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# Introduction to Documentary

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## Chapter 1

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### Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?

#### TWO TYPES OF FILM

Every film is a documentary. Even the most whimsical of fictions gives evidence of the culture that produced it and reproduces the likenesses of the people who perform within it. In fact, we could say that there are two kinds of film: (1) documentaries of wish-fulfillment and (2) documentaries of social representation. Each type tells a story, but the stories, or narratives, are of different sorts.

Documentaries of wish-fulfillment are what we would normally call fictions. These films give tangible expression to our wishes and dreams, our nightmares and dreads. They make the stuff of the imagination concrete—visible and audible. They give a sense of what we wish, or fear, reality itself might be or become. Such films convey truths if we decide they do. They are films whose truths, insights, and perspectives we may adopt as our own or reject. They offer worlds for us to explore and contemplate, or we may simply revel in the pleasure of moving from the world around us to these other worlds of infinite possibility.

Documentaries of social representation are what we typically call non-fiction. These films give tangible representation to aspects of the world we already inhabit and share. They make the stuff of social reality visible and

audible in a distinctive way, according to the acts of selection and arrangement carried out by a filmmaker. They give a sense of what we understand reality itself to have been, of what it is now, or of what it may become. These films also convey truths if we decide they do. We must assess their claims and assertions, their perspectives and arguments in relation to the world as we know it and decide whether they are worthy of our belief. Documentaries of social representation offer us new views of our common world to explore and understand.

As stories, films of both type call on us to interpret them, and as “true stories,” films call on us to believe them. Interpretation is a matter of grasping how the form or organization of the film conveys meanings and values. Belief is a question of our response to these meanings and values. We can believe in the truths of fictions as well as those of non-fictions: *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) may teach us about the nature of obsession just as much as *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (Paire Lorentz, 1936) may teach us about soil conservation. Belief receives a premium in documentaries since these films often are intended to have an impact on the historical world itself and to do so must persuade or convince us that one point of view or approach is preferable to others. Fiction may be content to suspend disbelief (to accept its world as plausible), but non-fiction often wants to instill belief (to accept its world as actual). This is what aligns documentary with the rhetorical tradition, in which eloquence serves a social as well as aesthetic purpose. We take not only pleasure from documentary but direction as well.

This is the appeal and power of documentary. (We’ll call documentaries of wish-fulfillment “fictions” from now on and simply use “documentary” as shorthand for non-fiction films of social representation.) Documentaries lend us the ability to see timely issues in need of attention, literally. We see (cinematic) views of the world. These views put before us social issues and current events, recurring problems and possible solutions. The bond between documentary and the historical world is deep and profound. Documentary adds a new dimension to popular memory and social history.

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

Documentary engages with the world by representing it, and it does so in three ways. First, documentaries offer us a likeness or depiction of the world that bears a recognizable familiarity. Through the capacity of film, and

audio tape, to record situations and events with considerable fidelity, we see in documentaries people, places, and things that we might also see for ourselves, outside the cinema. This quality alone often provides a basis for belief: we see what was there before the camera; it must be true. This remarkable power of the photographic image cannot be underestimated, even though it is subject to qualification because (1) an image cannot tell everything we want to know about what happened and (2) images can be altered both during and after the fact by both conventional and digital means.

In documentaries we find stories or arguments, evocations or descriptions that let us see the world anew. The ability of the photographic image to reproduce the likeness of what is set before it compels us to believe that it is reality itself re-presented before us, while the story or argument presents a distinct way of regarding this reality. We may be familiar with the problems of corporate downsizing, global assembly lines, and plant shutdowns, but Michael Moore’s *Roger and Me* (1989) gives us a view of these issues in a fresh and distinctive way. We may know about cosmetic surgery and the debates surrounding efforts to regain lost youth by these means, but Michael Rubbo’s *Daisy: The Story of a Facelift* (1982) adds his own personal perspective to our knowledge.

Second, documentaries also stand for or represent the interests of others. Representative democracy, in contrast to participatory democracy, relies on elected individuals representing the interests of their constituency. (In a participatory democracy each individual participates actively in political decision-making rather than relying on a representative). Documentary filmmakers often take on the role of public representatives. They speak for the interests of others, both for the individuals whom they represent in the film and for the institution or agency that supports their filmmaking activity. *The Selling of the Pentagon* (1971), a CBS news production on the ways in which the American military markets itself and ensures itself a substantial slice of the federal tax dollar, presents itself as a representative of the American people, investigating the use and abuse of political power in Washington. It also represents the interests of CBS news in marketing itself as an institution independent from government pressure and committed to a well-established tradition of investigative journalism.

Similarly, *Nanook of the North* (1922), Robert Flaherty’s great story of an Inuit family’s struggle for survival in the Arctic, represents Inuit culture in ways that the Inuit were not yet prepared to do for themselves and represents the interests of Revillon Freres, Flaherty’s sponsor, at least to the extent of depicting fur hunting as a practice that benefits the Inuit as well as consumers. It also, somewhat less overtly, represents Robert Flaherty’s conception of Inuit culture. The emphasis on a nuclear family assembled

*Daisy: The Story of a Facelift* (Michael Rubbo, National Film Board of Canada, 1982)  
Michael Rubbo does not spare us the clinical details. His own voice-over commentary tries to grasp the complexity of the issues while his images detail the realities of the process.



for the sake of the film and on Nanook's own skills as a hunter, despite the fact that most Eskimos living in the 1920s no longer relied on the traditional techniques depicted, for example, belong to the cinema of wish-fulfillment: they are a fiction about the kind of peoples and cultures someone like Flaherty wished to find in the world.

Third, documentaries may represent the world in the same way a lawyer may represent a client's interests: they put the case for a particular view or interpretation of evidence before us. In this sense documentaries do not simply stand for others, representing them in ways they could not do themselves, but rather they more actively make a case or argument; they assert what the nature of a matter is to win consent or influence opinion. *The Selling of the Pentagon* represents the case that the U.S. military aggressively fuels the perception of its own indispensability and its enormous need for continued, preferably increased funding. *Nanook of the North* represents the struggle for survival in a harsh, unforgiving climate as the test of a man's

mettle and a family's resilience. Through the valor and courage of this family unit, with its familiar gender roles and untroubled relationships, we gain a sense of the dignity of an entire people. *Daisy: The Story of a Facelift* represents the case for the social construction of an individual's image in novel and disturbing ways that combine the effects of social conditioning, medical procedures, and documentary filmmaking practices.

## REPRESENTING OTHERS

Documentaries, then, offer aural and visual likenesses or representations of some part of the historical world. They stand for or represent the views of individuals, groups, and institutions. They also make representations, mount arguments, or formulate persuasive strategies of their own, setting out to persuade us to accept their views as appropriate. The degree to which one or more of these aspects of representation come into play will vary from film to film, but the idea of representation itself is central to documentary.

The concept of representation is what compels us to ask the question, "Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?" This question could also be phrased as "What Do We Do with People When We Make a Documentary?" For fiction films the answer is simple: we ask them to do what we want. "People" are treated as actors. Their social role in the filmmaking process is defined by the traditional role of the actor. Individuals enter into contractual relations to perform for the film; the director has the right, and obligation, to obtain a suitable performance. The actor is valued for the quality of performance delivered, not for fidelity to his or her own everyday behavior and personality. Both the actor and the filmmaker retain certain rights, receive certain compensation, and undertake to fulfill certain expectations. (Using non-actors begins to complicate the issue. Stories that rely on non-actors, such as many of the Italian neo-realist films or some of the New Iranian cinema, often occupy part of the fuzzy territory between fiction and non-fiction, stories of wish-fulfillment and stories of social representation.)

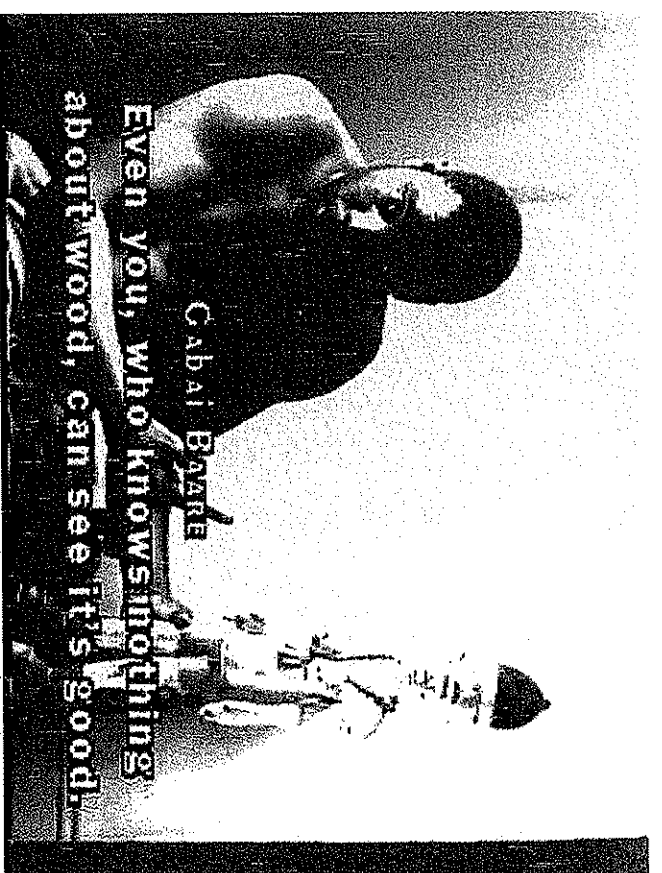
For non-fiction, or documentary, the answer is not quite so simple. "People" are treated as *social actors*: they continue to conduct their lives more or less as they would have done without the presence of a camera. They remain cultural players rather than theatrical performers. Their value to the filmmaker consists not in what a contractual relationship can promise but in what their own lives embody. Their value resides not in the ways in which they disguise or transform their everyday behavior and personality but in the ways in which their everyday behavior and personality serves the needs of the filmmaker. (One parallel between documentary characters and

traditional actors is that filmmakers often favor those individuals whose unschooled behavior before a camera allows them to convey a sense of complexity and depth similar to what we value in a trained actor's performance.)

The director's right to a performance is a "right" that, if exercised, threatens the sense of authenticity that surrounds the social actor. The degree to which people's behavior and personality change during the making of a film can introduce an element of fiction into the documentary process (the root meaning of fiction is to make or fabricate). Self-consciousness and modifications in behavior can become a form of misrepresentation, or distortion, in one sense, but they also document the ways in which the act of filmmaking alters the reality it sets out to represent. The famous twelve-hour documentary series on the Loud family televised on PBS, *An American Family* (Craig Gilbert, 1972), for example, raised considerable debate about whether the Louds' behavior and their own family relationships were altered by the act of filmmaking or were simply "captured" on film. (The parents divorced, their son declared himself gay; these acts figured heavily in the overall drama of the series.) And if these events came about because of the watchful eye of the camera and the presence of the filmmakers, were these changes encouraged, even if inadvertently, because they added to the dramatic intensity of the series?

What to do with people? Put differently, the question becomes, "What responsibility do filmmakers have for the effect of their acts on the lives of those filmed?" Most of us think of the invitation to act in a film as a desirable, even enviable, opportunity. But what if the invitation is not to act in a film but to *be* in a film, to be yourself in a film? What will others think of you; how will they judge you? What aspects of your life may stand revealed that you had not anticipated? What pressures, subtly implied or bluntly asserted, come into play to modify your conduct, and with what consequences? These questions have various answers, according to the situation, but they are of a different order from those posed by most fictions. They place a different burden of responsibility on filmmakers who set out to represent others rather than to portray characters of their own invention. These issues add a level of ethical consideration to documentary that is much less prominent in fiction filmmaking.

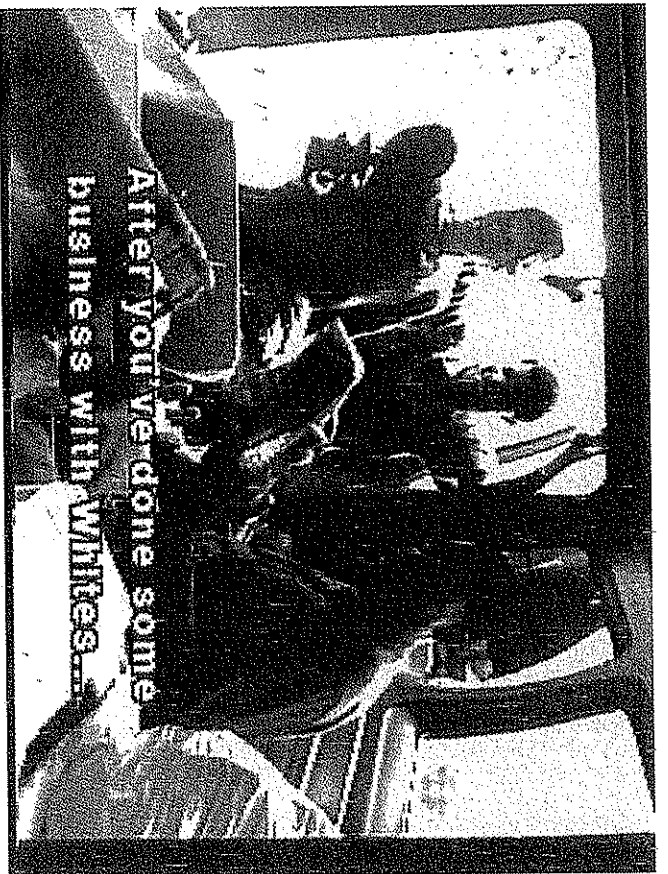
Consider Luis Buñuel's *Land without Bread* (1932). In it, Buñuel represents the lives of the citizens of the Hurdanos, a remote, impoverished region of Spain, and he does so with an outrageously judgmental, if not ethnocentric, voice-over commentary. "Here is another type of idiot," the narrator tells us at one moment as a Hurdanos man raises his head into the frame. At another moment we see a tiny mountain stream as the narrator informs us, "During the summer there is no water other than this, and the inhabitants



*In and Out of Africa* (Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, 1992). Photos courtesy of Lucien Taylor. This film adopts a radically different attitude from *Land without Bread*. A high degree of collaboration occurred between filmmakers and subject. Their interaction gives the viewer a sense of "inside" or "behind-the-scenes" knowledge rather than the impression of parody, or possibly disrespect. Middleman and merchant Gabai Barré assures the filmmakers that his piece of "wood," as he calls it, is a good sculpture. The leap in value that an object takes when it goes from "wood" to "art" is the source of Barré's livelihood and of his client's sense of aesthetic pleasure.

use it despite the disgusting filth it carries." Taken at face value, this abusive representation of people takes our breath away. How profoundly disrespectful; how contemptuous! How little regard for the hardships and difficulties of those who confront an inhospitable environment and whom the filmmaker does not choose to nominate for the myth of noble savage as Robert Flaherty did with *Nanook*.

On the surface of it, *Land without Bread* seems to be an example of the most callous form of reporting, worse even than the hounding of celebrities by paparazzi or the gross misrepresentations of others in "mondo" films such as *Mondo Cane* (Guattiero Jacopetti and Franco E. Prosperi, 1965). But Luis Buñuel's film gradually suggests a level of self-awareness and calculated effect that might prompt us to wonder if Buñuel is not quite the insensitive cad we initially thought. In one scene, for example, we are told the Hurdanos eat goat meat only when a goat accidentally dies. What we see, though, is



#### In and Out of Africa

Art gallery owner Wendy Engel assesses Gabai Barré's wares to choose items for her shop. Much of this film's emphasis is on how objects take on new meanings and values when they cross cultural boundaries. Barré plays a vital but customarily unnoticed role in this process. His willingness to let the filmmakers create meanings and values of their own from his activity led them to give Barré a credit as a co-creator of the film.

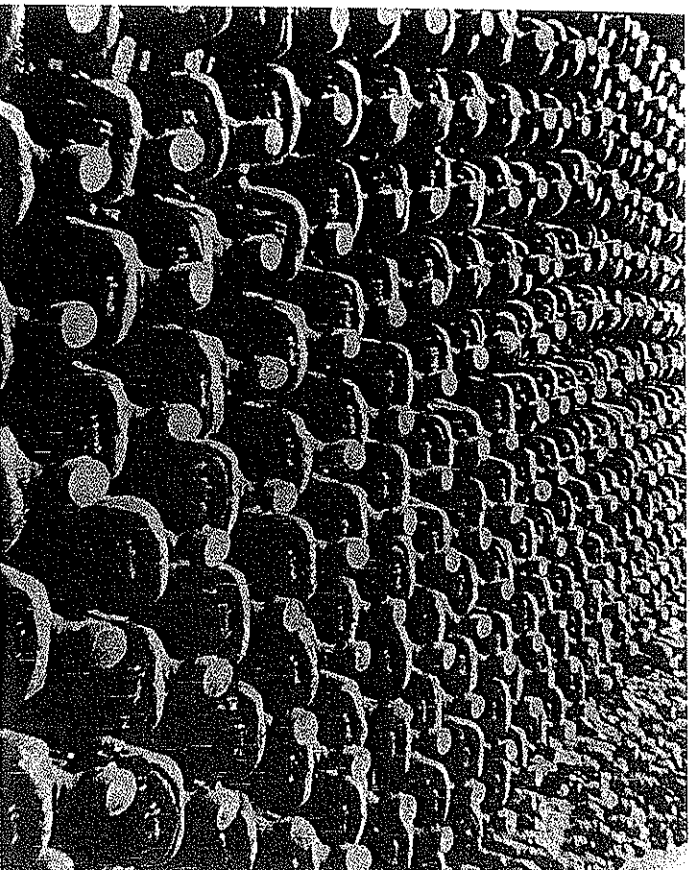
a goat that falls off a steep mountainside as a puff of gun smoke appears in the corner of the frame. The film suddenly cuts to an overhead view of the dead goat tumbling down the mountainside. If this was an accident, why was a gun fired? And how did Buñuel jump from one position, at some distance from the point where the goat falls, to another, right above the falling goat, while the goat is still in the midst of tumbling down the mountain side? Buñuel's representation of the incident seems to contain a wink: he seems to be hinting to us that this is *not* a factual representation of Hurdanos life as he found it or an unthinkingly offensive judgment of it but a *criticism* or exposé of the forms of representation common to the depiction of traditional peoples. Perhaps the film's comments and judgments are a caricature of the kind of comments found both in typical travelogues of the time and among many potential viewers of such films at the time. Perhaps Buñuel is satirizing a form of representation that uses documentary evidence to re-

inforce preexisting stereotypes. *Land without Bread*, from this perspective, might be a highly political film that calls the ethics of documentary filmmaking itself into question.

Seen from this perspective, Buñuel sounds, in 1932, an early and important cautionary note against our own tendency to believe literally what we see and hear. We risk missing the irony of a Buñuel or the manipulations of a Riefenstahl. Leni Riefenstahl constructs as flattering a portrait of the National Socialist Party and its leader, Adolf Hitler, at their 1934 Nuremberg rally in *Triumph of the Will* (1935) as Buñuel constructs an unflattering portrait of the Hurdanos in *Land without Bread*. We accept either as a "truthful" representation at our own peril. Buñuel may be among the first filmmakers to explicitly raise the issue of the ethics of documentary filmmaking, but he is hardly the last.

Ethics exist to govern the conduct of groups regarding matters for which hard and fast rules, or laws, will not suffice. Should we tell someone we film that they risk making a fool of themselves or that there will be many who will judge their conduct negatively? Should Ross McElwee have explained to the women he films, in *Sherman's March* (1985), as they interact with him during his journey through the South, that many viewers will see them as examples of coquettish, heterosexually obsessed Southern "belles"? Should Michael Moore have told the people of Flint, Michigan, he interviews in *Roger and Me* that he may make them look foolish in order to make General Motors look even worse? Should Jean Rouch have warned the Hausa tribesmen whom he films performing an elaborate possession ceremony in *Les Maitres Fous* (1955) that their actions may seem bizarre if not barbaric to those not familiar with their customs and practices, despite the interpretative spin his voice-over commentary provides? Should Tanya Balantyne have warned the husband of the down-and-out family she portrays in *The Things I Cannot Change* (1966) that her record of his behavior could serve as legal evidence against him (when he gets into a street fight, for example)?

These questions all point to the unforeseen effects a documentary film can have on those represented in it. Ethical considerations attempt to minimize harmful effects. Ethics becomes a measure of the ways in which negotiations about the nature of the relationship between filmmaker and subject have consequences for subjects and viewers alike. Filmmakers who set out to represent people whom they do not initially know but who typify or have special knowledge of a problem or issue of interest run the risk of exploiting them. Filmmakers who choose to observe others but not to intervene overtly in their affairs run the risk of altering behavior and events and of having their own human responsiveness called into question. Film-



*Triumph of the Will* (Lent Rietschall, 1935)

In contrast to *The City* (see Chapter 2), *Triumph of the Will* celebrates the power of the assembled, choreographed masses. The coordinated movement of the troops and the cadence of the sound track's music make it clear that these city dwellers experience not alienation but ecstasy.

makers who chose to work with people already familiar to them face the challenge of representing common ground responsibly, even if it means sacrificing their own voice or point of view for that of others. Carolyn Strachan and Alessandro Cavadini consciously adopt precisely such a collaborative, self-effacing position in *Two Laws* (1981) as they go about making decisions about everything from subject matter to camera lenses through dialogue with the Aboriginal people whose case to regain title to their ancestral land provides the core of their film.

A common litmus test for many of these ethical issues is the principle of "informed consent." This principle, relied on heavily in anthropology, sociology, medical experimentation, and elsewhere, states that participants in a study should be told of the possible consequences of their participation. To invite someone to join in a medical experiment involving a new drug without telling them that the drug has potentially dangerous side-effects, may not prove an effective treatment, and may or may not be, in fact, a

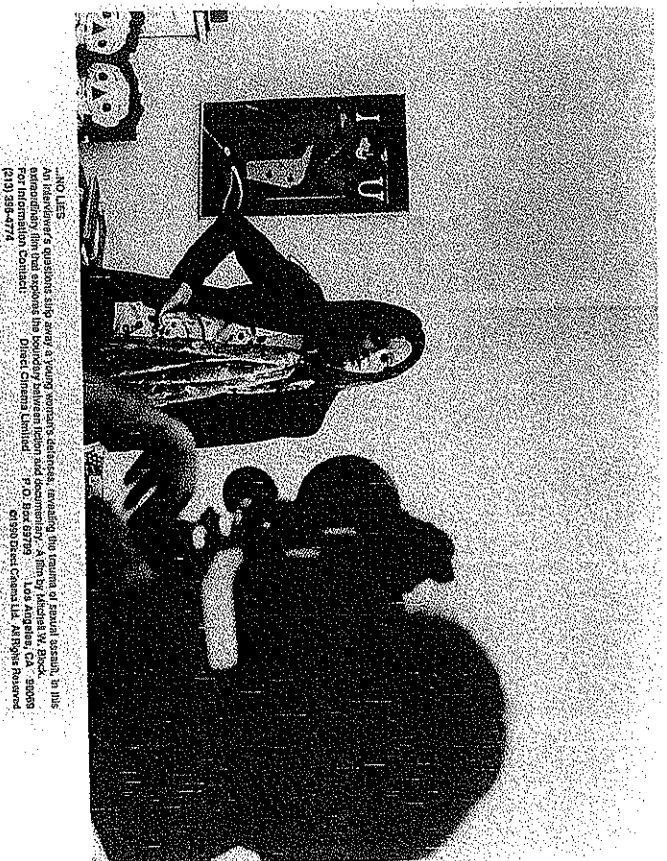
placebo breaches medical ethics. The individual may consent to participate, because they cannot afford the standard drug treatment, for example, but they cannot consent on an informed basis without a conscientious explanation of the design and risks of the experiment itself.

To invite someone to participate in a film about their family, unemployment, the possibilities of romance in the nuclear age (as Ross McElwee describes his goal in *Sherman's March*), or to follow someone through the process of obtaining a facelift as Michael Rubbo does with *Daisy*, poses a less clear-cut issue. Of what consequences or risks should filmmakers inform their subjects? To what extent can the filmmaker honestly reveal his or her intentions or foretell the actual effects of a film?

What is a deceptive practice? Is it acceptable to feign interest in a company's achievements to gain evidence of its unsafe labor practices? Is it appropriate to film illegal acts (using cocaine or stealing cars, say) to make a documentary about a successful but severely stressed businessman or an urban gang? What obligation do documentarians have to their subjects relative to their audience or their conception of the truth? Is it all right to make Miss Michigan look foolish by asking for her opinion about local economic conditions in order to mock the irrelevance of beauty pageants to the damage caused by automotive plant shutdowns in Flint, as Michael Moore does in one scene from *Roger and Me*?

One concrete example of such issues involves a scene from *Hoop Dreams* (1994) in which the filmmakers go with Arthur Agee to a local playground. Arthur is one of the two young men whose hopes of making it to the NBA (National Basketball Association) forms the basis of the film. But as Arthur practices his game in the foreground, the camera records his father engaged in a drug deal in the background. Should the filmmakers have included this scene in the final film? Did it compromise Mr. Agee or risk providing legal evidence against him? To answer these questions, the filmmakers consulted their lawyers, who judged the degree of detail in the image was insufficient to serve as evidence in court, and they discussed the matter with the Agee family itself. They were prepared to remove the scene if anyone in the family wanted it removed. In fact, the family, including Mr. Agee, felt it should stay in. Mr. Agee was subsequently arrested on a drug charge, an event that transformed him, on his release, into a far more responsible father. He felt that the scene would help dramatize his own growth as a parent over the course of time.

Given that most filmmakers act as representatives of those they film or of the institution sponsoring them rather than as community members, tensions often arise between the filmmaker's desire to make a compelling film and the individual's desire to have their social rights and personal dignity



### *No Lies* (Mitchell Block, 1973)

The "production crew" in action. In *No Lies* a single person shoots the film we see. In this case we may end up wondering if we have been deceived when we learn that the cameraman is not the actual filmmaker. On the other hand, we may decide that Mitchell Block has made a wise decision to employ actors to play the role of a filmmaker and his subject, given the highly intrusive nature of the filmmaker's questioning.

respected. Mitchell Block's film, *No Lies* (1973), makes this point exceptionally clear. The film takes place entirely inside the apartment of a young woman whom the filmmaker visits with his handheld camera. He nonchalantly chats with her as he films, seemingly to practice his shooting skills, until a casual question reveals a traumatic event: the young woman was recently raped. What should the filmmaker do? Stop shooting and console her as a friend? Continue shooting and make a film that might aid our understanding of this form of criminal behavior? The filmmaker opts to continue shooting. His questions become increasingly probing and personal. He expresses doubt whether the rape happened at all, causing the woman considerable distress. Finally, as the short film comes to a close, he seems to realize he has pushed too hard and agrees to stop filming.

What do we make of the young man's conduct? Block's film would seem grotesquely callous if Mitchell were himself the filmmaker and the events

we see entirely authentic. But *No Lies* functions something like *Land without Bread*: it works to call into question the values it initially seems to accept. Block practices a calculated deception in order to make this point: we learn in the final credits that the two social actors are, in fact, trained actors and that their interaction was not spontaneous but scripted. *No Lies* functions like a meta-commentary on the very act of filmmaking itself by suggesting that we as an audience are put in a position similar to the young woman's. We are also subject to the manipulations and maneuvers of the filmmaker, and we, too, can be left unsettled and distressed by them. We are unsettled not only by the on-screen filmmaker's aggressive interrogation of the woman but also by the off-screen filmmaker's (Block's) deliberate misrepresentation of the film's status as a fiction with contractual bonds to its actors. The film becomes, in a sense, a second rape, a new form of abuse, and, more importantly, it becomes a comment on this very form of abuse and the risk of turning people into victims so that we can learn about their suffering and misery.

Ethical issues often arise in relation to the question of "In Documentary, How Should We Treat the People We Film?" because of the degree to which the filmmaker is set apart from those he or she films. Filmmakers, especially journalistic filmmakers, belong to organizations and institutions with their own standards and practices. Even independent filmmakers usually see themselves as professional artists, pursuing a career more than dedicating themselves to representing the interests of a particular group or constituency. Conflict is inevitable under these conditions. Developing a sense of ethical regard becomes a vital part of the documentary filmmaker's professionalism.

## FILMMAKERS, PEOPLE, AUDIENCES

"How Should We Treat the People We Film?" is a question that also reminds us of the various ways in which filmmakers can choose to represent others. Very different forms of alliance can take shape between the three-fold interaction among (1) filmmaker, (2) subjects or social actors, and (3) audience or viewers. One convenient way to think about this interaction involves a verbal formulation of the three-way relationship. The most classic formulation is

*I speak about them to you.*

1. The filmmaker takes on a personal persona, either directly or through a surrogate. A typical surrogate is the Voice of God commentator, whom we hear speaking in a voice-over but do not see. This anonymous but surro-

gate voice arose in the 1930s as a convenient way to describe a situation or problem, present an argument, propose a solution, and sometimes to evoke a poetic tone or mood. Films like *Night Mail* (1936) and *Song of Ceylon* (1934) rendered the British postal service and Ceylonese culture, respectively, in a poetic tone that made the transmission of information secondary to the construction of a deferential, somewhat romanticized mood. The Voice of God, and a corresponding voice of authority—someone we see as well as hear who speaks on behalf of the film, such as Roger Mudd in *The Selling of the Pentagon* or Michael Rubbo in *Daisy: The Story of a Facelift*—remains a prevalent feature of documentary film (as well as of television news programming).

Another possibility is for the filmmaker him- or herself to speak, either on camera, as in *Sherman's March* and *Roger and Me*, or off-camera, heard but not seen, as in *The Thin Blue Line* (1987), Errol Morris's film about a man wrongfully convicted of murder, and *Reassemblage* (1982), Trinh T. Minh-ha's film about the problems and conventions of ethnographic film. In these cases the filmmaker becomes a persona or character within their own film as well as the maker of the film. Their character may be thinly developed, as in the case of *Reassemblage*, where we learn very little about Trinh herself, or quite richly developed, as in the case of *Roger and Me*, where filmmaker Michael Moore portrays a socially conscious nebbish who will do whatever is necessary to get to the bottom of pressing social concerns, a persona also evident in later work: *TV Nation* (1994), *Pets or Meat* (1992), *The Big One* (1997), and *Bowling for Columbine* (2002).

Speaking in the first person edges the documentary form toward the diary, essay, and aspects of avant-garde or experimental film and video. The emphasis may shift from convincing the audience of a particular point of view or approach to a problem to the representation of a personal, clearly subjective view of things. From persuasion the emphasis shifts to expression. What gets expressed is the filmmaker's own personal perspective and unique view of things. What makes it a documentary is that this expressiveness remains coupled to representations about the social, historical world that are addressed to viewers. Much of the "new journalism" (Hunter Thompson's *Slouching toward Las Vegas*, for example) and documentary filmmaking that was influenced by it, such as Michael Rubbo's, stressed just this combination of an idiosyncratic or personal voice coupled to reporting on a topical issue.

*Speak about.* The filmmaker represents others. The sense of speaking about a topic or issue, a people or individual lends an air of civic importance to the effort. Speaking about something may involve telling a story,

creating a poetic mood, or constructing a narrative, such as the story of how the mail gets to its destination or how Nanook manages to find food for his family, but it also implies a content-oriented desire to convey information, rely on facts, and make points about the world we share. Compared to "What story shall I tell?" the question "What shall I speak about?" turns our minds to the public sphere and to the social act of speaking to others on a topic of common interest. Not all documentaries adopt this posture, but it is among the most common ways of structuring a documentary film.

*Them.* The third person pronoun implies a separation between speaker and subject. The I who speaks is not identical with those of whom it speaks. We as an audience receive a sense that the subjects in the film are placed there for our examination and edification. They may be rendered as rich, full-rounded individuals with complex psychologies of their own, a tendency particularly noticeable in observational documentaries (discussed in Chapter 6), but just as often they seem to come before us as examples or illustrations, evidence of a condition or event that has happened in the world. This can seem reductive and diminishing, but it can also be highly compelling and effective. Rodney King, for example, does not emerge as a full-blown character in the raw footage of his beating at the hands of the Los Angeles police, but the power and shock of the footage depends more on its claim to authenticity than on its portrayal of a personality. Even in these cases, "they" remain at a remove, not to be represented to us with the complexity we might find in a fiction. For some this diminishes the pleasure of documentary; at the least, it suggests that we look elsewhere for pleasure and satisfaction in documentary representation.

*You.* Like "them," "you" suggests a separation. One person speaks and another listens. A filmmaker speaks and an audience attends. Documentary, in this sense, belongs to an *institutional* discourse or framework. People with a particular form of expertise, documentary filmmakers, address us as members of a general public or some specific element of it. As an audience we are typically separated from both the act of representation and the subject of representation. We occupy a different social time and space from either; we have a role and identity of our own as viewers and audience members that is itself a distinct aspect of our own social persona: we attend the film as viewers, audience members, even though part of our reason for doing so may be that the film will speak about people and issues whose actual life experience compares or contrasts with our own. "They" too may be husbands and wives, lawyers and accountants, students or athletes, and their actions may prove instructive to our own in more direct ways than we expect from fiction. We need not ask if real army recruits are like Demi

Moore's character in *G.I. Jane* (Ridley Scott, 1997); we can see real recruits in Joan Churchill and Nick Broomfield's documentary, *Soldier Girls* (1980). We may draw analogies about human conduct from the dramatic events in *G.I. Jane*, but we can draw conclusions about human conduct from the actual events represented in *Soldier Girls*.

"You" becomes activated as an audience when the filmmaker conveys a sense that he or she is indeed addressing us, that the film reaches us in some way. Without this sense of activation we may be present at but not attend to the film. Filmmakers must find a way to activate our sense of ourselves both as the one to whom the filmmaker speaks (about someone or something else) and as members of a group or collectively, an audience for whom this topic bears importance. The usual means of doing this is by recourse to techniques of rhetoric (discussed in Chapter 4).

Rhetoric is the form of speech used to persuade or convince others about an issue for which no clear-cut, unequivocal answer or solution exists. Guilt and innocence in the judicial process often hinges not simply on evidence but on the convincingness of the arguments made regarding the interpretation of the evidence. The O.J. Simpson trial was a prime example, given that there was a considerable amount of incriminating evidence. Even so, the defense lawyers made a successful argument that this evidence might have been fabricated and that its value was suspect. A judgment about the truth, the verdict, lay outside the realms of science, poetry or story-telling. It came to pass within the arena of rhetorical engagement, the arena in which most documentary operates as well.

Rhetoric differs from reason as used to arrive at a mathematical proof or scientific conclusion; these logical processes contain their own self-evident proof, and they usually address problems for which one and only one solution exists, given a specific set of initial assumptions. Rhetoric also differs from poetic or narrative speech, which aims less to convince us about a social concern than to provide us with an aesthetic experience or involvement in an imaginary world. Rhetoric, though, may readily make use of poetic, narrative, or logical elements. They are, however, put in the service of convincing us about an issue for which more than one point of view or conclusion is possible.

Georges Franju's *Blood of the Beasts* (1949), for example, uses irony and surreal imagery to persuade us of the strangeness of slaughtering cattle, in 1940s France, so that we may enjoy their flesh, whereas Frederick Wiseman's *Meat* (1976) observes the activities in a Midwestern slaughterhouse with considerable detachment, in 1970s America, to show us the routine nature of the human interactions among workers and supervisors, men and animals. Wiseman focuses on issues of labor, Franju on issues of custom.

Wiseman regards the workers as typical or representative wage-earners in a labor-management context, Franju regards the workers as mythical figures who perform astounding feats. Specific stylistic and rhetorical choices operate in both cases to activate our sense of being addressed and engaged in specific ways.

*I speak about them to you* may be the most common formulation of the three-way relationship among filmmaker, subject, and audience, but it is certainly not the only one. A chart could be made that would include all of the variations in pronouns that this sentence allows for. Each variation would carry a different set of implications for the relationships among filmmakers, subjects, and viewers. A few of the more pertinent ones are sketched out here:

*It speaks about them or it to us.* This formulation betrays a sense of separation, if not alienation, between the speaker and the audience. The film or video appears to arrive, addressed to us, from a source that lacks individuality. It addresses a subject likewise separated from us, even if it lies within some proximity. This formulation characterizes what we might call an institutional discourse, in which the film, often by means of a voice-over commentary, perhaps even a Voice of God commentator with a deep, male voice, informs us about some aspect of the world in an impersonal but authoritative manner.

The film appears to speak to "us" but addresses itself to a largely undifferentiated audience. We should attend to the film because it assumes we want or need to know about its topic. Informational films and advertising messages, including trailers for forthcoming films, often adopt this framework. *The River*, for example, not only uses a stentorian male commentator, it constantly refers to what "we" have done to the land and what "we" can do to change things, even though the actual culprit is quite removed from you or me today.

Films of this sort seem to arrive from nowhere in particular. They are not the work of a specific individual whom we could call the filmmaker; they are often not even the work of an institution as identifiable as CNN news with its on-camera representatives (anchor men and women, reporters, interviewees). They arrive as the utterances of an "it" that remains impersonal and unidentifiable. (The "it" may be the scientific community, the medical establishment, the government, or the advertising industry, for example.) This "it" speaks to an "us" that may be a function more of demographics than of collectivity. Such works convey information, assign values, or urge actions that invite us to find a sense of commonality within a framework that may be dryly factual or emotionally charged, but it is seldom organized to move beyond a statistical, generic, or abstract conception of who "we" are.

*I or We speak about us to you.* This formulation moves the filmmaker from a position of separation from those he or she represents to a position of commonality with them. Filmmaker and subject are of the same stock. In anthropological filmmaking the turn to this formulation goes by the name of “auto-ethnography”: it refers to the efforts of indigenous people to make their films and videos about their own culture so that they may represent it to “us,” those who remain outside. The Kayapo Indians of the Amazon river basin have been exceptionally active in this practice, using their videos to lobby Brazilian politicians for policies that will protect their homeland from development and exploitation.

Often the sense of commonality hinges around the representing of family. Alan Berliner, for example, has made two exceptional films about his own father, *Intimate Stranger* (1992) and *Nobody's Business* (1996). Marlene Booth has made an intriguing film about her family's experience as predominantly assimilated Jews living in Iowa, *Yidd in the Middle* (1998). After discovering in her adulthood that her father was Jewish, Lisa Lewenz travels to Europe to understand how the family lived in 1930s Germany in *Letter without Words* (1999). In a film that mixes staged enactments with documentary representations, Camille Billops describes what happens when she and the now grown daughter whom she gave up for adoption as a child reunite in *Finding Christa* (1991).

By speaking about an “us” that includes the filmmaker these films achieve a degree of intimacy that can be quite compelling.

One of the most striking examples of the first-person voice in a documentary is Marlon Riggs's extraordinary video, *Tongues Untied* (1989). In it Riggs speaks about what it means to be a black, gay male. He and other social actors speak on and off camera about their experiences as black, gay men. Some recite poetry, some recount stories, some participate in sketches and reenactments. These are not the standard voices of authority. They are not stripped of ethnic identity or colloquial idiosyncrasy to approximate the dominant norm of standard, white, non-regional English. Inflection and rhythm, cadence and style attest to the power of individual perception and the strength of personal expression that makes *Tongues Untied* one of the milestones in recent documentary production.

These and other formulations convey some sense of how the filmmaker adopts a specific position in relation to those represented in the film and those to whom the film is addressed. This position requires negotiation and consent. It supplies evidence of the ethical considerations that went into the film's conception. It suggests what kind of relationship the viewer is expected to have with the film by suggesting what kind of relationship we are expected to have with the filmmaker and his or her subjects. To ask what

we do with people when we make a documentary film involves asking what we do with filmmakers and viewers as well as with subjects. Assumptions about the relationships that should exist among all three go a long way toward determining what kind of documentary film or video results, the quality of the relationship it has to its subjects, and the effect it has on an audience. Assumptions vary considerably, as we shall see, but the underlying question of what we do with people persists as a fundamental issue for the ethics of documentary filmmaking.