

A NEW HISTORY OF
DOCUMENTARY FILM

Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane



continuum

NEW YORK • LONDON

2005

Chapter Sixteen

English-Language Documentary in the 1980s—Video Arrives

As the 1970s progressed into the 1980s a major transition—sometimes threatening to mutate into a battle—took place as technology moved from film to video. Lighter, and easier to learn than 16mm, video did not have to be processed, generally required less light, handled more easily in difficult locations, was felt to be less intrusive in *vérité* situations, and could capture an image in a continuous shot for much longer than a load of film. Perhaps most important for the ever-money-strapped documentarian was the fact that tape was much, much cheaper than film stock and laboratory processing. The U.S. military (along with the National Football League) had for years been by far the largest consumer of 16mm stock converted to video. The very serious drawbacks of video—lesser image quality and lack of long-term archival stability—did not outweigh its cost-saving benefits, speed, and ease of use.

Even though the first videotape recorder was demonstrated as early as 1956, it wasn't until the 1968 U.S. presidential campaign that a portable video minicam was used in broadcast television. The 1/2-inch open reel "portapak" became available to consumers around the same time, but not until 1973 did a time-base corrector make 1/2-inch tape pictures acceptable for commercial broadcast. Video technology refinements continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1986 Sony introduced digital video recorders, dramatically improving ease of use and image quality. By the end of the twentieth century video had almost completely replaced film for most types of documentary making.

Development of digital editing systems, chiefly the Avid Media Composer, further revolutionized the field by replacing videotapes, which like film had to be wound back and forth, with randomly accessible images on digital hard disks. Fast, relatively simple, and cost effective, Avid became the standard for digital nonlinear editing. At the end of the twentieth century over 80 percent of U.S. television commercials and prime-time programs were edited on this system.

These technological advances had numerous effects on documentary production practices as well as esthetics. Shooting ratios could expand exponentially, since the cost of videotape was a fraction of the cost of film. Editors often faced hundreds of hours of videotape material, rather than the dozens of 16mm hours. This was particularly noticeable in *vérité*-style documentaries and also contributed to the increasing numbers of personal documentaries, which in some ways are an outgrowth of classic *vérité*. Since it cost virtually nothing to let the camera run, why turn it off? In some cases this led to the capture of wonderful previously unavailable moments; in others it led to overlong navel-gazing of the most boring sort.

The changes in distribution and exhibition brought by video were also dramatic, where technology, economics, and artistry once again converged to rearrange documentary form and content. The nontheatrical educational film field, which was built on a 16mm film marketplace, lost its economic underpinnings to the low-cost availability of videotape. The sale and rental of 16mm films had created an economic base that throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s generated enough money to support a group of distribution companies, which in turn returned royalties to filmmakers that helped them to continue producing documentaries. The profitability of this business was shattered when a film user (teacher, librarian, film society programmer), who in 1976 had to pay \$100 to rent or \$800 to buy a 16mm print, could by 1986 purchase a similar videotape for \$29. Prerecorded home video was also a blow to art house and cinémathèque exhibition, traditional venues for documentaries. So, although the means of production was more affordable and accessible, the economic returns generated by the distribution of video made profits, or even recouping costs, much more difficult.

A major factor in the transition from film to video was a significant change in quality of image and sound recording. Especially in early video work, the poor quality of these, compared to film, caused many serious debates about aesthetic values. From the vantage of the twenty-first century, where crystal-clear digital imagery is available virtually everywhere, it is difficult to understand the heated passion that surrounded the film versus video debates. Advocates of film capture of images and sound were ardent in their beliefs that video degraded the form to an unacceptably low level. Video proponents were just as adamant about the ease of use, cost-savings, and portability of video formats. One of the big problems with video has remained this multiplicity of formats. New video, and later digital, technologies came (and continue to arrive) on the market in such rapid succession that makers, distributors, and audiences all were often spinning in confusion.

The aesthetic effects of video, television, and projected film images are all different, in terms of lighting, depth of field, aspect ration, and even emotional tone, and discussion of these is important. What is just as important, especially for the documentarian, is a consideration of the archival stability of the medium.

Earliest videos have in far too many cases simply disappeared, taped over for other purposes, or just disintegrated. Even when a video exists, the format with which it was recorded and/or shown may no longer exist. Salvaging original two-inch television videotapes is a rarefied art form, and we now witness the phasing out of VHS video, heading the way of beta, one inch, 1/2 inch, and all the other previous formats. Digital imagery and DVDs are not much more reliable. In fact, the only medium that has proven to last over one hundred years is black-and-white film negative, stored in good conditions. For documentary, this is critical. Not only can historical compilation films be made only when there is historical material to access, but any filmmaker who is producing a document that she hopes will last beyond her lifetime needs to be constantly aware of preservation issues. Without conscious preservation efforts, no documentarian can claim that he is making a contribution to social history.

Cable and Satellite Technology

Another of the big changes to affect documentary making in this period was the growth of multiple cable, and later satellite, television channels that began in the 1970s and exploded in the 1980s. Cable, which originally was intended only to bring a television signal to areas that could not be reached by over-the-air broadcasting, soon presented the possibility of a hugely expanded number of special interest channels. Despite the growth of public-service cable access described in chapter fifteen, the profit-driven nature of U.S. broadcasting assured that most channels, with the exception of public television, were devoted first and foremost to making money. By the end of the eighties there were specially cable channels for children, every type of sport imaginable, animals, science, home care, history, movies, and more. Documentaries and other varieties of nonfiction programming became more widely distributed than ever before. Ultimately the economics of this mode of distribution had an enormous impact on production. Like the advent of broadcast television, described in chapter twelve, cable television was both a boon and a bane for documentary. There were countless numbers of hours to fill on these new channels but very little money to pay for product to fill them.

One of the more hospitable cable outlets for documentaries was, and remains, HBO. In 1972 HBO went on the air, originally transmitted via terrestrial microwave towers. In 1976 it became the first TV network to broadcast signals via satellite when it showed "The Thrilla from Manila" boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. Shortly after that other networks also began satellite transmission. HBO, with its subsidiary Cinemax, has both produced and acquired a wide range of documentaries, including an extensive number of works from important independents. Under the long-time leadership of executive Sheila Nevins, HBO has supported work by veterans such as Al Mayesles, Alan and Susan Raymond (*Children of War*), Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman (*Para-*

graph 17), and Jon Alpert, as well as newcomers like Jessica Yu (*The Living Museum*), Rory Kennedy (*American Hollow*), Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky (*Brother's Keeper*, *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills*). Due in part to relatively lush production and marketing budgets, HBO helped to create a high television profile for serious documentaries in the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, it became a cable home for some of the most innovative filmmakers in the United States. HBO creates its share of cable "potboiler" documentaries such as *Real Sex* but, unlike most other cable entities, it offsets these with pieces in which filmmakers retain a great deal of artistic control over their work.

In another vein, Ted Turner launched CNN in 1980, calling it "America's news channel." At that time it reached only about 1.7 million households. By 1985 CNN reached more than 33 million households, nearly 40 percent of all U.S. television homes. In that year Turner combined the U.S. domestic signals of CNN and Headline News to put them on a global satellite system, creating CNN International. In doing so he created a commercial web, outside of old major network control, feeding news images to and from all parts of the world. CNN and TBS (Turner Broadcasting System) have been responsible for numerous documentaries, among the most notable being the continuation of the Cousteau legacy of undersea exploration begun by David Wolper.

The birth and growth of The Discovery Channel provides an interesting example of the shifting relationship between documentaries and television that took place in the 1980s. It is representative of the mass of nonfiction programming that in the twenty-first century occupies most of the time on such networks as A&E, The History Channel, The Learning Channel, House and Garden, American Movie Classics, and others. John S. Hendricks, founder, chairman and until 2004 CEO of Discovery Communications, created the U.S. Discovery Channel in 1982 as a cable network designed to provide documentary programming with a goal of "enabling people to explore their world and satisfy their natural curiosity." By definition, Discovery was all documentary, all the time. In 2003 The Discovery Channel reached over 86 million subscribers in the United States and was the most widely distributed television brand in the world, reaching over 425 million homes in 155 countries. At least nineteen offices outside the United States are part of its extensive infrastructure, enabling Discovery Networks International to create inroads in fast-growing markets from China to India to Mexico.

As a privately held company, Discovery has a strongly unified corporate vision, the primary goal of which is to turn a profit. Its shareholder representatives are the following: Liberty Media (the giant run by John Malone, which also owns Starz, QVC, The Game Show Network, and Court TV), Cox Communication (one of the highest capability broadband cable networks in the world), Advance/Newhouse (the Newhouse family's other interests include Condé Nast magazines, *Parade* magazine, daily newspapers serving twenty-two cities, and the American City Business Journals), and John S. Hendricks. Although Discovery

began as most cable channels did, by acquiring low-cost programming produced by others, it soon turned to in-house production to fill its ever-expanding schedule. One very early Discovery acquisition, for example, was *Justicville* (1987), a half-hour video about homeless activists in Los Angeles by Gary Glaser. After Discovery's first months of operation nothing remotely like this subject matter or its rough-hewn treatment (the sound track was by rapper Ice T) would make it into the channel's formula. Instead, Discovery's most successful audience-pleaser by far has been the relentless *Shark Week*.

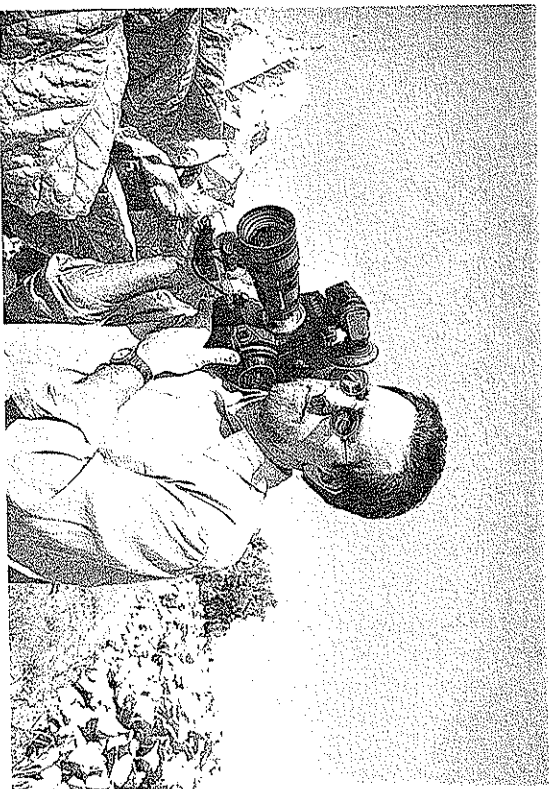
The methods of production adopted by Discovery became the antithesis of the vision of an independent filmmaker with control over the form and content of his/her work. Rather than presenting a fully formed documentary piece in its entirety, Discovery became most interested in "branding" itself as a cable "destination" and "re-purposing" material contributed by filmmakers to create specifically targeted programs for each of its international markets. In other words, a show about elephants might have one point of view and artistic perspective for audiences in North America, and the same material could be re-edited with a different sound track, aesthetic values, and point of view for an audience in the Middle East. The documentary culture created by these practices is discussed further in chapter 17.

The Personal Essay Film

Some of the same technological factors that led to the production mode of Discovery also contributed to the growth of very individualized films created for opposite reasons. Inexpensive video and the ease of use of digital media led many individuals, who would otherwise never pick up a camera, to create their own documentaries. As Pat Aufderheide, Director for the Center of Social Media at American University, has so clearly pointed out:

First-person films—diaries, memoirs, home movies, therapeutic records, travelogues—have been part of the audio-visual landscape for decades. But it wasn't until the mid-1980s that the personal essay film became accessible beyond the reaches of film schools and art houses, and began to take a place in the programming diet of television. It was a period of rapid expansion of accessible video technology, and just as rapid cutting back of public resources for independent and experimental use of the medium. Personal essay documentaries were part of a trend in documentary work overall toward a more intimate approach, even in explicitly public affairs subject matter, with the goal of intervening in a shared understanding of meaning. In this documentary genre, the narrator takes clear ownership of the narration, at the same time that the narrator is a character. They are frankly, inevitably personal.

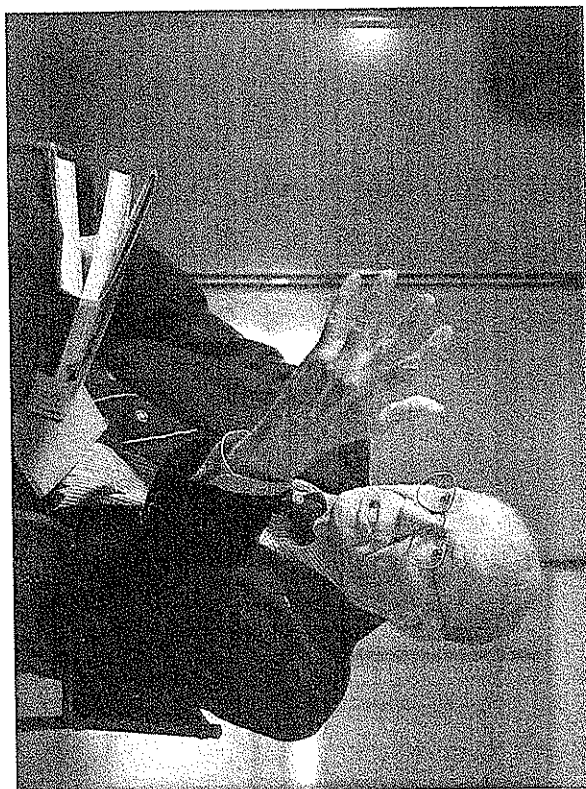
Ross McElwee is the filmmaker perhaps most acclaimed for (or accused of) initiating a flood of self-reflexivity that became known in the 1980s as personal



Ross McElwee in a North Carolina tobacco field with Aaton camera shooting *Bright Leaves* (U.S., 2004, Ross McElwee). Photo by Adrian McElwee

diary or essay documentary. Like Michelle Citron, Mitchell Block, Jim McBride, and Nick Broomfield, McElwee is another of the first film-school-educated generation of documentarians. He began in the mid-1970s, as a graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, when Ricky Leacock and Ed Pincus were involved in the documentary film program there. Ten years later McElwee made *Sherman's March: A Meditation on the Possibility of Romantic Love in the South During an Era of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation* (1986). In it McElwee retraces Union General William Tecumseh Sherman's destructive Civil War path, interweaving his journey with vignettes of seven Southern women. The film is not at all about General Sherman. Highly influential among other emerging documentarians of the time and critically applauded, *Sherman's March* was followed by McElwee's continued self-reflection in *Something to Do With the Wall* (1991), *Time Indefinite* (1994), *Six o'Clock News* (1998), and *Bright Leaves* (2004). His films tend toward an almost comic, certainly a self-deprecating, appreciation of life around him.

Alan Berliner, another 1970s film school graduate, merged experimental art with documentary fact in a very personal manner. *Intimate Stranger* (1991) explores the extraordinary life of Berliner's maternal grandfather, a Palestinian Jew raised in Egypt, whose obsession with all things Japanese created confusion and conflict in his post-World War II Brooklyn home. Berliner has said,



Robert S. McNamara speaks to the camera in the Academy Award-winning *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons From the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (U.S., 2004, Errol Morris). Photo by Claire Folger, Sony Pictures Classics

The truth is I never actually "decided" to become a filmmaker; somehow via a more arduous and circuitous route derived of inner necessity, I grew into one. Much of my adult life has been spent grappling with the conflicts and contradictions of family. With both the presences and absences of memory. When I came upon my family home movies . . . the images I had forgotten about suddenly became triggers for a flood of memories. Using them in my films became a kind of photo-therapy, perhaps even a way towards healing some of the wounds of my childhood.

There are some similarities between Berliner's work and that of Errol Morris. Morris's films are not personal diaries, but they have an unmistakable aura in which the presence of the filmmaker as creator is always evident. His major films have been distributed theatrically to wide critical acclaim. This work includes *Gates of Heaven* (1978), *Vernon, Florida* (1981), *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), *A Brief History of Time* (1992), *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* (1997), *Stairway to Heaven* (1998), *Dr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred E. Leuchter, Jr.* (1999), and *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2002). Morris is drawn to often-eccentric people who talk candidly about their lives while doing what they normally do. In an interview he explained that while he

was asked endlessly whether his films are documentaries, "The answer is 'yes' and 'no.' There are elements of fiction and nonfiction in all filmmaking. I use real people. They're not reading a prepared script. They're attempting to talk about themselves. That's real. But I do other things that are closer to fictional films, like I storyboard, for instance."

As a graduate philosophy student Morris spent much of his time at San Francisco's Pacific Film Archives watching movies. After making *Gates of Heaven* and *Vernon, Florida*, he spent two years working as a private detective. Morris's talent for investigating the implied truth of documentary filmmaking, and for appreciating how people reveal themselves to the camera, is at the heart of his art. His first two films became cult favorites. Critic Roger Ebert has said about *Gates of Heaven*: "I believe it is one of the greatest films ever made. Ostensibly a documentary about two pet cemeteries in northern California and the people who owned them, it is in fact one of the most profound, and funniest, films ever made about such subjects as life and death, success and failure, dreams and disappointments, and the role that pets play in our loneliness."

It was the theatrical release of *The Thin Blue Line* that brought Morris popular recognition. The film follows the case of Randall Dale Adams, a man who, it seemed, was falsely accused of the highway murder of a Texas police officer. Morris uses repeated dramatizations of the murder, multiple points of view, talking-heads interviews, and telephone conversations, in concert with Philip Glass's almost eerie score, to create the overriding impression that justice was not served. The film makes a strong case that prejudice and possibly tainted testimony persuaded the jury to find Adams, a drifter from the Midwest, guilty. The "thin blue line" of police officers separating the public from chaos—as the judge, quoting the D.A. in the case, describes them—is shown as ineffective. The police, courts, and prison are seen as putting people at the risk of injustice as often as they protect them. After serving time for a death sentence committed to life imprisonment, Adams was freed—in no small part because of the impact of the film.

The Historical Film

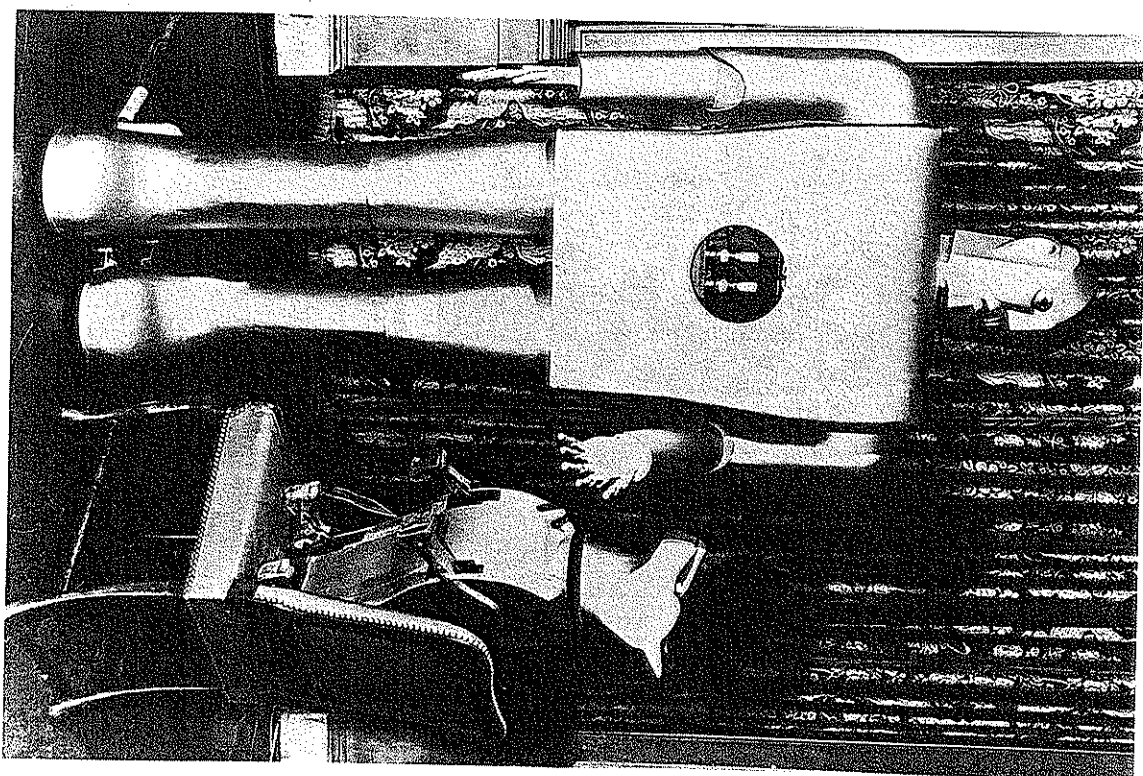
In almost all subject areas archival compilation films began to multiply. One of the key makers of historical films, Ken Burns, began producing in the 1980s. His work is examined at length in chapter seventeen. For a time in the 1970s and 1980s, before many of the rights-holders realized the economic value of their footage, putting together "clip shows" was relatively inexpensive. Part of the David Wolper empire, discussed in chapter twelve, was built upon popular themes such as *Hollywood and the Stars*, the 1963 clip-filled documentary miniseries on NBC. Other filmmakers used the technique to explore more serious subjects.

America Lost and Found (1980) is a compilation by Tom Johnson and Lance Bird, which conveys the impact of the economic and social collapse of the Great Depression in the United States. The filmmakers spent three and a half years on research and production, assembling period film, photographs, and sounds. Evocative commentary, written by John Crowley, reinforces the images of how the United States reacted to the loss of its dreams of prosperity and how those dreams were slowly rebuilt. This is a deeply psychological presentation of the effects of the Depression, offering persuasive yet emotional contrasts among the images, the hype, and the realities of the era. *The World of Tomorrow* (1985), also by Johnson and Bird and narrated by Jason Robards, is perhaps the most poetic and poignant historical film of the 1980s. Its use of home movies, many in color, as well as promotional films from the 1939 New York World's Fair, captures a precious and precarious moment when the world stood poised between optimism about the fading of the Depression and foreboding occasioned by a looming world war.

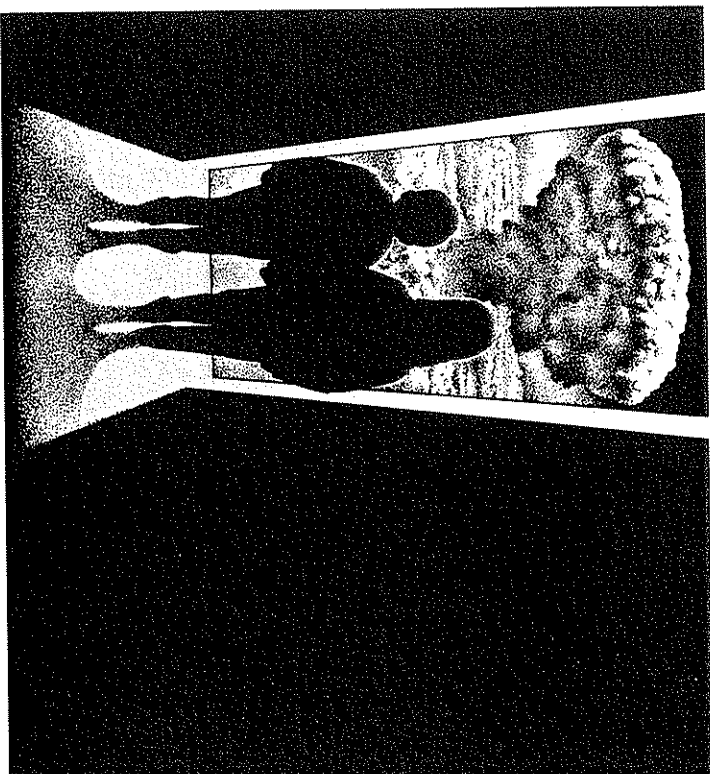
Atomic Café (1982), by Jane Loader, Kevin Rafferty, and Pierce Rafferty, is a seriocomic compilation elaborating on the ways that Americans' awestruck celebration of atomic weapons changed to pervasive fear of Soviet nuclear attack. When Kevin Rafferty found a catalog of U.S. government films in a San Francisco bookstore in 1976, he envisioned a film that would utilize such titles to create a satirical documentary on the subject of American propaganda. After six years of work, *Atomic Café* emerged as a successful theatrical feature, partly because the filmmakers abandoned narration and relied on the power of the footage and its often-ludicrous original sound track. The film's footage, much of it produced by the government, follows the development of the bomb through the atomic attacks on Japan to its central role in the cold war. Shown along with the infamous "duck and cover" civil defense films are lesser-known clips, many of which are unintentionally filled with twisted black humor.

Echoing the peace movement's growing concern over the threat of nuclear war in the early 1980s, the National Film Board of Canada commissioned journalist Gwynne Dyer to create the seven-part series *War*, based on his own military experience. The film was a reflection of Dyer's growing concern about the proliferation of new technology, its impact on the changing nature of warfare, and the growing threat of nuclear annihilation. Filmed in ten countries and with the participation of six national armies, it examined the nature, evolution, and consequences of warfare, arguing that in an era of total war, professional armies were no longer able to fulfill their traditional roles. *War* was shown on television around the world to great acclaim but was controversial in Canada. One episode, produced by Michael Bryans and Tina Viljoen, "The Profession of Arms," was nominated for an Academy Award.

Other documentaries responding to the threat of nuclear warfare during these years were *The Day After Trinity* (1980) Jon Elise, *Eight Minutes to Midnight* (1981) Mary Benjamin, Suzanne Simpson, Baird Bryant, *If You Love This Planet*,



"Electro" the Moto Man and his mechanical dog "Sparko" were among the attractions at the 1939 New York World's Fair, documented in *The World of Tomorrow* (U.S., 1980, Lance Bird and Tom Johnson). DCL © 2005, all rights reserved



Poster for *If You Love This Planet*: Dr. Helen Caldicott on Nuclear War (Canada, 1982, Terre Nash, Studio D, National Film Board of Canada). DCL © 2005, all rights reserved

Dr. Helen Caldicott on Nuclear War (1982) NFBC Studio D; *Half Life: A Parable for the Nuclear Age* (1985) Dennis O'Rourke; *Radio Bikini* (1987) Robert Stone; and *Dark Circle* (1991) Judy Irving and Chris Beaver. Each of these films makes a strong antinuclear case, although in very different ways. Perhaps the most interesting in political terms is *If You Love This Planet*, produced by Women's Studio at the National Film Board of Canada and directed by Terre Nash. In many ways it is simply a filmed speech by eloquent antinuclear activist Dr. Helen Caldicott. But her message and the delivery of the film are very powerful, and United States nuclear policies are harshly criticized. Before winning an Academy Award as Best Documentary Short, the twenty-minute film was labeled as "political propaganda" by the Reagan-era U.S. Department of Justice under the aegis of a 1930s era law. Copies of the film print shown in the United States were required to carry this warning label, creating a situation in which a documentary from the NFBC was discussed as enemy propaganda.

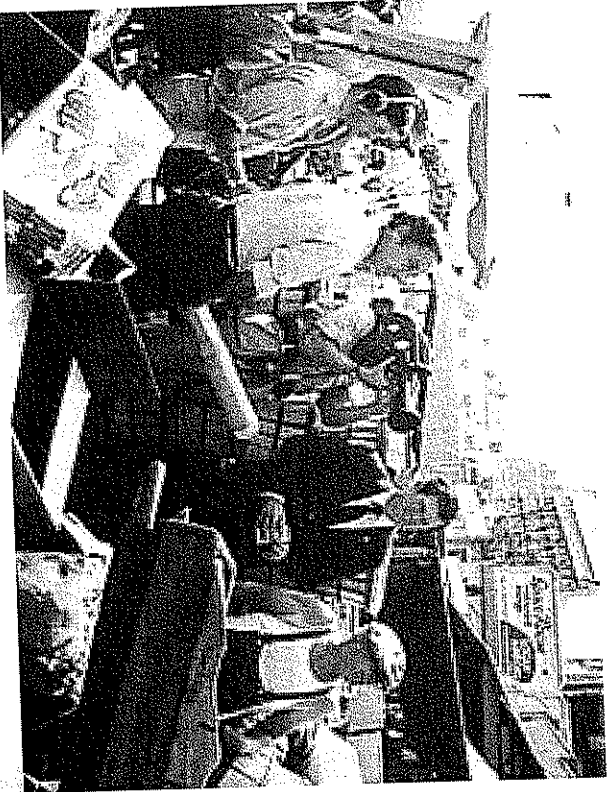


Terre Nash, National Film Board of Canada

The career of one of the most successful producers of historical/completion films, Charles Guggenheim, spanned half a century. He made over one hundred documentaries, was nominated for twelve Academy Awards, and won four of them. In 1954 he established his first production company in St. Louis, where he produced a film about the construction of the St. Louis Arch, *Monument to the Dream*. It won the Venice Film Festival's XI Gold Mercury Award, marking the first time in the Festival's history that the award was given to an American. It was in St. Louis that Guggenheim won his first Academy Award, for the film *Nine from Little Rock*, which tells the story of the Arkansas school integration crisis. Later he moved to Washington, D.C., to work with George Stevens, Jr., who headed the film program of the United States Information Agency (USIA) under Edward R. Murrow.

Guggenheim's second Academy Award came from *Robert Kennedy Remembered*, a film biography, which was made in a lightning-fast six weeks after the senator's assassination, in time for the 1968 Democratic Party Convention. This film used extensive footage shot by Drew Associates during the making of *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment* (1963). The third Academy Award went to *The Johnstown Flood* (commemorating the hundredth anniversary of that disaster). Guggenheim's final Oscar was received in 1995 for *A Time for Justice*, a film about the civil rights movement.

As a eulogy noted, despite acclaim, Guggenheim pursued his work with an almost private single-mindedness, developing an unadorned style that seemed to



Charles Guggenheim (second from left) filming the Edward Kennedy Campaign in 1970.

be a reflection of his own personality. In his later films, such as the Academy Award-nominated *D-Day Remembered*, Guggenheim began to explore history from a singular point of view. The struggle and humanity of a few individuals thrown into harrowing circumstances beyond their control was the kind of story that interested him most. This was a theme that would lead him toward his most personal film of all—and his last.

Berga: Soldiers of Another War (2003), made with his daughter Grace Guggenheim, was the first film in fifty years of directing and producing in which Guggenheim included himself in the telling of the story. Many of the American soldiers caught in the Battle of the Bulge were from his 106th Infantry Division. He could have shared their fate if he had not been sidelined by illness. In his narration he remembers quietly, "They went overseas, and I didn't. And some of them didn't come back. And I've been thinking about it for fifty years, wondering why it didn't happen to me. And that's why I had to tell this story."

Strictly Political

The new ease of use and low cost of video production of the seventies made it easier for activists of many stripes to cover situations in remote places. The Cen-

tral American insurgencies of that era, and U.S. involvement in them, occasioned a number of impassioned exposés. As often happens in documentary, the desire to impress the audience with the importance and/or urgency of the subject sometimes overrides the attention given to craft and artistry. Rarely does someone with the vision of Dziga Vertov use documentary to break aesthetic as well as political ground, but the following documentarians have at least well understood the use of film as political hammer.

Pamela Yates's work in war-torn Central America includes the Academy-Award-winner *Witness to War: Dr. Charlie Clements* (1985, made with David Goodman), as well as *When the Mountains Tremble* (1984), and *Nicaragua: Report from the Front* (1983). Her trilogy *Living Broke in Boom Times* (1990, 1997, 1999 made with Peter Kinoy) describes poverty in America in the 1990s.

Barbara Trent has for many years headed up a Los Angeles-based group, The Empowerment Project, which used agitprop techniques to inform and motivate audiences to speak out. *The Panama Deception* (1992) won the Academy Award with its blunt indictment of U.S. policies in that country. Her other pieces include *Coverup: Behind the Iran Contra Affair* (1988) and *Destination Nicaragua* (1986). Trent's work continues into the twenty-first century with antiglobalism documentaries. Deborah Shaffer, a veteran of the Newsreel Collective, made *Nicaragua: Report from the Front* (1984) with Ana Maria Garcia and Glenn Silber and took another look at the Nicaragua war in 1987 with *Fire from the Mountain*. With David Goodman and Pamela Yates, Shaffer produced *Witness to the Mountain* (1983), the story of Dr. Charlie Clements who, as a pilot in the American Vietnam War, refused further combat missions and began to dedicate himself to non-violence and healing. This story of how he ultimately found himself tending to the wounded behind rebel lines in El Salvador won the filmmakers an Academy Award.

Longtime filmmaker and activist Robert Richter has worked in documentary since his days with the Edward R. Murrow team. His career has been dedicated to creating documentary exposés such as *Father Roy: Inside the School of Assassins* (1997), narrated by Susan Sarandon. This film exploring the inner workings of the U.S. Army's School of the Americas recounts the actions of Father Roy Bourgeois, a Vietnam War hero and leader in the campaign to close the school. Non-U.S. operatives were trained at this school for work in Latin America, and Richter documents human rights abuses committed by its graduates. Other productions include the short *School of Assassins* (1994), also narrated by Sarandon, which was nominated for an Academy Award, as was Richter's *Gods of Metal* (1982).

Racial and Ethnic Minorities

William Greaves is a groundbreaking contemporary African-American documentarian in the United States. After beginning in the entertainment industry as a stage actor, he spent a short time at the National Film Board of Canada in the



William Greaves, co-host of the National Educational Television groundbreaking series *Black Journal* (1968–1976). International Film Seminars

early 1960s working with the innovators of cinéma vérité there. He returned to the U.S. and became executive producer (after a controversy in which the white executive producer was removed) and cohost of the pioneering National Educational Television series *Black Journal* (1968–1976), with a mandate to produce “by, for, and about black people.” Greaves’s best-known documentary work is

Ralph Bunche: *An American Odyssey* (2001). Among his other documentaries are *From These Roots* (1974), an in-depth study of the Harlem Renaissance, and *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* (1989).

In 1979 eight independent black producers created the National Black Programming Consortium to counter the dearth of African-American programming on PBS. Mabel Haddock has been the continuous driving force behind NBPC, which is committed to positive images of African Americans and the African Diaspora.

Exploring African-American history was Henry Hampton (1940–1998), who established Blackside, Inc., in 1968, the largest African-American-owned film company of its time. As he chronicled political developments of the twentieth century, Hampton became one of the world’s most respected documentarians. Hampton as executive producer, with Judith Vecchione as series senior producer, headed production of the massive PBS series *Eyes on the Prize*. The episodes, made over twelve years, followed the pattern of other historical compilations to make its points, using archival footage, interviews with participants, stills, and a strong period musical score. It remains a touchstone in television documentary history in its telling of the story of race relations in the United States.

Eyes on the Prize I: America’s Civil Rights Years 1954–1965, narrated by Julian Bond, documents events that helped focus the nation’s attention on the oppression of African-American citizens, such as the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in 1955, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It also covers the key court case *Brown v. the Board of Education* and other milestones. *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads* (1965–1985) uses the same formula of mixing present-day interviews and historical footage to examine those years of social unrest. Despite the critical and popular success of the first part, Hampton had difficulty raising the six million dollars needed to fund the sequel. The subjects of *Eyes II*—the rise of the Black Panther party, the Nation of Islam, the Vietnam War, busing, and Affirmative Action—were considered too controversial by many potential funders.

Ironically, this important series is no longer available for purchase or television screening. Only old copies sold chiefly to educational institutions remain in circulation. The complex issues of copyright and clearance of its many archival clips make selling it impossible. As Jon Else, one of its producers and cinematographers, noted in a study by Patricia Aufderheide and Peter Jaszai for the Center for Social Media on rights and clearances for documentary makers,

What happened was the series was done cheaply and had terrible fundraising problems. There was barely enough to purchase the minimum five-year rights of the archive heavy footage. Each episode is 50% archival. And most of the archive shots are derived from commercial sources. The five-year licenses expired and the company that made the film also expired. And now we have this situation where we have this series for which there are no license rights. . . . It will cost

\$500,000 to re-up all the rights for this film. This is a piece of landmark TV history that has vanished.

In a television interview Hampton once said that he thought the civil rights movement was often overshadowed by the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., and that *Eyes on the Prize* was an attempt to tell the stories of lesser-known civil rights activists. He wanted the series to be a testament to the power of ordinary people to effect great changes.

Blackside completed sixty major films and media projects, most exploring the worlds of the poor and disenfranchised. Among the dozens of filmmakers who worked with Hampton in making these films were Orlando Bagwell, Lillian Benson, Callie Crossley, Jim DeVinney, Jon Else, Louis Massiah, Sam Pollard, Judy Richardson, Terry Rockefeller, Paul Stekler, and Tracy Strain. Their notable titles include *Malcolm X: Make It Plain* (1994), *America's War on Poverty* (1995), and *I'll Make Me a World* (1999).

Marlon Riggs's films explore various aspects of African-American life and culture and earned him wide recognition. In addition to the intrinsic value of his work and his teaching, Riggs will probably be remembered for the controversy surrounding the public television broadcasts of his highly charged productions. *Ethnic Notions: Black People in White Minds* (1987) is an historical compilation examination of mass media stereotypes of African Americans, much like Appaloosa's review of hillbilly stereotypes in *Strangers and Kin*. Riggs's *Color Adjustment* (1989) continued the themes of *Ethnic Notions* as it traces forty years of race relations through the lens of TV shows like *Amos and Andy*, *The Nat King Cole Show*, *I Spy*, *Julia*, *Good Times*, *Roots*, and *The Cosby Show*. Riggs looks at these familiar favorites in a revealing examination of the interplay between America's racial consciousness and network prime-time programming. His work in another subcategory will be examined later.

Other African-American documentarians of note include St. Clair Bourne, who chronicles African life internationally by finding common links among people of African descent. During the past twenty-five years he has made over forty films, including the feature-length *Half Past Autumn: The Life and Works of Gordon Parks* (2000) for HBO. With actor Wesley Snipes as executive producer, Bourne directed *John Henrik Clarke: A Great and Mighty Walk* (1996), a feature-length documentary about the respected historian and Pan-African activist. He also made *Paul Robeson: Here I Stand!* (1999). For at least forty years filmmaker William Miles has created documentaries such as *Men of Bronze* (1997), the story of the 369th infantry regiment of African-American soldiers that fought under the French flag in World War I, *The Untold West: The Black West* (1994), and *Black Stars in Orbit* (1990), a film about the black astronauts.

In the United Kingdom, Black Audio Film Collective, founded in 1982, was one of the film and video workshops set up in Britain in the aftermath of inner-city protests against institutionalized racism. Best known and most controversial

of the collective's work, *Handsworth Songs* (1986), directed by John Akomfrah, uses self-reflexivity and fragmentation to examine the history of contemporary black British experience. Shot in the aftermath of riots against discrimination and unemployment in Handsworth, Birmingham, the film uses images of the violence intercut with interviews with local residents. These are interwoven with archival footage of immigration into Britain, and mainstream media coverage of the riots, along with interior audio monologues. It is part of an emerging history of black people in England in its postcolonial eras. Other documentaries by Akomfrah include *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993), *The Wonderful World of Louis Armstrong* (1991), and *Martin Luther King—Days of Hope* (1997).

In documentary, one of the most successfully organized U.S. racial minorities has been the various coalitions of Asian-Pacific filmmakers. The year 2000 marked the thirtieth anniversary of Los Angeles-based Visual Communications, the twenty-fourth anniversary of Asian Cine Vision (both of these organizations sponsor large film festivals), and the twentieth anniversary of the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA). These organizations support Asian-American filmmakers and seek to address the need to raise social and cultural awareness of Asian-American experience and history. All three groups played a consistently important role in defining an Asian-Pacific documentary presence.

One of the best-known Asian-American documentarians is Arthur Dong, who is also claimed by the gay film community. His professional career began with *Sewing Woman* (1983), about the life of his grandmother, an immigrant seamstress. Dong's productions also include *Forbidden City U.S.A.* (1989), a musical tribute to Asian-American nightclub performers in the 1940s, and *Licensed to Kill* (1997), a brutal look into the minds of murderers who killed gay men. *Coming Out Under Fire* (1994) chronicles the lives of nine gay and lesbian soldiers during World War II, when the U.S. military established its first explicit anti-gay policies. Dong is an interesting example of a filmmaker who has retained a great deal of independence by self-distributing all of his own work. This distribution income, coupled with grants funding, gives him an autonomy that is very different from that of producers for cable outlets.

Like many Asian-American documentarians, most of the work of Christine Choy deals with social issues directly pertaining to Asian Americans. Choy and partner Rene Tajima made a number of films, including their best known, the Academy-Award-nominated *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988). This is about the murder of a twenty-seven-year-old Chinese American, whose bachelor party turned into an ugly confrontation in a suburban Detroit bar, and later into Chin's fatal beating outside a fast-food restaurant. The incident, on June 19, 1982, was an almost perfect metaphor for then growing anti-Asian sentiment in America. It was ignorant: the attackers presumed Chin was Japanese. It was economically motivated: the two autoworkers blamed the Japanese—and, mistakenly, Chin—for the loss of U.S. auto industry jobs. The crime was horribly

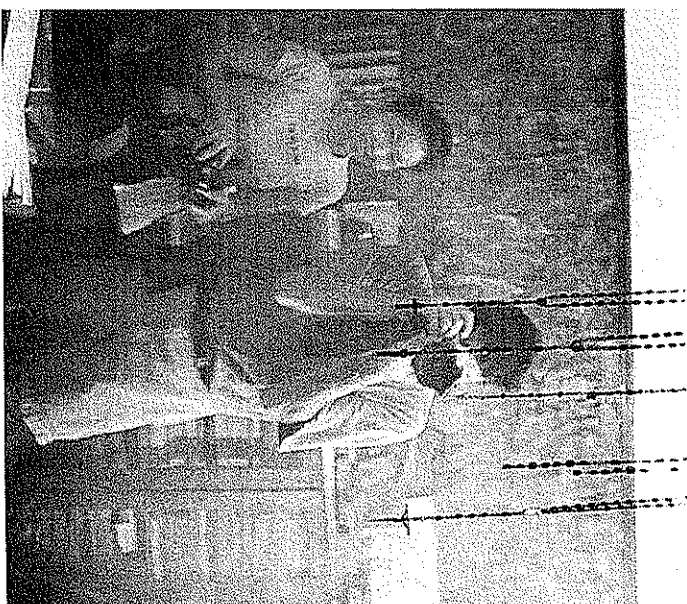


Arthur Dong (left) composes a shot with cinematographer Hiroki Mijano on the set of *The Chinese in Hollywood* (working title) (U.S., 2005, Arthur Dong). Photo by Jon Oh

violent: a baseball bat was used as the murder weapon. The film presents this information in a dispassionate nightly-news manner that serves to make the facts even more shocking.

Other Asian-American documentarians who have left a mark include multi-Academy Award-nominated Freida Lee Mock, *Maya Lin: a Strong Clear Vision*; Rea Tajiri, *History and Memory of Takiko and Takashige* (1991); Jessica Yu, *Breathing Lessons: The Life and Work of Mark O'Brien* (1996); Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (1999), about Korean victims of WWII Japanese aggression, enslaved as prostitutes for Japanese soldiers; Loni Ding, *The Color of Honor* (1987), on the experiences of Japanese-American soldiers in WWII; and Stephen Okazaki, *Black Tar Heroin: The Dark End of the Street* (1999) and the Academy Award-winning *Days of Waiting* (1990). Spencer Nakasako has worked in the Southeast-Asian community in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco for several years, training at-risk refugee teenagers in video production. He produced and codirected a.k.a. *Don Bonnis* (1994), a portrait of a Cambodian family devastated by the pressures of life in their adopted country.

Canadian Abenaki Indian Alanis Obomsawin has had a long career as singer, writer, and storyteller, promoting the history and culture of her people. In 1967,



Jessica Yu with cinematographer Russ Harper on the set of *Realms of the Unreal*, about outsider artist Henry Darger (U.S., 2005, Jessica Yu). International Documentary Association

after being seen in a television profile, Alanis (1965), she was invited by the National Film Board to act as a consultant and has since divided her time between filmmaking and performing. In 1971 Obomsawin directed her first film, *Christmas at Moose Factory*, a study of life in a small northern settlement based on children's drawings. Between 1977 and 1994 she made ten films illustrating different aspects of Aboriginal life. Committed to the cause of justice for her people, Obomsawin documented two major confrontations: *Incident at Restigouche* (1984), and *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, her best-known work.

In the United States—unlike Canada, where Indians use the term *Aboriginal*—the preferred term for American Indians is *Native*. The Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium was begun in 1974 by a group of six producers, with twenty-six public television stations. Its mission is to support and promote Native-American culture through various media productions. Although it has been involved in numerous documentary works, its greatest successes have been with radio and more recently Internet development. In 1977 Frank Blythe



Alanis Obomsawain. International Documentary Association

opened a national office at the Nebraska Educational Television network headquarters in Lincoln and was named executive director, a position he held for over twenty-five years.

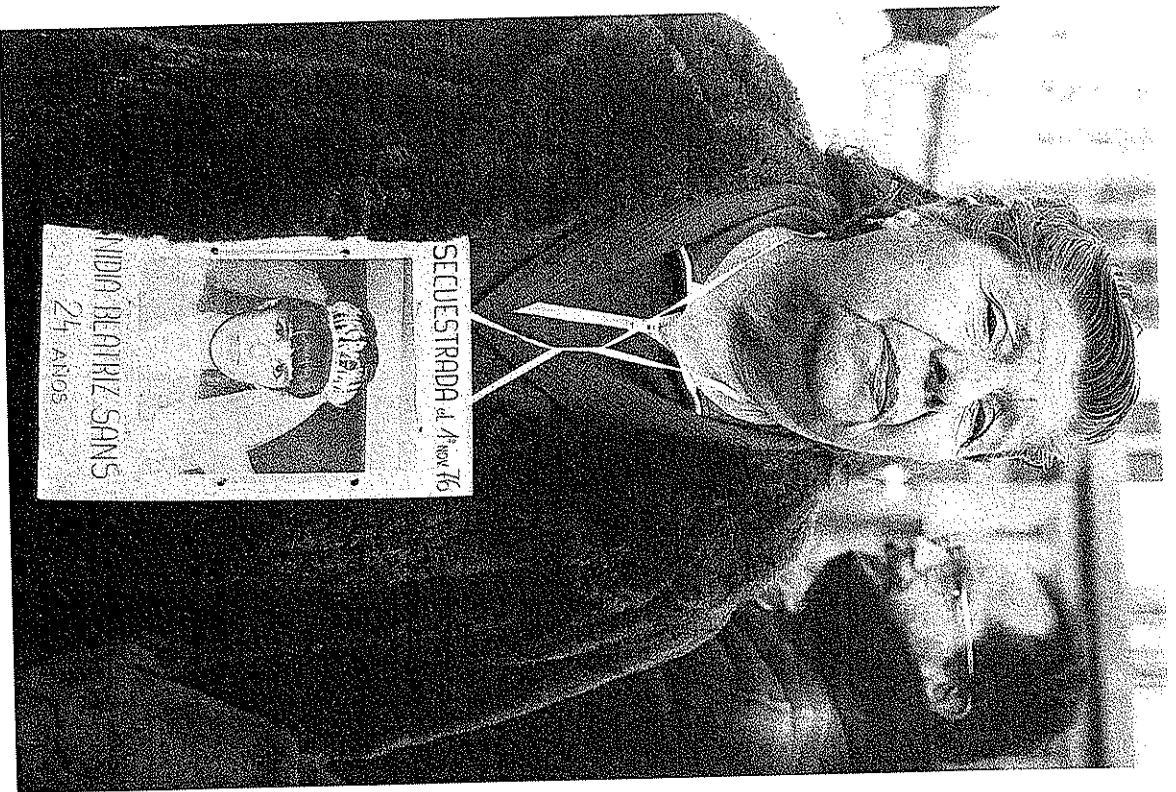
In the Latino filmmaking community, noteworthy documentarians include Lourdes Portillo, whose *Las Madres: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* (1985) was the result of a three-year collaboration with writer/director Susana Muñoz and was nominated for an Academy Award. Portillo's next film, *La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead* (1989), is a charming look at cultural blending. *La Ofrenda* is set up to challenge the notion that, as Portillo puts it, "documentary is always associated with injustice." In it she celebrates the traditions of a colorful Mexican and Chicano holiday, the November first celebration of *el día de los muertos*. The film relies on a poetic structure that Portillo has used in other work. *Señorita Extraviada, Missing Young Woman* (2001) tells the haunting story of the more than two hundred kidnapped, raped, and murdered young women near the *maquiladoras* of Juárez, Mexico. Like others of the PBS Minority Consortium Groups, there is an organization of Latino Public Broadcasting, although much of its efforts have been focused on fiction works.

Representing Gay and Lesbian Culture

As an outgrowth of the social changes and the video technology of the 1970s, various previously disenfranchised groups began to make more documentaries speaking directly to their own concerns. Homosexuals were one large group who found in documentary a powerful way to express a distinctive culture. Many of the advances in gay, later labeled queer, cinema were made in the documentary.

Word Is Out: Some Stories of Our Lives (1977), an early landmark, was produced collectively by the San Francisco-based Mariposa Film Group: Peter Adair, Nancy Adair, Andrew Brown, Veronica Selver, Lucy Phenix, and Rob Epstein. Following videotaped interviews with two hundred gay and lesbian people from across the United States, they focused on a selected group of these individuals. After more than a year of editing, they cut 50 hours of material to a final 135-minute version. *Word Is Out* is divided into three major sections—"The Early Years," "Growing Up," and "From Now On"—although the interviews weave in and out among these with little formal structure. What emerges is a somewhat random, but often moving, collage portrait of the personal stories of gays and lesbians in mid-1970s America.

Before Stonewall (1984), Robert Rosenberg, John Scagliotti, and Greta Schiller (narrated by Rita Mae Brown), chronicles the evolution of gay culture in the United States from the early 1920s to violence in 1969. In that year patrons of the Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village decided to fight back against ongoing harassment, transforming a police raid into three nights of rioting that signaled the public nature of the new gay liberation movement. Using archival footage and photography from five decades, the film explores the gay under-



Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (U.S., 1985, Lourdes Portillo and Susana Muñoz). Direct Cinema, 2005, all rights reserved

COLLEAGUES -
I hope this screening interests you. would you pass it
around & post it if
you can? many thanks
AMANDA POPE
PETER ADRIK

ADAIR FILMS

Dear Friends,

WE WOULD LIKE TO INVITE YOU to attend an investors' screening of our documentary on gay women and men to be held on Saturday, June 4 at 10:30 A.M. at the Vanguard Theater, 9014 Melrose Avenue in Hollywood.

THE FILM is a series of portraits of twenty-two lesbians and gay men, edited from forty hours of color footage shot across the country during the past eighteen months. It is an exploration of the histories and variety of lifestyles of an emerging, but still mostly invisible, minority—ten to twenty million people in this country (according to Kinsey).

OUR PURPOSE is to begin to counter the pervasive negative images of "dykes" and "faggots" by presenting a series of intimate portraits of gay people—with all the joys and sorrows common to everyone. The film will help homosexuals, who themselves have accepted the negative mythology, begin to feel better about who they are and who they can be. It will also promote in the country as a whole a destigmatizing air of acceptance of homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle.

OUR AUDIENCE will number in the millions. Following in the tracks of other recent theatrical documentaries (Harlan County, Jumping the Shrub, The Sorrow and the Pity, People of the Wind, etc.), our movie will open first in theaters in large cities this fall, then will be televised nationally this winter (it has already been sold for four network broadcasts which guarantees it a minimum exposure of four million), and then will be available for rental to colleges, graduate schools, feminist and gay groups, professional societies, etc.

FINISHING MONEY is needed in the form of investments. The film has been produced as a profit-making venture. There are no general films available about homosexuals, and there is now a tremendous and growing need for such material. Copies are very expensive to make. Our budget is \$200,000—shoestring by industry standards for a film of this scope. We have already raised \$92,000 from investors and \$50,000 from the television sale. We need \$50,000 more to finish. We're in the final stretch.

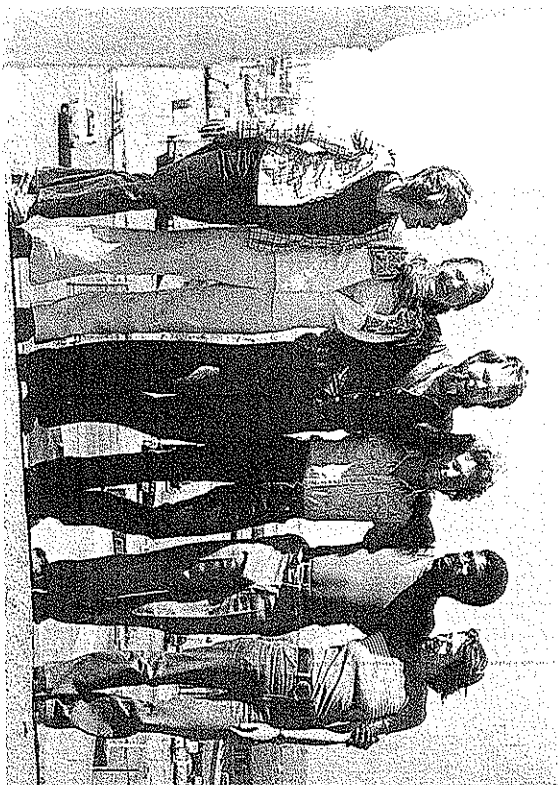
PLEASE COME to this hour-long screening of excerpts from our film, whether you can consider investing or not. If you are gay or not, judging from past audience reaction, you will be affected by the experience.

FEEL FREE TO BRING INTERESTED FRIENDS.

Yours,

2051 THIRD ST., SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107 (415) 621-6500

A fundraising letter for the film *Word Is Out*. (U.S., 1977, Mariposa Film Group). Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences



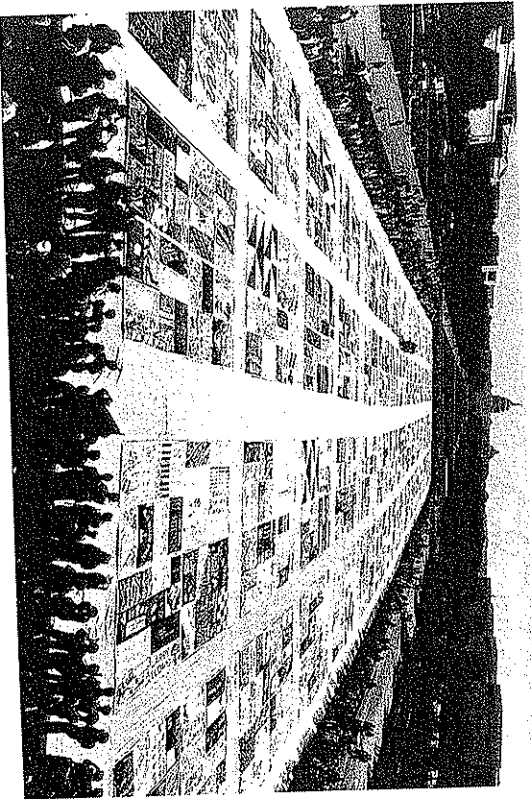
The Mariposa Group of filmmakers who made *Word Is Out*, left to right: Lucy Phenix, Nancy Adair, Peter Adair, Rob Epstein, Andrew Brown, and Veronica Selver.

ground of the twenties and thirties, the rise of gays in the military and workforce during WWII, and their persecution in the U.S. State Department as "subversives" and "sexual perverts" by Senator McCarthy in the 1950s. *After Stonewall* (1999), directed by Scagliotti and narrated by Melissa Etheridge, explores gay and lesbian history from the 1970s through the 1990s. Like its predecessor, it covers a lot of ground in a short time but, since it deals with only three decades, it is more concise.

Other important films of the era dealing in different ways with gay life include Academy Award-winning *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), by Rob Epstein and Richard Schmiechen. In 1978 Harvey Milk was elected to the San Francisco city council, becoming the first openly gay person elected to public office in California. One year later he and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone were shot and killed by another council member, former police officer and fireman Dan White. *The Times of Harvey Milk* recreates the story of Milk's grass-roots political organizing and election, through the murders and their repercussions. From the eloquent candlelight memorial joined by tens of thousands of San Franciscans on the evening of the assassinations, to the angry mobs who stormed City Hall, breaking windows and torching police cars in the aftermath of White's lenient sentencing, the film is a revealing analysis of democracy in America. As photographer Andrew Epstein said, "Richard and Robert's vision was, of course,



The Times of Harvey Milk (U.S., 1984, Rob Epstein and Richard Schmiechen).



The AIDS quilt on display in Washington, D.C. in *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (U.S., 1989, Bill Couturie, Rob Epstein, and Jeffrey Friedman). Photo by Marc Geller/HBO, 2005 Direct Cinema

the bigger picture, the whole story in political terms. They reclaimed a queer political history that could have easily been forgotten. They recorded and bore witness. It was our assassination, our Kennedy, our King, our Malcolm X, our bullet."

Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt (1989), by Bill Couturie, Rob Epstein, and Jeffrey Friedman, made for HBO, is one of the most hauntingly beautiful, and accessible to the public, of many films concerning the AIDS crisis. Narrated by Dustin Hoffman, with a score sung by Bobby McFerrin, the film tells the story of the growth of the AIDS epidemic from its mysterious beginnings to the peak of the epidemic in the United States.

Silver Lake Life: The View from Here (1990) is a diary video in which the filmmaker is the subject, at least until he becomes too weak from AIDS to continue shooting. At that point his partner takes up the camera and the work becomes a sometimes harrowing, sometimes tender journey toward death in a most personal, personal essay. In Canada a series that became known as *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* aired on the CBC evening news beginning in 1990, made by Dr. Peter Jenson-Young, who had been diagnosed with AIDS in 1986. Each piece chronicled another aspect of his fight for a fulfilling life in the face of the disease. He continued doing segments up until his death in 1992, despite going blind, being disfigured by the cancer Kaposi's sarcoma, and losing his



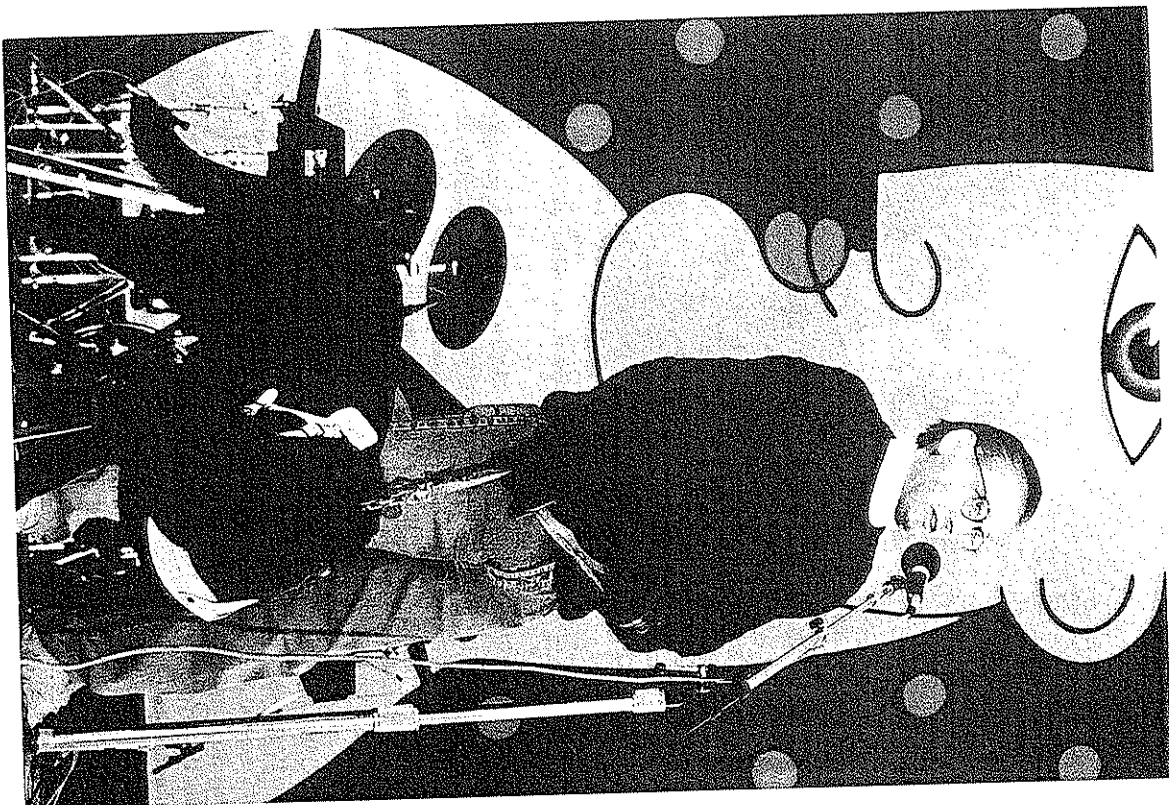
Silver Lake Life: The View From Here (U.S., 1990, Peter Friedman)

strength from medical treatments. The 111 segments were compiled into a unique forty-five-minute documentary that was broadcast by HBO, creating an emotional and inspiring portrait of the epidemic.

Paris Is Burning (1990, Jennie Livingston) delves colorfully into America's subculture of the urban drag queen. It's a parallel world of bizarre beauty, where "houses" compete for turf and reputation, but instead of street fighting, they vamp down makeshift catwalks in competitive "balls."

Of the gay filmmakers, Barbara Hammer is probably the most prolific. Since the 1970s she has made over eighty films and videos and is considered a pioneer of lesbian-feminist experimental cinema. Her work can be directly related to the experimental art documentaries of the 1920s. One early piece, *Dyketactics* (1974), was the first film about lesbian lovemaking to be made by a lesbian. Her trilogy of documentary essays on lesbian and gay history—*Nitrate Kisses* (1992), *Tender Fictions* (1995), and *History Lessons* (2000)—has been widely acclaimed. Hammer uses an evocative visual and aural style in which, although imagery may not always be instantly readable in a literal sense, its emotional and often sexual power is clearly recognizable. Her films are also laced with a sophisticated humor and sometimes graphic eroticism.

Hammer's uncompromising work is far from mainstream, like that of African-American filmmaker Marlon Riggs, who pushed the boundaries of conven-



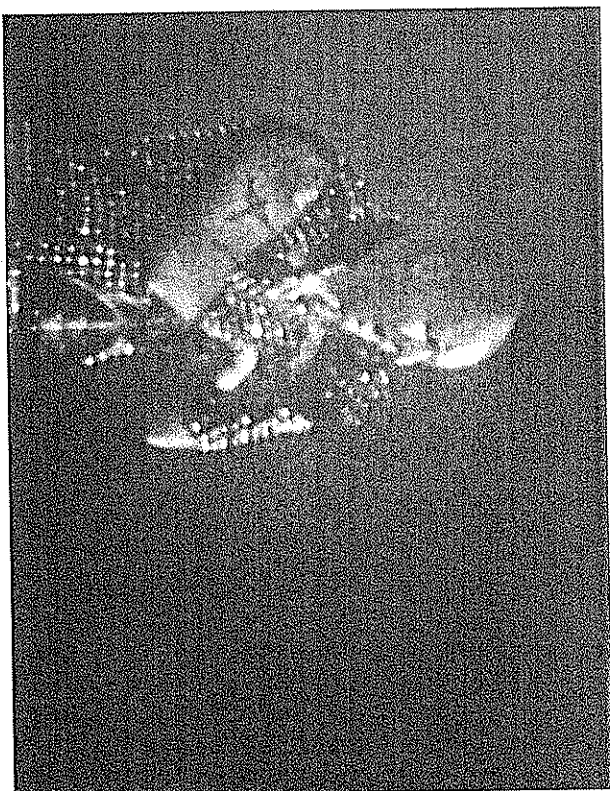
Dr. Peter Jenson reports on his own deterioration from AIDS in *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* (1994, Canada, David Paperny). DCL © 2005, all rights reserved

tional network television. Before his death from AIDS in 1994, Riggs became one of the more controversial figures in recent documentary history. In his second film, *Tongues United* (1988), Riggs profiled urban African-American gay men with frank portraits of gay subcultures, complete with explicit language and sexual imagery. The film was partly financed by a \$5,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). When it was about to be broadcast nationally on PBS, descriptions of the film's subject matter touched off a heated debate about government funding of art that some labeled obscene. While artists argued for free speech, government policy makers, especially the politically conservative, engaged in a public discussion about the use of taxpayer money for the funding of such work. Adding to the controversy was the fact that the public television *P.O.V.* (*Point of View*) series, which presented the film, also receives general production funding from the Endowment. Leaders of conservative organizations, many of whom had not seen the film, labeled *Tongues United* obscene. When a few public stations decided not to air the program, this self-censorship added to the debate. Although most PBS stations did broadcast the film, controversy surrounding *Tongues United* played a key role in the future NEA decision to stop funding individual artists, including individual filmmakers.

Music and Performance

From 1961, when the National Film Board of Canada produced *Lonely Boy*, discussed in chapter 11, through Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky's 2004 psychological exposé of heavy metal stars Metallica in *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*, rock and roll and pop music have fascinated documentary makers, and musicians have loved to be filmed. Notable music documentaries are not fiction films that use rock and roll, or straight-ahead filmed concerts, nor are they simply records of performances. These are fully realized creative efforts. Filmmakers such as D. A. Pennebaker (*Don't Look Back*, Bob Dylan, 1967), Martin Scorsese (*The Last Waltz*, The Band, 1979), Taylor Hackford (*Hail, Hail, Rock and Roll*, Chuck Berry, 1987), Penelope Spheeris (*The Decline of Western Civilization*, the punk movement, 1981), Jonathan Demme (*Stop Making Sense*, Talking Heads, 1985), Michael Apted (*Bring on the Night*, Sting, 1985), Wim Wenders (*Buena Vista Social Club*, 1999), and Jason Priestly (*Barenaked in America*, Barenaked Ladies, 2000) are only some of the well-known names who have made notable music films.

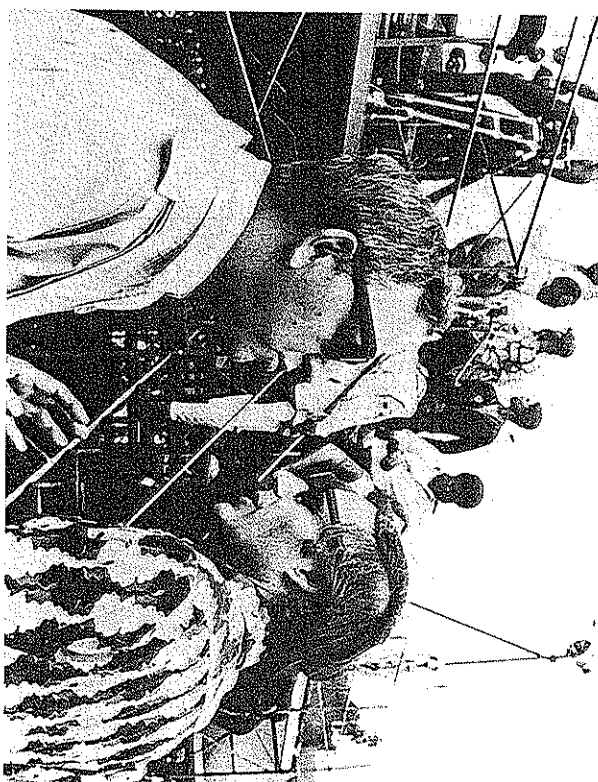
For many years the most financially successful theatrically released documentary—rock music or otherwise—was Warner Brothers' *Woodstock* (1970) by Michael Wadleigh. The film devotes almost as much screen time to the audience encamped on Yasgur's farmland in upstate New York as it does to its now legendary musical performances. *Woodstock* thus is an informal sociological study of hippie culture. Its many split-screen images, its (for the time) thundering sound track, and the lure of its carefree approach to "Peace, Love, and Music," as well



Rob Halford, lead singer of Judas Priest in *Dream Deceivers: The Story Behind James Vance vs. Judas Priest* (U.S., 1992. David Van Taylor). Did subliminal messages in heavy metal music cause two teenagers to fulfill a suicide pact, or was it the hopelessness of a dysfunctional America?

as sex and drugs, made it a landmark and inspiration for millions of young people. The iconography of *Woodstock* remains powerful. New versions of the concert have been staged and new documentaries made about those events, notably Barbara Kopple's *My Generation*, which began as a documentary of Woodstock '94. As she finished editing her Woodstock '94 footage, Woodstock '99 occurred. "I took a deep breath and went and did '99 with a really small crew—one 16mm camera and two DV cameras," she has said. The result was a cross-generational look at all the factions that participated in the various Woodstocks. Wadleigh's original, which continues to generate income in revamped re-release and home video and DVD sales, remains as a seminal event in the history of American culture.

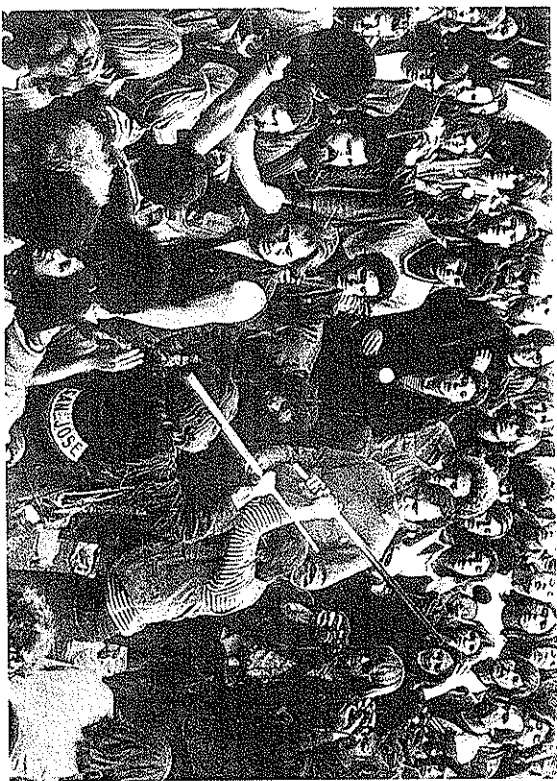
Watstax (1973) is a bold documentary directed by Mel Stuart, produced by David Wolper for Warner Brothers. This film of a concert staged in the summer of 1972 that drew over 100,000 people to the Los Angeles Coliseum featured performances by Stax Records soul stars such as Isaac Hayes, Albert King, and the Staples Singers, as well as an appearance by Jesse Jackson. For the African-American community it gained the stature of a black Woodstock. Intercut with



Producer David Wolper and director Mel Stuart on the set of *Watstax* (U.S., 1973. Mel Stuart).

the musical numbers are two contrapuntal threads: one of a group of black men discussing life questions in a local bar, another of raw standup comic newcomer Richard Pryor. *Watstax* is an unusually frank and hip look at the mores and the problems of urban black Americans in the mid-1970s. Stuart, who is white, achieved this insider's perspective by using a crew made up of as many black filmmakers as he could find (an almost unheard of situation for a studio-backed film) and the result is a real-deal celebration of giant afros and swinging dashikis. Stuart's career as a Hollywood-based filmmaker from the Wolper school encompasses decades of durable fiction and documentary works, including the telling portrait *Man Ray: Prophet of the Avant-Garde* made for PBS's *American Masters* series in 1999.

One of the most prolific music documentarians is the iconoclastic Robert Mudge. His film subjects range from the blues to Hawaiian music to entertaining the troops. A graduate of Temple University's film school, his first film was a profile of an avant-garde composer: *George Crumb: Voice of the Whale* (1976). This was followed by his only non-music work, *Amateur Night at City Hall* (1978), about the late mayor of Philadelphia, Frank L. Rizzo. In 1980 Mudge released *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*, about Sun Ra and his "Arkestra"; followed by *Black Wax* (1982), a portrait of poet-singer-songwriter Gil Scott-Heron; *Cool*



A murder caught by the cameras in *Gimme Shelter* (U.S., 1970, Albert and David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin). Maysles Films

Runnings: The Reggae Movie (1983); *The Gospel According to Al Green* (1984); and over a dozen more music profiles continuing through *Blues Breaks* (2003), in which thirteen 60-second mini-movies feature little-known Mississippi blues artists. Mugge's documentaries are in some ways like those of Les Blank (see chapter 17). For both filmmakers, the soul of the subject is the most important element, and Mugge, like Blank, has created an extraordinary record of a part of America often overlooked by the mainstream.

The flip side to *Woodstock*'s sunny view of the world (even during a downpour) is Albert and David Maysles's, with Charlotte Zwerin, *Gimme Shelter* (1970). Ostensibly the study of a free concert by the Rolling Stones at Altamont Speedway in northern California, *Gimme Shelter* invokes the darkest moments of rock and roll as an enormous crowd surges out of control in response to Mick Jagger's "Sympathy for the Devil" persona. At Altamont two people died in a hit-and-run auto accident, another drowned, and, captured on film, is the knife murder of an eighteen-year-old black spectator by the Hell's Angels, who were hired to provide concert security. Later in the film we see the filmmakers screening, rewinding, and focusing in on this bit of footage as Jagger watches it on a flatbed editing machine. We, the film viewers, watch as the performer watches his performance and the filmmaker watches his own work, while an unknown someone is killed in front of us all. The murder becomes part not only of the

filmed record but also of a work of art. In this it presages many controversies about capturing brutality and death on film and so-called reality television.

Michael Sragow, writing in 1990 for the magazine of the International Cinematographer's Guild (ICG), made the point that "Pauline Kael and Vincent Canby led the [critical] charge against *Gimme Shelter* as an opportunistic snuff film, essentially saying that the filmmakers were complicit in the murder by having photographed it and subsequently profited from its theatrical release." Their main criticism was that the concert was staged specifically to be filmed—and irresponsibly so. While conceding that the filmmakers had caught Jagger's "feral intensity" with acute "editing of the images to the music," Sragow quotes Kael writing that "the filmed death at Altamont" was part of a "cinéma vérité spectacular." She condemned the movie with rhetorical questions: "If events are created to be photographed, is the movie that records them a documentary, or does it function in a twilight zone? Is it the cinema of fact when the facts are manufactured for the cinema?"

Films of the Period

1980

The Day After Trinity (U.S., Jon Elise)
From Mao to Mozart: Isaac Stern in China (U.S., Murray Lerner)
Garlic Is as Good as Ten Mothers (U.S., Les Blank)

1981

Not a Love Story (Canada, Bonnie Sherr Klein)

1982

Atomic Café (U.S., Jane Loader, Kevin Rafferty, and Pierce Rafferty)
The Brooklyn Bridge (U.S., Ken Burns)
Burden of Dreams (U.S., Les Blank)
If You Love This Planet (Canada, Terre Nash)

1983

"The Profession of Arms," *War* (Canada, Gwynne Dyer, Michael Bryans, and Tina Vioen).

1984

The Times of Harvey Milk (U.S., Rob Epstein and Richard Schmiechen)

1985

Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (U.S., Susana Muñoz and Lourdes Portillo)
28 Up (U.K., Michael Apted)

1986

- Handsworth Songs* (U.K., John Akomfah)
Sherman's March (U.S., Ross McElwee)
The World of Tomorrow (U.S., Lance Bird and Tom Johnson)

1987

- Eyes on the Prize* (U.S., Henry Hampton)
To a Safer Place (Canada, Beverly Shaffer)

1988

- Lightning Over Braddock: A Rustbowl Fantasy* (U.S., Tony Buba)
The Thin Blue Line (U.S., Errol Morris)
Tongues United (U.S., Marlon Riggs)
Who Killed Vincent Chin? (U.S., Rene Tajima and Christine Choy)

1989

- Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (U.S., Bill Coururé, Rob Epstein, and Jeffrey Friedman)
Roger & Me (U.S., Michael Moore)

Books on the Period

- Bullert, B. J., *Public Television: Politics and the Battle over Documentary*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997.
 Critchdon, Roger with Cherry Potter, *Confronting Reality: Some Perspectives on Documentary*. Beaconsfield, England: CILECT Review Clarendon Printers, 1985.
 Goldsmith, David A., *The Documentary Makers: Interviews with 15 of the Best in the Business*. Switzerland: RotoVision, 2003.
 Homlund, Chris and Cynthia Fuchs, eds. *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, and Gay Documentary*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
 Klotman, Phyllis R. and Janet K. Cutler, eds., *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
 Ledbetter, James, *Made Possible By: The Death of Public Broadcasting in the United States*. London: Verso, 1997.
 Rabiger, Michael, *Directing the Documentary*. London: Focal Press, 1992.
 Rosenthal, Alan, *The New Challenges for Documentary*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
 Stubbs, Liz, *Documentary Filmmakers Speak*. New York: Allworth Press, 2000.
 Waldman, Diane and Janet Walker, eds., *Feminism and Documentary*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
 Zimmerman, Patricia R., *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.