interpreting, or arguing. Viewers come to realize that what they see when they see a documentary is a complex, often semi-visible, mix of the historically real and the discursively constructed. To the pleasure of recognition are added personal journeys, moral imperatives,

political exhortations, spiritual discoveries, cautionary tales, romantic longings, and enchanted idylls.

By the early 1930s the re-presentation of the historical world, combined with the distinctive voice of the filmmaker, began to give the domain of documentary a use value that drew the attention of politicians and governments, not to mention poets and adventurers. It was possible not only to represent reality with great exactitude (something that might have remained at the level of the early *actualités* or become primarily of scientific interest) but also to give audiences a perspective on the world that had never been seen in quite the same way before and to convey this view with emotional power, thanks, in no small measure, to the use of sound.

These impulses gradually bifurcated into the two main divisions of non-fiction film, the documentary and the avant-garde, but in the beginning such distinctions were blurred (as the lists of early films discussed as documentary in Ellis, Jacobs, and Barnouw suggest). Those setting out to explore the world around them and represent it in recognizable form were simultaneously interested in discovering how they might reshape that world, and our image or understanding of it, through cinematic techniques. The emerging documentary form allowed viewers to see the world anew, from a distinct perspective and for a particular purpose.

Another way to think of these two, nonexclusive tendencies toward documentation and voice or, if pushed toward their extremes, documentary and the avant-garde, is to think of them as cinematic versions of two twentieth-century tendencies: an anthropological impulse, bent on broadening the scope of the familiar and recognizable beyond our own culture or worldview, and a corresponding surrealist impulse, bent on shocking or shaking up existing assumptions about the familiar and recognizable within our own culture or worldview.¹² Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler's *Mannahatta* (1921), Ralph Steiner's *H2O* (1929), Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures*, Joris Ivens's *The Bridge* (1927), and Dimitri Kirsanoff's *Ménilmontant* (1926) are among the films discussed in Ellis and Jacobs that emphasize the surrealist impulse toward strange juxtaposition most vividly, whereas *Nanook of the North* stands as the most celebrated instance of the strange made familiar.

The question of the filmmaker's voice and the extent to which it remained unobtrusive or highly noticeable often took precedence over the fiction/nonfiction distinction. Much of Robert Flaherty's remarkable success in exhibiting *Nanook of the North*, for example, resulted from his astute combination of a documentary attitude toward a preexisting world and a narrative strategy with its unobtrusive—because so recognizably

humanist—representation. In Flaherty's romantic voice Nanook becomes the first "star" of the still nascent documentary film (with Flaherty himself not far behind). Nanook's tale of struggles against nature stand as the documentary equivalent of the folkloric and classic Hollywood tale of a hero's quest to overcome obstacles and adversity and reach his goal (in this case survival in a harsh environment).¹³

It is of no small import that Flaherty utilized intertitles in a manner similar to what would, with the coming of sound, become voice-over commentary. Titles, for this silent film, guided the viewer toward the meanings and values intended by the filmmaker, and they provided a narrative backbone for the illustrative scenes of Inuit life.

Flaherty's success in gaining theatrical release for his film is a key factor in his elevation to founding pioneer, and that success is clearly due to his ability to draw on qualities of the fiction film to tell an engaging and carefully conceived story and to convey a specific, appealing (humanist) perspective on man's relation to his world. Flaherty did not want to string together a series of semiconnected scenes of disparate events, as the less commercially successful Edward S. Curtis did before him in his *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914), restored and retitled *In the Land of the War Canoes* (1972), a narrative nonfiction set among the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest and told, albeit less gracefully, in a spirit clearly akin to Flaherty's tale of Inuit life in the Arctic.

Flaherty went beyond Curtis's proscenium stage camera style, where a single long shot often constitutes each scene, to adopt many of the editing devices of fiction film (close-ups, continuity editing, matches on action, and so on) while also retaining great respect for the long take when the actual duration of an event had distinct importance. Flaherty also substituted the familiar (and heartwarming) tale of a nuclear family (Nanook's) for Curtis's more lurid story of sexual jealousy, dubious ceremonies, and grim rituals such as head-hunting, all bundled into a tale of melodramatic excess.

Flaherty wanted to tell a story and to document the life of a people. Whether these two aims were at odds with each other, or in what ways they combined to produce specific effects, depending on the voice of the filmmaker, may not have troubled Flaherty himself as much as they have troubled documentary filmmakers and theorists ever since. Narratives are always fictions in the sense that, even if they refer to the historical world, they must still be shaped from the flow of historical events into a tale that has a beginning, middle, and end; corresponds to known facts; and holds together as a plausible account. Narratives are a vital way to make meaning from what happens, without cessation, in the world around us. They form

the backbone of all the great myths. Documentaries do so with sounds and images that refer to this historical world and give voice to the filmmaker's vision of it.

Sometimes important events occur when a camera is not present to record them. Reenactment or reconstruction is a logical solution to the paradoxical quandary a documentary filmmaker often confronts: how to film an actual event that occurred before a camera could record it so that it once again appears as it might have appeared at the time it originally occurred. *Nanook of the North* is certainly not the first or only film to rely on reenactments. At least since Curtis's *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, in which he, like Flaherty, "painstakingly reconstructed [settings] for pre-contact authenticity,"¹⁴ the goal of filmmaker, anthropologist, historians, and storytellers—to re-present the historical world in an engaging, essentially authentic manner—seemed entirely compatible.

This goal, however, further blurs any distinction between fiction, which reenactments must, to some degree, be, and documentary, which sets out to represent the preexisting world, not to fabricate another one. Music, sound effects, and speech could all be plausibly added to a reenactment in ways that might seem more intrusive and problematic in the representation of a historical event recorded on the spot. In a reenactment the creative use of sound can heighten what it might feel like to witness a given event for which the camera was not initially present or to increase our awareness of the fictive quality of such a scene.

As long as the filmmaker's intentions were deemed honorable (as long as viewers shared the apparent intentions of the maker), these ways of giving creative shape to reality were readily accepted. They were, in fact, the foundation stone of the creative reediting of existing footage in the work of Esfir Shub's compilation films and many newsreels. Compilation films, like reenactments, attest to the centrality of the filmmaker's expressive voice and distinct perspective. These creative elements, conveyed by sound and image, were also readily accepted by viewers of the British films produced by John Grierson in the 1930s, films like *The Saving of Bill Blewitt* (Harry Watt, 1936) or *The Smoke Menace* (John Taylor, 1937). Similar strategies of reshaping and constructing what would then be presented as reality were also central to Pare Lorentz's U.S. government-sponsored films *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937), films that also effectively introduced sound to the American documentary. Music, as well as commentary, became a crucial element in giving an emotional coherence to the argument for soil conservation in the former and flood management in the latter.

For much of the early history of documentary it was the individual shot that retained a special relation to historical reality (and even this left considerable room for fabrication if done in the spirit of an anthropological quest for authenticity that most critics attributed to Flaherty). The combination of shots remained less easily bound by principles of faithfulness or authenticity in any straightforward empirical sense (as Vertov's and Eisenstein's films and the heavily experimental films cited by Ellis and Jacobs remind us vividly). Collage assemblies of images governed by pace, rhythm, and composition often subordinate realist representations of time and space to aesthetic affect and impart a musical quality to the image track. Considerable license reigns when images constitute a form of visual poetry or music. Recent musical scores for early documentaries such as the Alloy Orchestra's lively music (first performed in 1995) for *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929) crackles with an energy and dynamism commensurate with the film's frenzied assembly of disparate images.

At this larger level of the assembly of shots into scenes or sequences, techniques of joining images together rely heavily on modernist collage even though the dominance of voice-over commentary compelled tamer forms of editing compatible with the principle of reasoned presentation: creative license was not unlimited. Images of illustration, what filmmakers usually refer to as "B-roll" footage, anchor the commentary in the visible world. Such images, such as a collage of people hurriedly eating sandwiches at a lunch counter in *The City* (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939), reinforce the verbal message—modern urban life is far too chaotic and rushed—rather than stand as a purely poetic message on their own. Music can support poetic collage assemblies or images of illustration, but if the voice-over dominates, music, like image, needs to subordinate itself to this unseen but controlling voice, as it does to the speech of characters in fiction films.

The tensions and dynamics of early documentaries, as they embraced sound in various combinations of music and voice-over commentary primarily, shifted dramatically in the 1960s. Portable cameras and tape recorders, capable of recording sync sound on actual locations, opened up a new world of possibility. The filmmaker might observe what unfolds before the camera, as if the camera merely recorded what would have happened anyway, or she or he might participate in the lives of others, most notably through interviews. This altered the status of the voice. No longer the disembodied, omniscient, invulnerable voice of He Who Already Knows (often crystallized in a scripted shooting plan and written commentary that could be completed

before the start of shooting), the filmmaker adopted an embodied, situated, and often highly vulnerable position as one among many—albeit the one with the movie camera—for whom the future unfolded in the course of making the film rather than having taken shape prior to the start of filming. It was the voice or perspective of He Who Does Not Yet Know and what happens happens outside his full control. Impromptu, spontaneous speech prevailed over the well-polished commentaries of the past.

The filmmaker's new challenge was to find or shape the dramatic quality in life lived before the camera, either in observed moments or through interactions with the filmmaker (where illustrative archival footage often replaced the wild collage assemblies of the past). The image track was no longer a collage of shots that built a mood or attitude; it was instead the visible counterpart to the voice of the speaking subject. The filmmaker now held his or her camera on the one who speaks, in sync. This meant willingly sacrificing full control of the image. Less preconceived, the image as caught served to anchor spoken words to individual bodies. For the filmmaker, listening with a well-tuned ear became as high a priority as speaking, through commentary, with polished eloquence.

Documentary stars akin to Nanook arose at a rapid rate. They were individuals who command our attention with their expressiveness, idiosyncrasy, or emotional intensity. Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy in *Primary* (Drew Associates, 1960), Jason in *Portrait of Jason* (Shirley Clarke, 1967), Paul Brennan in *Salesman* (Albert and David Maysles, 1968), and Edith and Little Edie Bouvier Beale in *Grey Gardens* (Albert and David Maysles, 1975) helped erect a pantheon of documentary figures of memorable proportion through what they said as much as what they typified or did.

The innovations of the 1960s remain with us, but so does the richer stew of experimentation from the 1930s. It is in the 1980s that these two tendencies found common ground in the innovative work of individuals such as Michael Moore and Errol Morris, among others, who pursued the avenues opened up by Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1968), which used sound and music expressionistically, and Connie Field's *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980), which introduced archival footage only to undercut and subvert it.

Errol Morris, in particular, with his landmark film, *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), expertly and powerfully coupled the anthropological and surreal impulses of early documentary with the rise of the sync interview in the 1960s to extraordinary effect. (The film helped secure the release of an innocent man sentenced to die for murder.) His 35 mm carefully lit and expertly

composed scenes evoked as much as they described. Morris reclaimed the carefully composed image of 1930s documentary, sacrificing nothing to spontaneity, and married his compelling images to the distinct, idiosyncratic speech of his subjects. He reintroduced elements of surreal collage, as well as close-up shots of newspaper reports that tracked across fragments of sentences, making it impossible to treat this standard form of information as source material. It gestured, as Bertolt Brecht might, to this function without fulfilling it. Viewers beheld a familiar visual field rendered strangely unintelligible.

Likewise, his reenactments upheld the intentionality of authentic representation except that what Morris sought to authenticate were the subjective memories, self-serving narratives, and suspect accounts of police investigators and alleged witnesses alike. No single reenactment, of the several included in the film, represents “what really happened,” but all attest to the cloud of doubt and self-deception that shrouded what was, in fact, the truth of who did or did not kill the fallen police officer. With no commentary at all the film calls the veracity of individual statements into question and asks whether it is not ourselves whom we often deceive as much as, if not more than, others.

Morris also utilized Philip Glass’s musical score to great effect, giving the testimony and reenactments a haunting, ethereal, and yet powerful impact. The subtle, repetitive, hypnotic music functioned less as a supportive backdrop than as a powerful alternative to any voice-over commentary: it conveyed an obsessive perspective and mysterious tone from which any discursive argumentation had been removed.

The film adopted the performative qualities that revolve around social actors, or subjects, who possess distinctive expressive qualities and who populated the observational or participatory documentaries of the 1960s. The two main subjects of his film were both potential heroes in the sense of possessing memorable qualities, even as Morris coupled these qualities with the prevailing tone of the film, carried by surreal images and compelling music, and with a gradual revelation of guilt and innocence. The film spoke engagingly and movingly through sounds and images no longer beholden solely to what happens in front of the camera but liberated to once again speak in an inventive, personal voice that addressed reality and the viewer with equal verve. The qualities that made the nascent documentaries of the 1920s and early 1930s captivating—suspense, narrative, music, a collage of striking images, and a mix of fabrication and observation, staging, and listening—serve to build emotional engagement and intellectual involvement with a world both familiar and, once again, disconcertingly strange.

Sound remains essential throughout this condensed history of the form. From the voice-over commentary that replaced intertitles and gave documentary a nascent form as the locus of one-who-knows to the more stylistically based voice of countless documentaries that avoid commentary but nonetheless convey a distinct perspective and moral attitude toward the world we share, sound provides a major point of identification for the viewer. It guides us through the imagery; it lends coherence, emotional intensity, and sensory rhythm; it draws us into a state of epistophilia as we set out to experience and know the world in a distinct way. The shape of sound's design on us has changed with time, but its centrality to the power of documentary abides.

6 To See the World Anew

Revisiting the Voice of Documentary

Unexpectedly, someone calls out: “Hey, you!” This interpellation served as one of the foundation stones for Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology,¹ but we can make a simpler claim: to be addressed by a film—to sense that a film seeks to engage and speak to us about the world we share—functions as a hallmark of documentary film. Seldom as confrontational as the famous Althusserian “hailing of the subject,” and tied to more specific forms of ideology than the construction of the subject itself, ranging, in fact, from the soft-spoken “Consider this” of a poetic documentary to the “Listen up” of a didactic one, the documentary’s imperative address distinguishes it from the overseen and overheard quality of most fiction and prepares us for a distinct form of engagement.

Technologies change, but the need to have a voice with which to address others, a distinct way of seeing our shared world, remains a constant. It is as elemental as the need to tell a story, present a point of view, or give poetic form to a formless world. Now digitized in myriad ways, the need for a voice persists across the history of the documentary film. More than a style, which imbues an imagined world with its distinct allure, which we then behold, the voice of documentary, as the felt presence of a cohabitant of our shared reality, shapes the historical world from its specific point of view and addresses us directly. Voice calls out to us to acknowledge the presence of an other who strives, by means of sounds and images, to speak to us. (I regard this other mainly as the individual filmmaker, but it may also be institutional, as in the address of network news or reality TV shows.)

Just as the public speaker uses his or her entire body to give voice to a particular perspective, documentaries use all the cinematic means at their disposal to address us. Questions of speech and voice are therefore not simply literal. The spoken word, of course, plays a vital role in most documen-

tary film and video: Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955) exemplifies the centrality of voice-over commentary, just as Drew Associates' *Primary* (1960) demonstrates the power of the spoken word captured with sync sound as the camera rolls.

Some films, like *Portrait of Jason* (Shirley Clarke, 1967), *Word Is Out* (Nancy Adair and Andrew Brown, 1977), or *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985), seem at first glance to be nothing but speech. But when Jason confides to us about his life in *Portrait of Jason*, a key avenue to understanding his words involves what we notice of his inflections, gestures, and behavior, including his interaction with Shirley Clarke, the filmmaker, as she orchestrates their dialogue. And when the various interviewees in *Shoah* speak to us about their past, a key aspect of understanding the force and severity of that past lies in its effect on their way of speaking and acting in the present. Memories, experience, habits, and trauma all get embedded in the body, and it is of them that the body in documentary speaks.² Even the most speech-oriented of documentaries—often referred to as “talking head” films—convey meanings, hint at symptoms, and express values on a multitude of levels beyond what is said literally.

Voice has taken on different characteristics over the course of documentary film history, differences we can sketch out in terms of five periods.

(1) With silent films, accompanied only by music, the sense of a voice addressing us came largely through intertitles and nonverbal means such as composition and editing. Scenes of walrus, fish and seal hunting, as well as of igloo building, in *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922), with their long takes and suspense, say, in effect, “Just watch; see what this man can do against tough odds.” The intertitles, like those in many other silent films, tell us what voice-over commentators would soon describe. There is a respectful but suspenseful, anticipatory quality to these titles from Flaherty just as there is an exhortatory, ecstatic tone to the intertitles of Mikhail Kalatozov's delirious tribute to Soviet engineering as it brings a road to a landlocked region in *Salt for Svanetia* (1930), a tribute amplified by the wild but rhythmic editing and music that seem to hew the road from celluloid mountain sides.

(2) With the coming of sound at the end of the 1920s, voice takes firm root in “Voice of God” commentary (unseen but heard narrators who guided us through a situation or issue from the film's perspective), but this was but one component of what conveyed a sense of being addressed by films like *Night Mail* (Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936), *Coal Face* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1935), or *The River* (Pare Lorentz, 1937). Their assembling of images to illustrate their verbal points played just as vital a role.

We witnessed men at work or nature at its most dangerous. As W.H. Auden's poetic voice-over for *Night Mail* attests, commentary need not be didactic or stilted and can engage us affectively as well as factually. And for much of the 1930s and 1940s—and ever since, in fact—commentary has played a decisive role in conveying the perspective of the filmmaker to the audience, be it John Huston's rueful account of difficult, costly struggle to defeat Italian and German forces in his *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945) or Peter Coyote's flat, middle-of-the-road recounting of a presidential dynasty in Ken Burns's *The Roosevelts* (2014).

Time and space as we normally know them unravel to reveal the time and space called up by the film's voice. Images from many different places might be edited together to support a single point. Continuity of time and space matter less than continuity of thought or emotional tone. Classic expository films seldom have a deep investment in any one person, place, or thing. Each shot serves to represent typical qualities needed to support the film's point of view.

These qualities are evident in Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Hans Richter's *Inflation* (1929), Harry Watt and Basil Wright's *Night Mail*, and Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke's *The City* (1939). These films share a common theme—life in the modern urban center—but speak with different voices: the formal, abstract power of machinery that seems to function on its own, devoid of human agents, in *Berlin*; the freneticism and excitement of a new human agency in charge of production, its own body, and its environment in *Man with a Movie Camera*; the wreckage brought about by rampant inflation in *Inflation*; the harmony of state and society evident in the work of the British postal service in *Night Mail*; and the overwhelming, oppressive frenzy of an urban pace that reduces individuals to cogs that conform to the rhythm of the machines in *The City*.

Time and space submit to the logic of a point of view; shots support a specific tone rather than build a sense of concrete geographic space. Images come together to create this tone rather than to offer evidence of a fixed location; individuals pass through the films less to attest to their specific circumstances or to reveal aspects of their distinct experience than to represent types and activities the film wishes to speak about. People may lack in individuality or personality, but they contribute to the distinct and powerful voice of the filmmaker.

All these films speak in vivid voices and use a wide variety of cinematic means to do so, the voice-over commentary of a narrator being but one of many devices put into play. These strategies remain commonly adopted

ones today. Ali Samadi Ahadi's *The Green Wave* (2010), for example, returns to this tradition even though it adopts new technologies such as computer-generated animation. In this film we don't get to know individuals in any great detail, but their many voices and experiences during the massive protests and political movement leading up to the 2009 elections in Iran give us a vivid sense of what it was like to stand up to an oppressive regime and demand change. Similarly, Tony and Ridley Scott's *Life in a Day* (2010) creates a rich collage of individual experiences on one day that evokes large themes like love, marriage, and birth by taking fragments from thousands of diaries shot on the same day around the world by people using cell phones and digital cameras. We learn almost nothing about any of these people, not even their names, but the footage they provide folds into an impressive sense of what one day, an Everyman's Any Day, was like around the world.

(3) Something happened in the 1960s to change all this. Sound recording became far more manageable, and for the first time the voices of social actors—people—entered into documentary in a major way. Everyday speech, recorded at myriad locations outside a sound studio, could be heard and social actors seen in their immediate environment, doing what they routinely do and saying what they often say. They go about their business, with or without the overt intervention of the filmmaker to interview, challenge, provoke, or otherwise interact with them. Voice now emerges from how the filmmaker encounters others in the moment of filming more than in the process of editing footage and adding commentary and music, footage often recorded without a comparable sense of immediacy and risk.

The very moment of filming becomes the heart of the matter in a way that earlier approaches seldom stressed, be it in the intensity with which Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy campaign for the Democratic nomination as presidential and vice presidential candidates in *Primary*, the pseudo-intensity of David Holzman's effort to capture his quotidian life in the mockumentary *David Holzman's Diary* (Jim McBride, 1967), or Eduardo Coutinho's remarkable ability to draw out personal testimony from near strangers in *O fim e o princípio* (Eduardo Coutinho, 2006) or from not-so-shy teenagers in *Last Conversations* (2015).

O fim demonstrates vividly the new principle of synchronous sound and the change it produced. The film consists largely of interviews with elderly residents of Brazil's less prosperous northeast, and they talk mainly about their views on life, religion, and death. We gain a vivid sense of them as individuals rather than a sense of the filmmaker's controlling sensibility. Indeed, rather than controlling *all* the sound that accompanies the film,

Coutinho controls virtually *none* of the sound. He adds nothing to what he can record in the moment: no music, no sound effects, no voice-over commentary. Coutinho, like other filmmakers working in this new key, respects the spatial and temporal geography of a very specific time and place and captures fundamental qualities of specific encounters with fleshed-out individuals in that geohistorical location. This is also vividly true for *Roundabout in My Head* (Hassen Ferhani, 2015), a respectful observational study of men who work in an Algerian slaughterhouse. We learn little of the larger context save what the men tell us through their casual conversations, but what they say is thoughtful, poetic, and profoundly revealing of a society that seems to lack an underlying cohesiveness.

From complete control over sound to almost no control over sound, but still able to speak about the world in compelling ways, the voice of documentary has changed profoundly. The broad-scale perspective that might have organized films in an earlier period and used individual figures to promote this perspective now becomes the small-scale perceptions of discreet individuals whose views we must measure against our own, knowing that we encounter them through the lens of a filmmaker who nonetheless cedes a large measure of control to his subjects.

After 1960 the individual shot is no longer just a fragment in a montage assembly. The individual who is in the shot is no longer just an example of a larger principle. There is the sense of a direct, personal encounter. Acute questions involving the ethics of encounter arise: how do we acquit ourselves in the presence of others? Do we treat others with respect or disrespect, as full human figures or as symbols or stereotypes that fulfill a larger purpose? The voice of documentary now says to us, in so many words, "This is how I choose to act and film; what do you make of it?" Coutinho confronts these questions with extraordinary eloquence in *O fim e o princípio*. D.A. Pennebaker shows a similarly attentive ear in *Don't Look Back* (1967). He observes and recedes from the frame. People act as if he were not there. He observes how Bob Dylan acts when people seek to interview him, but Pennebaker himself does not interview Dylan; he only observes what happens when others do. Listening attentively becomes as vital as speaking eloquently.

In taking this approach, Pennebaker also demonstrates a new editing style that honors the time and space of a specific encounter. Montage assemblies of shots no longer dominate. Pennebaker, like many other contemporary filmmakers, maintains a continuity of time and space because that is the time and space of encounter itself, the time and space needed for two people to face one another and create a relationship. Pennebaker therefore edits in the camera, panning and zooming to achieve the effect of con-

tinuity editing and its shot/reverse shots, its two-shots, establishing shots, and close-ups, except that they all occur within the duration of a single long take. The year 1960 marks not only the rise of a new documentary voice but a new documentary editing style as well.

(4) The 1980s saw a return to the more open-ended, inventive forms of social representation that flourished in the 1930s—from fictional reenactments to formal innovation. This earlier period of experimentation spoke to the commonalties of avant-garde and documentary filmmaking.³ John Grierson attempted to suppress this comingling in favor of a more promotional form of advocacy, with partial success, but it took the shifts that occurred in the 1960s to propel documentary away from the avant-garde most decisively. It would only be a matter of time before their common root in seeing things anew, in ways that exceed the strictures of capturing the present moment as it unfolds in front of the camera, was rediscovered.

Often this new, more prominent voice includes the personal voice of the filmmaker, which underscores the sense of direct encounter, an embodied perspective, relayed to the viewer. Michael Moore remains almost synonymous with the vivid presence of the filmmaker within his own film, from *Roger & Me* (1989) to *Where to Invade Next* (2015). Something personal is at stake. In a radically different key, Trinh Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1982) owes a good measure of its distinction to Trinh's voice-over commentary as she speaks in her own carefully modulated Vietnamese-accented and very forthright style, just as the films of Péter Forgács address us with, among many other things, his own slightly idiosyncratic, Hungarian-accented, minimalist commentary. And although Boris Gerrets chooses written intertitles to speak for him, the sense of something intensely personal surfaces vividly in *People I Could Have Been and Maybe Am* (2010).

Gerrets wants to find out what the lives of strangers are like and what it might be like to enter into those lives. He does this with his cell phone. What we see is how he acts in the presence of people he meets, gets to know, and even in one case has a sexual relationship with. We hear and see someone relating to others on the basis of their mutual participation in the making of a film even as they go on just living their lives. A strong sense of loneliness and need, irrational actions, and turbulent feelings comes across from everyone, including the somewhat detached but deeply invested filmmaker. His life becomes his film, and his film, as the product of a cell phone, becomes an extension of his life. The film has a confessional voice as Gerrets reveals to us how he relates to others and how others relate to him. It is, in its own distinct way, as personal and experimental as the work of Stan Brakhage.

If I were to nominate one film to epitomize the shift that occurred in the 1980s and lay the groundwork for the documentary of today, it would be *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988), a film about a man sentenced to die for a crime he did not commit. Errol Morris eschews deferential adherence to the observational and participatory modes for something more eclectic. He combines special effects (particularly slow-motion shots), attention-grabbing music (by Philip Glass), an emphasis on emotional affect (with dubbed sounds and suspenseful structuring), and feature-film production values (shooting on 35 mm film with a production designer as part of his crew). These shifts alone proclaim something radically different from the handheld, rough-and-ready style of the 1960s. But Morris also gives us portraits of social actors as far more complex entities than most documentaries allow (people emerge as complex characters with contradictory testimony, hints of deception, self-deception, and as symptoms of the power of institutions, or ideology, to frame how they see and describe the world) and fantasy (reenactments depict claims about what happened at the time of the shooting more than what really happened factually and reintroduce the classic devices of music, sound effects, artful mise-en-scène, and stylistic embellishments such as the slow-motion shot of a flying milk shake). These are the classic forms of speaking through the body of the film that Vertov, Ruttman, and others pioneered but that were swept aside in the 1960s.

It is, in many ways, the voice of documentary today. In *Regarding Susan Sontag* (Nancy D. Kates, 2014), for example, special effects let us experience the world as Sontag did, serving less to amplify a given historical event than a personal aesthetic. A memorable example involves an image of typed words that decompose into an animated sea of floating letters that slowly cluster back into a Chuck Close–like portrait of Susan Sontag, which then dissolves into a photographic image of her. Nancy Kates uses such effects to speak empathetically about a woman whose life revolved around a love for and profound engagement with words.

This return to its mixed, open-ended origins accounts, in my view, for the explosion of interest in documentary as a theatrically appealing, commercially viable, socially invested, poetically sophisticated enterprise. Documentary has repossessed its affinity not only with the avant-garde but with narrative storytelling as well. It has become less like a narrowly conceived form of social moralizing and short-term advocacy and more like its fictional siblings: a form that explores the depth and complexity of human interaction. Special effects, even animation, as utilized in Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) and Dennis Tupicoff's *His Mother's Voice* (1997);

the quest, as utilized by Michael Moore in *Roger & Me*, by Morgan Spurlock in *Supersize Me* (2004), and by Banksy in *Exit through the Gift Shop* (2010); complex, deceptive, or self-deceptive characters in Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady's *Jesus Camp* (2006) and Alex Gibney's *Steve Jobs: The Man in the Machine* (2015); and heightened suspense as deployed in James Marsh's *Man on Wire* (2008), Louie Psihoyos's *The Cove* (2009), and Jeff Prosser's *Chasing Madoff* (2010) all attest to a willingness to resort to any means necessary to tell a story and involve an audience.

In my original "Voice of Documentary" essay, written before this revived interest in documentary had peaked, my concern was that some films that broke free from the observation mode still relied on archival footage to impart a classic tonal flow; but instead of being coupled to a voice-over commentary offering the filmmaker's point of view, it amplified what social actors said about their experiences through a string of interviews. The filmmaker's voice seemed to succumb to that of the film's subjects. The filmmaker risked sacrificing his or her independent voice by omitting what interview subjects did not want to address. This occurred in *Union Maids* (Jim Klein, 1976) and *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (Connie Field, 1980). In both of these cases the involvement of interviewees with the Communist Party goes unacknowledged, presumably because it carried a stigma that might discredit their testimony.

My concern then, though real, does not seem central to the direction taken by the late 1980s in which the filmmaker's voice gains increasing clarity and strength. Even in works like *Jesus Camp*, *12th and Delaware* (Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, 2010), or *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012), where many of the social actors espouse views the filmmaker does not endorse, the film's voice makes clear that a distance exists, that these are views to ponder—in terms of how they arise and get sustained—but not necessarily to embrace. There is a mix of "Decide for yourself" and "Can you believe this?" in these films' voices that avoids the dangers of subordination while expanding the range of subjects with whom we are invited to seriously engage, from those with whom we might already agree to those with whom we often do not.

(5) These developments remain with us in the twenty-first century as documentary migrates into the digital universe of recording, editing, and projecting pixels rather than analog traces of what strips of film or video record. Be it the relative ease with which an image can be modified, edited, or combined with sounds and music, or the interactive potential that allows viewers to chart their way through narrative options on interactive websites, the form now exhibits a degree of flexibility, or indeterminacy, that

marks a dramatic departure from its original claims to represent reality with a clear and sober voice. Far more fluidity and participatory potential exist. Documentary film spans a gamut from the IMAX screen to the cell phone for both production and reception, with new opportunities to text, tweet, and blog, to post to YouTube or to send an Instagram. We no longer need to be trained filmmakers to share intimate photographs or to capture events as they happen around us, as participant or bystander, with nothing more than a handheld device. It is despite, or perhaps because of, this bewildering array of forms and functions that documentary finds itself in the midst of a golden age of creative expression.

Do all these possibilities significantly alter the question of voice? Some recent films suggest tentative answers to this question. Many recent films, speak probingly and responsively about the nature of encounter and human relationships, including that between filmmaker and subject. Such a voice typically acknowledges its subject, and audience, as its equal, not its target, victim, or tool. This is a voice that speaks compellingly through the body of the film: through editing; through subtle and strange juxtapositions; through music, lighting, composition, and *mise-en-scène*; through dialogue overheard and commentary delivered; through silence, as well as speech; and through images, as well as words.

These elements announce a voice that listens with compassion and responds with empathy, be it the plight of immigrants strewn across a European landscape in the poetic and haunting *Those Who Feel the Fire Burning* (Morgan Knibbe, 2014) or the anguish and indignation of the brother of a victim of Indonesian death squads in Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Look of Silence* (2014) as he interacts with the killers and their families, probing, almost always unsuccessfully, for some small sign of contrition or remorse.

We witness an embodied perspective that becomes relayed to the viewer. Something personal is at stake for the filmmaker and the subject. Witnessing the hardships and struggles of others stems from a need to address a sense of social injustice or an inner demon that may never be announced but is felt all the same. The profound anguish suffered by veterans of the war in Iraq in Laurent Bécue-Renard's *Of Men and War* (2014), an excruciatingly honest portrait of men in a life-and-death battle for their souls, arrives as a result of Bécue-Renard's dedication to telling their story over a five-year period of filmmaking. The camera attests to a presence that possesses none of the voyeurism that sometimes mars an observational style. Accepted and integrated with others who expose their darkest deeds and deepest fears, the filmmaker becomes a medium, or channeler, who facilitates our own com-

passion and understanding. Respect, if not love, marks the camera's presence decisively and imparts a luminous quality to the film's voice.

The end credits of *Of Men and War* attest to this when we see photographs of two of the filmmaker's grandfathers in military uniforms from World War I. In a question-and-answer session Bécue-Renard indicated that these figures haunted him with their perpetual silence at family gatherings. Unlike the veterans he witnesses in intense sessions of group therapy as they struggle to overcome the moral injuries they have suffered, these relatives never spoke of what they experienced at war. Their silence was the great elephant in the room that haunted family relations and that Bécue-Renard sought to exorcise.

Unlike Ed Pincus's groundbreaking personal film *Diaries* (1982), a frank, even intimate, portrait of his personal and family life from 1971 to 1976, shot on 16 mm, films like *The Act of Killing*, *Of Men and War*, and *People I Could Have Been and Maybe Am* explore how similar intimacy can develop between relative strangers. It quickly seems in all these films as if the participants had long known each other. The camera can exhibit an intrusiveness, for better or worse—vividly felt in Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1985), tragically recounted in Elizabeth Barret's *Stranger with a Camera* (2000), mockingly portrayed in Jim McBride's *David Holzman's Diary*—but in these other works it becomes an embodied prosthetic, a corporeal extension that enables a vibrant, respectful relation to come to the fore and engage us.

Something personal is at stake here, as it always is in an encounter, a fact often masked by concepts and categories that submerge the individual within a preestablished frame, including observation as an end in itself. The filmmaker becomes more than a professional maker of films; she becomes a collaborator and confidant, a partner in life to a remarkable degree. What emerges is a dialogical truth, the type of truth about the self that only arrives in and through encounter, interaction, and relationship. It is radically distinct from factual or logical truth and from personal or subjective truth.⁴ It is not what is true for just the filmmaker or just her subjects alone and not what is true about the world in its empirical facticity. It is the manifestation of what is true when two people engage with one another and through their dialogical engagement discover for themselves, and us, aspects of our shared state of being not otherwise evident.

Along with Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003), about the filmmaker's tumultuous family relationships; Heddy Honigmann's *Food for Love: A Shtetl That's No Longer There* (2004), in which the filmmaker's seventy-five-year-old mother makes vrennekes as she reminisces with her

daughter about family history and longs to return to the Polish shtetl eradicated by the Nazis soon after she left, long ago (in the 1930s), as if this were possible; Alan Berliner's *First Cousin Once Removed* (2012), in which the filmmaker celebrates the life of his cousin, Edwin Honig, as he slowly slides into the obliviousness of Alzheimer's disease; and Laura Poitras's *Citizenfour* (2014), these films speak to the power of the camera to attest to the love and intimacy that can flourish between those aligned across from one another.⁵

The films I am emphasizing sidestep the risk of voyeurism by adopting the position of witness, of one who listens to the words, and testimony, of the other in an act that brings a sense of closure and fulfillment. Like Frederick Wiseman's work, whose early films seem to be the work of a sociologist and sometime voyeur, his more recent films—especially *La Danse* (2009), *Boxing Gym* (2010), *National Gallery* (2014), and *In Jackson Heights* (2015)—radiate a profound respect, appreciation, and even love for their subjects. This affection flows from the rhythm of the films and their patient absorption into the everyday rehearsals of ballet dancers; the routine practices of aspiring boxers; the encounters among staff, visitors, and art at England's National Gallery; and the vast array of interactions and political tensions swirling through a highly diverse section of New York City. Clearly, it could be otherwise, but these films reverberate with the voices of those who encounter others who fascinate and inspire them.

What common qualities emerge from how filmmakers engage with this twenty-first-century digital world and adopt the technologies now available? I want to suggest four ways this contemporary voice emerges:

1. Time and space collapse into a vivid sense of simultaneous event and overlapping space.
2. History from below gains a striking prominence over the classic model of history from above. The reliance on archival material of humble origin, such as home movies, is a vivid demonstration of this tendency.
3. Affect and emotional engagement, similar to what we experience in face-to-face conversation, come to the fore.
4. Performance, or the presentation of self, gains complexity as fantasy and reality, deception and self-deception, social reality and psychic reality blur in increasingly sophisticated ways.⁶

1. The collapse of time and space. People can be in more than one place at once. This defies what we know from physics and yet becomes increasingly vivid as the devices that "transport" us become more and more sophisti-

cated. *Life in a Day* strives to locate us in a transnational, indeed global, present where cultures, languages, social status, and nations fade into the background. Our identity moves into alignment with others elsewhere at a highly quotidian, even moment-by-moment, level. In *The Green Wave* we enter a world inhabited by those who stood up to the Iranian regime and demanded reform at the time of national elections in 2009. We shift not only from location to location, and from one participant to another, but also from what was live, on-the-spot cell phone recordings to animation and interviews conducted after the fact, as if these were all part of a single continuum.

Time and space take on a mutability that no longer speaks to a world of fixed geographic coordinates so much as a field of experience and memory that continues to evolve. This quality links up with affect and immediacy as these immersive, subjective dimensions imbue time and space with an indeterminate fluidity quite strikingly in *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel, 2012), where multiple fishing voyages couple with numerous acts of hauling nets and sorting fish to generate a vivid sense of what it is like to fish the open sea rather than to locate a particular boat and crew on a specific trip. And, as I have noted, the body acts as a palimpsest for past memories, experiences, and trauma so that how the body moves, gesticulates, or self-protects, and how the voice evidences emotion in the density of its grain—in films from *Shoah* and *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (Patrizio Guzmán, 1997) to *Waltz with Bashir* and *Of Men and War*—speaks to a past still affectively present in the how and why of what subjects say and do.

2. History from below and the archive effect. As *People I Could Have Been and Maybe Am*, *The Green Wave*, *Tehran without Permission* (Sepideh Farsi, 2009), which Farsi made as she explored the streets of Tehran with her cell phone, and *A Sinner in Mecca* (Parvez Sharma, 2015), where Sharma takes us into the forbidden city of Mecca (forbidden to non-Muslims) via his cell phone as he tries to reconcile being gay and being Muslim, suggest, those who wield the cell phone or digital camera and share the results with others are typically not those who hold power and expect others to carry out their commands. They are typical citizens or individuals. We see events unfold from the bottom up. The revolution Louis Marcorelles proclaimed in his book *Living Cinema* (1973), about the rise of direct cinema in the 1960s, reaches a new level as filmmakers no longer have to find ways to represent those who cannot speak for themselves.⁷ Instead, they reassemble the sounds and images made by those who, with

these new technologies, do, in fact, speak for themselves and do so compellingly, offering a history of our times but from below.

This is nowhere more vividly demonstrated with archival footage than in the work of Péter Forgács. His films, made almost entirely from the home movies of others, function as a “private history,” as he calls it, of bygone times and cultures. Many, such as *The Maelstrom* (1997), *Free Fall* (1998), and *Miss Universe 1929* (2006), revolve around footage of European Jews in the 1930s and 1940s, before they fell beneath the murderous boot of Nazism. Their lives, families, and entire culture were almost entirely erased. And yet they return to us, in moving images, as a precious gift made possible by the creative interventions of Forgács, who reworks the footage considerably, tracing out a narrative line that runs parallel to the larger social history, until these lines intersect in disaster. No fiction film could have so vivid an effect as these simple home movies do when they are spun into mesmerizing tales of exuberance, perseverance, love, life, and loss.⁸

3. Affect and emotional engagement. This quality emphasizes what it feels like to see the world a certain way, to be immersed in a given situation, or to live in a distinct part of the world in a specific way. It includes the relational intimacy of filmmaker and subject that I discussed above as well. Films from *Sweetgrass* (Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, 2009), with its intense sights and sounds of sheep amid the high plains of the Rocky Mountains; *Être et avoir* (*To Be and to Have*, Nicolas Philibert, 2002), with its patient immersion in the day-to-day life of a rural schoolteacher and his pupils; and one of the most inspiring works of this kind, *Koyaanisqatsi* (Godfrey Reggio, 1982), itself a radical revision of the city symphony films of the 1930s, all attest to the ability of the documentary to speak about the world poetically and movingly, as well as politically and motivationally. This remains a powerful tendency in documentary in the early twenty-first century, even as the idea of documentary as a tool for addressing social issues and promoting political advocacy continues to play a dominant role.

4. Performance, the presentation of self, and the thin line between fantasy and reality. Clearly foreshadowed by *The Thin Blue Line* and its conflicting, sometimes self-serving, and often self-deceiving accounts of a murder, how filmmakers tackle the presentation of self has become a central concern for many. A certain hall-of-mirrors effect occurs in films like *David Holzman's Diary*, with its mock diary and realist style mimicking perfectly the realism of the new documentaries of the 1960s, an effect taken to a different level in

a film like Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005). Here the surviving footage of Timothy Treadwell, who sought to protect wild grizzly bears by living among them, commingles with footage shot by Herzog himself. The self-promotional quality of Treadwell's footage, designed to cast him as a noble hero, erodes in the face of more self-deprecating outtakes and Herzog's own sharply divergent values. What did Treadwell accomplish, and was he wise to attempt to do so at all? Who was he that he would seek to live among bears? Herzog gives us a layered view of a man who appeared to be one thing, may well have been another, and was all the more fascinating for the complexity that results.

Something similar but with higher social stakes occurs in *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, where the public personas of its chief executives, so carefully calculated with an eye on the market value of their corporation, unravels under the relentless scrutiny of Alex Gibney. We see their self-presentation in interviews and press conferences but then learn about what they knew and what they hid about the house of cards they built. It is one thing to present a somewhat different side of oneself in different social settings, but Gibney shows how this quality can go hand in glove with manipulation and deception, and possible self-deception, as these men seem to believe the very things they fabricate to try to keep ahead of looming disaster. (Gibney pursues this search for contradiction in many of his films, including *Steve Jobs: The Man in the Machine* [2015], discussed herein in a separate essay.)

On a more individual level films like *Catfish* (Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, 2010), about a woman who takes on a full-blown but false online persona and the filmmakers who appear to believe her fabrication but with hints that they may not, or *I'm Still Here* (Casey Affleck, 2010), about Joaquin Phoenix's "retirement" from acting only to star in this mockumentary about his life after he decides to stop acting—except when he's in this film—performance no longer revolves around social actors being themselves, as if this were a singular thing, but around individuals whose self-awareness and self-presentation involves layers, roles, and calculation, some of it consciously conveyed and some of it less so. This becomes a central motif in Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012), about the layers of storytelling that wind around her own family's tangled history.

But few films confront this complexity more powerfully than Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*.⁹ Here we meet former death squad leaders in the massacre of more than a million citizens in Indonesia in the 1960s for alleged communist ties and antigovernment politics. These men reenact their killing methods with great flair and complete impunity. Treated as

heroes by the government even at the time of filming, they go through the motions of their former crimes with a clear pride in their inventive adaptation of murder techniques that they first saw in Hollywood genre films. Not only that, but they construct a modern-day fantasy for themselves: a gigantic fish constructed in a verdant landscape serves as home to a chorus line of beautiful women who emerge to praise them as the gods and saviors they themselves think they are.

The film mutes its own voice to allow these killers the chance to have their say, perplexing, if not flummoxing, us with their matter-of-fact tales of torture and murder. Oppenheimer's withholding of moral judgment compels us all the more to assess these acts for what they are. Oppenheimer's silence—a crucial element of classic rhetoric—speaks volumes, nowhere more so than in the pan of his camera to a volunteer victim who breaks down in deep distress after being depicted as having been tortured and killed in one of the reenactments. Now “dead,” he can be ignored as the killers discuss the potential impact of this very scene on audiences: it may be too graphic and may show that it was they who were cruel rather than the communists. Oppenheimer's camera says, “So very true,” without his uttering a word.

Throughout the film fantasy becomes reality and reality fantasy, and it is up to us to uphold the distinction. The subdued voice of the film serves as a vivid reminder that history is not just the dead and gone, the resolved and settled, to be recounted in instructive morsels, as “Voice of God” commentary so often assumed, but a force that haunts the present and must be accounted for by us, as well as the filmmaker.

These qualities suggest that the voice of the filmmaker remains central and strong but with new distinctiveness. New technologies make possible new ways of seeing and responding to the world around us but do not in and of themselves create new ways of speaking, of seeing the world anew. They do not relieve us of the need to speak in our own voice about our own experience, perceptions, and perspectives and those of others.

It is not new technologies that hold our attention, although they may very well attract it. It is the old, even ancient, drive to tell a story, convey a point of view, and render reality with a sensitive eye, to, in short, give aesthetic form to lived experience in a way that engages and moves us, that makes documentaries worth our attention. Without a voice that addresses us in a compelling and convincing way, these films would collapse into heaps of mere footage, into documents of fact and information rather than documentaries of affect and engagement. Filmmakers have constantly had to respond to new technologies, from the advent of color film and synchro-

nous sound to videotape and digital cameras to the evolving world of the Internet and ubiquitous cell phone. They do so as masters not of technology alone but of the well-told story, the carefully shaped point of view, and the movingly evocative impression. Documentary filmmakers are masters of an art, not a science, and it is this mastery that we find on display in the works that resound in our hearts or trouble our sleep.

7 The Sound of Music

I know firsthand how important music is to documentary. For several years my university had a 16 mm print of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). The print had no sound track at all. It was truly a silent film, even though most silent films of its time were accompanied by live music. When I projected it in class, students fell asleep. The onslaught of rapidly edited images felt arbitrary and inconsequential. This wasn't true for every single student, but the impression of a less than rapt reception remains vivid in my mind.

Then in 2003 the Alloy Orchestra, which has created sound tracks for a number of films, released a new version of the film with their remarkable music, performed on a striking mix of nontraditional and traditional instruments, as accompaniment. Reception changed overnight. The film took on a vitality and coherence it had had all along that the completely silent version eviscerated. The Alloy Orchestra's music gives tempo to the day that structures the film; it gives vitality to the machinery that awakens and begins to produce the goods that will benefit the people; it organizes an affective response to the film that makes the editing cohere in a way it did not do when the film was simply a visual cascade without any sound track at all.

Examples proliferate. Consider Werner Herzog's extraordinary film *Grizzly Man* (2005), an examination of the life of Timothy Treadwell, a solitary defender of Alaska's grizzly bears whose own stunning footage of his life among the bears forms a significant part of Herzog's film about him. *Grizzly Man* possesses a haunting quality in its view of a majestic but deadly nature and a disturbed but impassioned man. It would not do so as powerfully as it does were it not for the unforgettable music, composed by Richard Thompson, formally of Fairport Convention. The guitar solos that punctuate the film add a deeply felt resonance to the sense of tragedy and