

Bill Nichols

Introduction to Documentary

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Chapter 2

How Do Documentaries Differ from Other Types of Film?

WORKING OUT A DEFINITION

"Documentary" can be no more easily defined than "love" or "culture." Its meaning cannot be reduced to a dictionary definition in the way that "temperature" or "table salt" can be. Its definition is not self-contained in the way that the definition of "table salt" is contained by saying that it is a chemical compound made up of one atom of sodium and one of chlorine (NaCl). The definition of "documentary" is always relational or comparative. Just as love takes on meaning in contrast to indifference or hate, and culture takes on meaning in contrast to barbarism or chaos, documentary takes on meaning in contrast to fiction film or experimental and avant-garde film.

Were documentary a *reproduction* of reality, these problems would be far less acute. We would then simply have a replica or copy of something that already existed. But documentary is not a reproduction of reality, it is a *representation* of the world we already occupy. It stands for a particular view of the world, one we may never have encountered before even if the aspects of the world that is represented are familiar to us. We judge a reproduction by its fidelity to the original—its capacity to look like, act like, and serve the same purposes as the original. We judge a representation more by the nature of the pleasure it offers, the value of the insight or knowl-

edge it provides, and the quality of the orientation or disposition, tone or perspective it instills. We ask more of a representation than we do of a reproduction.

This was quickly realized in photography. Henry Peach Robinson's 1896 guide to good photography, *The Elements of a Pictorial Photograph*, warned beginners that "imitative illusion is a trap for the vulgar. A scene may, and should be represented truthfully, but some artists can see and represent more and greater truths than every passer-by will notice. . . . The photographer who sees most will represent more truths more truthfully than another." (Robinson himself was a highly regarded photographer who sometimes combined more than one negative to produce the desired effect in his finished prints.)

Documentary is what we might call a "fuzzy concept." Not all films that count as documentaries bear a close resemblance to each other just, as many disparate sorts of transportation devices can count as a "vehicle." As the formulations we looked at in Chapter 1 already suggest, a documentary organized as *It speaks about them to us* will have quite different qualities and affect from one organized as *We speak about us to them*. But these differences are just the beginning. As we will see, there are a number of other ways in which documentaries differ from each other, even though we continue to think of the whole array of films as documentary despite the differences.

Documentaries adopt no fixed inventory of techniques, address no one set of issues, display no single set of forms or styles. Not all documentaries exhibit a single set of shared characteristics. Documentary film practice is an arena in which things change. Alternative approaches are constantly attempted and then adopted by others or abandoned. Contestation occurs. Prototypical works stand out that others emulate without ever being able to copy or imitate entirely. Test cases appear that challenge the conventions defining the boundaries of documentary film practice. They push the limits and sometimes change them.

More than proclaiming a definition that fixes once and for all what is and is not a documentary, we need to look to examples and prototypes, test cases and innovations as evidence of the broad arena within which documentary operates and evolves. The fuzziness of any definition arises partly because definitions change over time and partly because at any given moment no one definition covers all films that we might consider documentary. The usefulness of prototypes as a definition is that they propose generally exemplary qualities or features without requiring every documentary to exhibit all of them. *Nanook of the North* stands as a prototypical documentary even though many films that share its reliance on a simple quest nar-

rative to organize events, its exemplary or representative individual, and its implication that we can understand larger cultural qualities by understanding individual behavior also reject the romanticism, emphasis on a challenging natural environment, and occasionally patronizing elements of *Nanook*. Indeed, some fiction films, like Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thief* (1947), can also share these qualities with *Nanook* without being considered a documentary at all.

New prototypes such as *Night Mail* or the *Why We Fight* (1942–45) series may reject previously dominant qualities in films such as *Nanook* in favor of new ones such as a voice-over commentary or a deflection away from an individual social actor to representative types or groups and the unfolding of an event, process, or historical development in broader, more impersonal terms (poetically or prosaically rendered). Similarly, if we regard *High School* as a prototype or model of observational cinema we can note how it refused to provide any voice-over commentary whatsoever even though voice-over commentary had been considered one of the most characteristic qualities of documentary up until the 1960s.

We can get more of a handle on how to define documentary by approaching it from four different angles: institutions, practitioners, texts (films and videos), and audience.

AN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

It may seem circular, but one way to define documentary is to say, "Documentaries are what the organizations and institutions that produce them make." If John Grierson calls *Night Mail* a documentary or if the Discovery Channel calls a program a documentary, then these items come labeled as documentary before any work on the part of the viewer or critic begins. This is similar to saying that the Hollywood feature film is what the Hollywood studio system produces. This definition, despite its circularity, functions as an initial cue that a given work can be considered as a documentary. The context provides the cue; we would be foolish to ignore it even if this form of definition is less than exhaustive. Given that the sponsor is the National Film Board of Canada, Fox TV news, the History Channel, or Michael Moore, we make certain assumptions about the film's documentary status and its degree of likely objectivity, reliability, and credibility. We make assumptions about its non-fiction status and its reference to our shared historical world rather than a world imagined by the filmmaker.

The segments that make up the CBS news program *60 Minutes*, for example, are normally considered examples of journalistic reporting first and foremost simply because that is the kind of program *60 Minutes* is. We as-

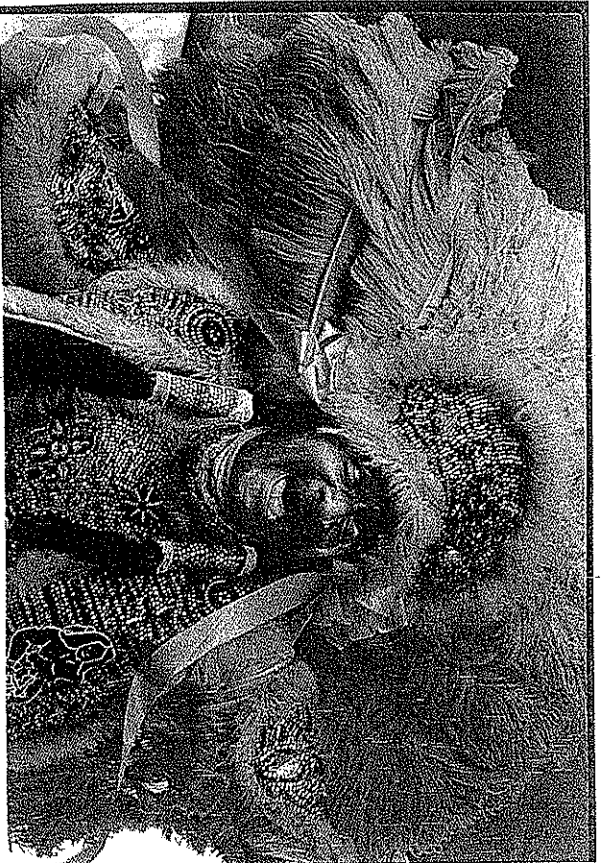
sume that the segments refer to actual people and events, that standards of journalistic objectivity will be met, that we can rely on each story to be both entertaining and informative, and that any claims made will be backed up by a credible display of evidence. Shown in another setting, these episodes might seem more like melodramas or documentaries, based on the emotional intensities achieved and the high degree of constructedness to the encounters that take place, but these alternatives dim when the entire institutional framework functions to assure us that they are, in fact, documentary reportage.

Similarly, films that get shown on Public Broadcasting System (PBS) series such as *POV* and *Frontline* are considered documentaries because these series routinely feature documentaries. Shows that appear on the Discovery Channel are, unless proven otherwise, treated as documentaries because this channel is dedicated to broadcasting documentary material. Knowing where a given film or video comes from, or on what channel it is shown, provides an important first cue to how we should classify it.

Films like *This Is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, 1982) build this type of institutional framing into the film itself in a mischievous or ironic way: the film announces itself to be a documentary, only to prove to be a fabrication or simulation of a documentary. If we take its own self-description seriously, we will believe that the group Spinal Tap is an actual rock group. Since one had to be created for the film, just as a "Blair witch" had to be created for *The Blair Witch Project*, we will not be wrong. What we may fail to realize is that neither the rock group nor the witch had any existence whatsoever prior to the production of these films. Such works have come to be called "mockumentaries" or "pseudo-documentaries." Much of their ironic impact depends on their ability to coax at least partial belief from us that what we see is a documentary because that is what we are told we see.

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

For a long time, it was also taken for granted that documentaries could



Flower Films presents
Always for Pleasure
 A film by Les Blank
 1334 San Pablo Ave
 El Cerrito, California 94530

**Chief of the Black Eagle,
 Ned Ojima
 Mardi Gras Indian Tribe**

Always for Pleasure (Les Blank, 1978). Photo courtesy of Les Blank and Flower Films.

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

talk about anything in the world except themselves. Reflexive strategies that call the very act of representation into question unsettle the assumption that documentary builds on the ability of film to capture reality. To remind viewers of the construction of the reality we behold, of the *creative* element in John Grierson's famous definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" undercuts the very claim to truth and authenticity on which the documentary depends. If we cannot take its images as visible evidence of the nature of a particular part of the historical world, of what can we take them? By suppressing this question, the institutional framework for documentary suppresses much of the complexity in the relationship between

representation and reality, but it also achieves a clarity or simplicity that implies that documentaries achieve direct, truthful access to the real. This functions as one of the prime attractions of the form.

Along with sponsoring agencies for the production of documentary work, a distinct circuit of distributors and exhibitors function to support the circulation of these films. These agencies operate tangentially to the dominant chains of film theaters that specialize in mainstream fiction films. Sometimes one organization, such as the television news networks, produces, distributes, and exhibits documentary work; sometimes the distributors are distinct entities, such as the Discovery Channel to a large degree or specialty film distributors like Women Make Movies, New Day Films, or Third World Newsreel, that acquire the documentaries produced by others. Other agencies, such as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the British Film Institute, provide financial support for documentary as well as other types of work. Still others, such as the Film Arts Foundation, the Foundation for Independent Film and Video, the European Documentary Film Institute, or the International Documentary Association, provide professional support for documentary filmmakers themselves, much as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences does for Hollywood filmmakers.

A COMMUNITY OF PRACTITIONERS

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

Documentary filmmakers share a common, self-chosen mandate to represent the historical world rather than to imaginatively invent alternative ones. They gather at specialized film festivals such as the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival (U.S.A.), the Yamagata Documentary Film Festival (Japan), or the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival (the Netherlands), and they contribute articles and interviews to many of the same journals, such as *Release Print*, *Documentary*, and *Dox*. They debate social issues such as the effects of pollution and the nature of sexual identity and explore technical concerns such as the authenticity of archival footage and the consequences of digital technology.

Documentary practitioners speak a common language regarding what they do. Like other professionals, documentary filmmakers have a vocabulary, or jargon, of their own. It may range from the suitability of various film stocks for different situations to the techniques of recording location sound,

and from the ethics of observing others to the pragmatics of finding distribution and negotiating contracts for their work. Documentary practitioners share distinct but common problems—from developing ethically sound relationships with their subjects to reaching a specific audience, for example—that distinguish them from other filmmakers.

These commonalities give documentary filmmakers a shared sense of purpose despite the ways in which they may also compete for the same funding or distributors. Individual practitioners will shape or transform the traditions they inherit, but they do so in dialogue with others who share their sense of mission. This definition of the documentary contributes to its fuzzy but distinguishable outline. It confirms the historical variability of the form: our understanding of what is a documentary changes as those who make documentaries change their idea of what it is they make. What might begin as a test case or apparent anomaly, as early observational films such as *Les Racquettours* (1958), *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), or *Primary* (1960) did, may fade away as a failed deviation or, as in this example, come to be regarded as transformative innovations leading to a new standard of accepted practice. Documentary has never been only one thing. Later, in Chapter 5, we will trace some of the development of different modes of documentary filmmaking. For now we can use this history of a changing sense of what counts as a documentary as a sign of the variable, open-ended, dynamic quality of the form itself. It is the practitioners themselves, through their engagement with institutions, critics, subjects, and audiences, that generate this sense of dynamic change.

A CORPUS OF TEXTS

The films that make up the documentary tradition are another way to define the form. For a start, we can consider documentary a genre like the western or the science-fiction film. To belong to the genre a film has to exhibit characteristics shared by films already regarded as documentaries or westerns. Norms and conventions come into play for documentary that help distinguish it: the use of a Voice-of-God commentary, interviews, location sound recording, cutaways from a given scene to provide images that illustrate or complicate a point made within the scene, and a reliance on social actors, or people in their everyday roles and activities, as the central characters of the film are among those that are common to many documentaries.

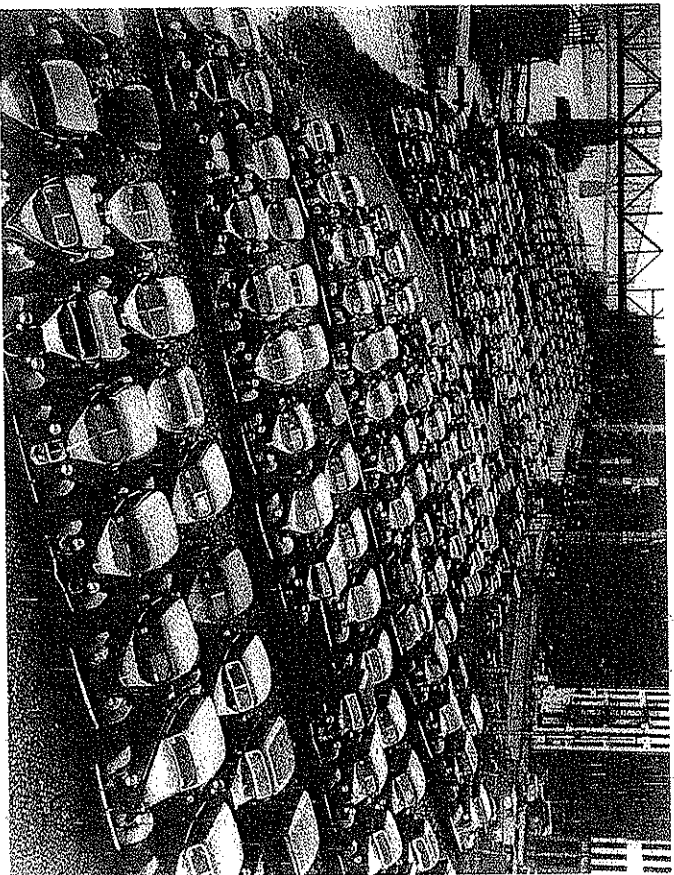
Another convention is the prevalence of an informing logic that organizes the film in relation to the representations it makes about the historical world. A typical form of organization is that of problem solving. This structure can resemble a story, particularly a detective story: the film begins by

establishing a problem or issue, then conveys something of the background to the issue, and follows this with an examination of its current severity or complexity. This presentation then leads to a concluding recommendation or solution that the viewer is encouraged to endorse or adopt personally.

The City (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939) exhibits a prototypical approach to this idea of a documentary logic. It establishes, through a montage of scenes that include fast motion clips of frenzied city living, that urban existence has become a burden more than a joy. The film presents this as a pervasive problem that saps people of their energy and zest for life. (It also tends to ignore related issues such as whether urban stress correlates with class or race.) What is the solution? The final section provides one: the carefully planned suburban community where every family has the space and tranquility needed as a restorative to the hustle and bustle of urban living (the film assumes the nuclear family and the detached home are the building blocks of community). *The City*, a classic in the documentary film genre, was sponsored by the American Institute of City Planners, a group with some real stake in the suburbanization of the American landscape, just as *The River*, which championed the efforts of the Tennessee Valley Authority as the solution to ravages of ruinous floods, was sponsored by the federal government in order to gain popular support for the TVA.

A variation on the problem/solution style of logic occurs in *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Speeches by Nazi party leaders refer to Germany's disaster following World War I while these same leaders nominate themselves, their party, and, above all, Adolf Hitler as the solution to the problems of national humiliation and economic collapse. The film glosses over the actual problems; instead it devotes the vast amount of its energy to urging its viewers (especially its initial viewers in 1930s Germany) to endorse the efforts of the Nazi party and its leader to redeem Germany and put it on the path to recovery, prosperity, and power. The film assumes that its contemporary audience was well aware of the nature and severity of the problem. More crucial to Leni Riefenstahl than archival footage of Germany's defeat in World War I, a review of the humiliating terms imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, or evidence of the hardships worked by skyrocketing inflation was a vivid, compelling portrait of the Nazi party, and Hitler, at their carefully choreographed best.

The logic organizing a documentary film supports an underlying argument, assertion, or claim about the historical world that gives this genre its sense of particularity. We expect to engage with films that engage with the world. This engagement and logic frees the documentary from some of the conventions relied upon to establish an imaginary world. Continuity editing,

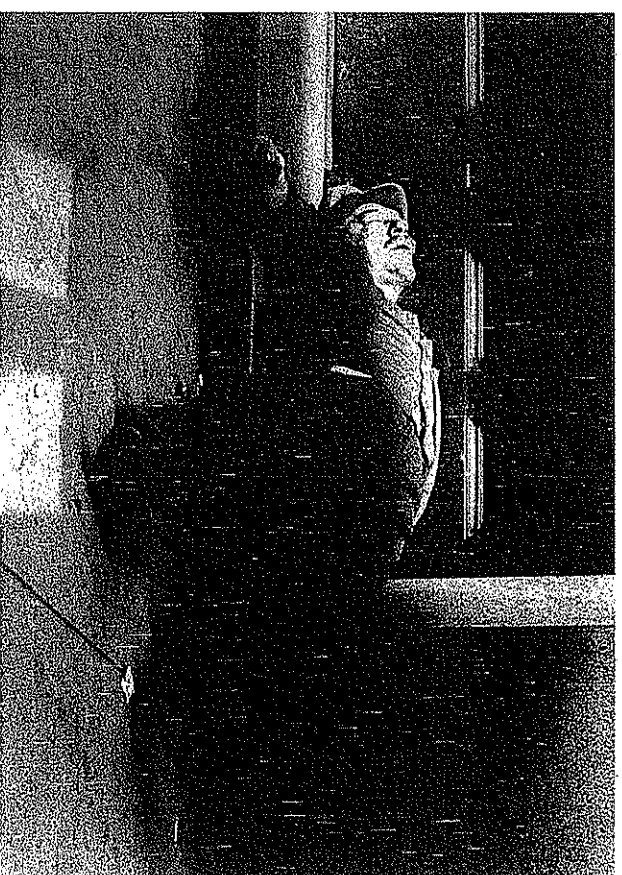


The City (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939). Photo courtesy of National Archives.

Images of vast numbers of similar objects, and people, help make *The City's* point: urban design has fallen behind human need.

for example, which works to make the cuts between shots in a typical fiction film scene invisible, has a lower priority. We can assume that what is achieved by continuity editing in fiction is achieved by history in documentary film: things share relationships in time and space not because of the editing but because of their actual, historical linkages. Editing in documentary often seeks to demonstrate these linkages. The demonstration may be convincing or implausible, accurate or distorted, but it occurs in relation to situations and events with which we are already familiar, or for which we can find other sources of information. Documentary is therefore much less reliant on continuity editing to establish the credibility of the world it refers to than is fiction.

Documentary film, in fact, often displays a wider array of disparate shots and scenes than fiction, an array yoked together less by a narrative organized around a central character than by a rhetoric organized around a controlling logic or argument. Characters, or social actors, may come and go, offering information, giving testimony, providing evidence. Places and things may appear and disappear as they are brought forward in support of the



The City (Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, 1939). Photo courtesy of National Archives.

Images of individuals such as this one do not affirm human triumph in a congested, frenzied environment. They register defeat and prepare for the film's solution: planned, green belt communities.

film's point of view or perspective. A logic of implication bridges these leaps from one person or place to another.

If, for example, we jump from a woman sitting in her home describing what it was like to work as a welder during World War II to a shot from a 1940s newsreel of a shipyard, the cut implies that the second shot illustrates the type of workplace and the kind of work the woman in the first shot describes. The cut hardly seems disruptive at all even though there is no spatial or temporal continuity between the two shots.

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

Instead of continuity editing, we might call this form of documentary edit-

ing evidentiary. Instead of organizing cuts within a scene to present a sense of a single, unified time and space in which we follow the actions of central characters, evidentiary editing organizes cuts within a scene to present the impression of a single, convincing argument supported by a logic. Instead of cutting from one shot of a character approaching a door to a second shot of the same character entering the room on the far side of the door, a more typical documentary film cut would be from a close-up of a bottle of champagne being broken across the bow of ship to a long shot of a ship, perhaps an entirely different ship, being launched into the sea. The two shots may have been made years or continents apart, but they contribute to the representation of a single process rather than the development of an individual character.

Pursuing the example provided by *Rosie the Riveter*, some choices for documenting a given topic, such as shipbuilding, can be sketched out. The film may (1) describe a process like shipbuilding poetically or simply chronologically, (2) present an argument about shipbuilding—that women were urged to take up work and then discouraged from continuing it during and after World War II, for example, (3) stress the filmmaker's response to the process of shipbuilding, representing it as an awesome feat of technical skill or a nightmare of hazards and hardships, or (4) tell the story of a particular, perhaps typical, worker in a shipyard, hinting at the larger meanings this one story implies. In each case editing serves an evidentiary function. It not only furthers our involvement in the unfolding of the film but supports the kinds of claims or assertions the film makes about our world. We tend to assess the organization of a documentary in terms of the persuasiveness or convincingness of its representations rather than the plausibility or fabrication of its fabrications.

A great deal of this persuasiveness stems from the sound track in documentary, whereas a great deal of our identification with a fictional world and its characters depends on the literal views we have of them. Arguments call for a logic that words are better able to convey than are images. Images lack tense and a negative form, for example. We can make a sign that says, "No Smoking," but we typically convey this requirement in images by the convention of putting a slash through an image of a cigarette. To decide to not show an image of a cigarette at all would not in any way communicate the same meaning as a sign declaring the injunction, "No Smoking." The convention of a slash mark through an image to mean "No" or "Not" is very hard to adapt to filmmaking. Whether it is through what we hear a commentator tell us about the film's subject, what social actors tell us directly via interviews, or what we overhear social actors say among themselves as the camera observes them, documentaries rely heavily on the spoken



The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter (Cine Field, 1980). Women welders at the Lande Freary and Clark Plant, Connecticut, 1943. Photograph by Gordon Parks.

Rosie the Riveter is a brilliant example of a film that uses historical film material not to confirm the truth of a situation but to demonstrate how truth claims can be made to serve political goals. In this case the historical footage was designed to encourage women to enter the work force during World War II as men then to leave the work force when the soldiers returned from the war. Thanks to Field's editing, the connotations of logic required for the task are often hilariously blatant. (Few government films even acknowledged the presence of African-American women in the work force, giving this particular photo extra value.)

word. Speech fleshes out our sense of the world. An event recounted becomes history reclaimed.

Like other genres, documentaries go through phases or periods. Different countries and regions have different documentary traditions and styles of their own. European and Latin American documentary filmmakers, for example, favor subjective and openly rhetorical forms such as we find in Luis Buñuel's *Land without Bread* or Chris Marker's *San Soleil* (1982), whereas British and North American filmmakers have placed more emphasis on objective and observational forms such as the "two sides of every argument" tone to much journalistic reporting and the highly non-interventionist approach of Frederick Wiseman in films like *High School* (1968), *Hospital* (1970), and *Model* (1980).

Documentary, like fiction film, has had its movements. Among them we could include the documentary work by Dziga Vertov, Esther Shub, Victor Turin, and others working in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and early 1930s; the Free Cinema of 1950s Britain, when Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson, and others took a fresh, unadorned look at contemporary British life in films such as *Every Day except Christmas* (1957),

Momma Don't Allow (1956), and *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1958), and the observational filmmaking of people such as Frederick Wiseman, the Maysles brothers, and Drew Associates (principally Richard Drew, D. A. Pennebaker, and Richard Leacock) in 1960s America.

A movement arises from a group of films made by individuals who share a common outlook or approach. This is often done consciously through manifestoes and other statements such as Dziga Vertov's "WE: Variant of a Manifesto" and "Kino Eye," which declared open warfare on scripted and acted films. These essays defined the principles and goals to which films like *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and *Entrhusiasm* (1930) gave tangible expression. Lindsay Anderson's essay in *Sight and Sound* magazine in 1956, "Stand Up! Stand Up!" urged a vivid sense of social commitment for documentary filmmaking. He defined the principles and goals of a poetic but gritty representation of everyday, working-class reality freed from the sense of civic responsibility for "solutions" to class difference itself that had made work produced by John Grierson in the 1930s seem a handmaiden of the British government's policies of limited amelioration.

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

Documentary falls into periods as well as movements. These, too, help give it definition and differentiate it from other types of films with different movements and periodizations. The period of the 1930s, for example, saw much documentary work take on a newsreel quality as part of a Depression-era sensibility and a renewed political emphasis on social and economic issues. The 1960s saw the introduction of lightweight, hand-held cameras that could be used together with synchronous sound. Filmmakers acquired the mobility and responsiveness that allowed them to follow social actors in their everyday routines. The options to observe intimate or crisis-laden behavior at a distance or to interact in a more directly participatory manner with their subjects both became highly possible. The 1960s

were thus a period in which the ideas of a rigorously observational and of a far more participatory cinema predominated.

In the 1970s, documentary frequently returned to the past through the use of archival film material and contemporary interviews to put a new perspective on past events or events leading up to current issues. (Historical perspective was an element found missing from observational and participatory filmmaking.) Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1969) provided the model or prototype that many others emulated. De Antonio combined a rich variety of archival source material with trenchant interviews to recount the history of Vietnam and the war there in a way radically at odds with the American government's official version of the war. *With Babies and Banners* (1977), about a 1930s automobile factory strike but told from the women's point of view; *Union Maids* (1976), about union organizing struggles in different industries; and *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980), about women's role in the work force during and after World War II, are but three examples that draw on de Antonio's example and inflect it to address issues of women's history. As such they were also part of a broad tendency in the 1960s and 1970s to tell "history from below," as lived and experienced by ordinary but articulate people rather than "history from above," based on the deeds of leaders and the knowledge of experts.

Periods and movements characterize documentary, but so does a series of modes of documentary film production that, once in operation, remain a viable way of making a documentary film despite national variations and period inflections. (Observational filmmaking may have begun in the 1960s, for example, but it remains an important resource in the 1990s, long after the period of its greatest prevalence.) Modes, too, distinguish documentary film from other types of film. Modes come close to movements in that a new mode usually has its champions as well as its principles or goals, but it also tends to have a broader base of support so that different movements can derive from a single mode. In fact, this book will identify six primary modes of documentary filmmaking. They are discussed further in Chapter 6.

Poetic Mode: emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization. Examples: *The Bridge* (1928), *Song of Ceylon* (1934), *Listen to Britain* (1941), *Night and Fog* (1955), *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983). This mode bears a close proximity to experimental, personal, or avant-garde filmmaking.

Expository Mode: emphasizes verbal commentary and an argumentative logic. Examples: *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1952), *Spanish Earth* (1937), *Les Maitres Fous* (1955), tele-

vision news. This is the mode that most people identify with documentary in general.

Observational Mode: emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera. Examples: *High School* (1968), *Salesman* (1969), *Primary* (1960), the *Netsilik Eskimo* series (1967–68), *Soldier Girls* (1980).

Participatory Mode: emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject. Filming takes place by means of interviews or other forms of even more direct involvement. Often coupled with archival footage to examine historical issues. Examples: *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), *Soloiky Power* (1988), *Shoah* (1985), *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970), *Kurt and Courtney* (1998).

Reflexive Mode: calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking. Increases our awareness of the constructedness of the film's representation of reality. Examples: *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), *Land without Bread* (1932), *The Ax Fight* (1971), *The War Game* (1966), *Reassemblage* (1982).

Performative Mode: emphasizes the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker's own engagement with the subject and an audience's responsiveness to this engagement. Rejects notions of objectivity in favor of evocation and affect. Examples: *Unfinished Diary* (1983), *History and Memory* (1991), *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971), *Tongues Untied* (1989), and reality TV shows such as *Cops* (as a degraded example of the mode). The films in this mode all share qualities with the experimental, personal, and avant-garde, but with a strong emphasis on their emotional and social impact on an audience.

Modes come into prominence at a given time and place, but they persist and become more pervasive than movements. Each mode may arise partly as a response to perceived limitations in previous modes, partly as a response to technological possibilities, and partly as a response to a changing social context. Once established, though, modes overlap and intermingle. Individual films can be characterized by the mode that seems most influential to their organization, but individual films can also "mix and match" modes as the occasion demands. Expository documentaries, for example, remain a staple form, particularly on television, where the idea of a voice-over commentary seems obligatory, be it for A&E's *Biography* series, nature films on the Discovery Channel, or the evening news.

The texts in the corpus we call documentaries share certain emphases that allow us to discuss them as members of a genre (characterized by norms and conventions such as an organizing logic, evidentiary editing, and a prominent role for speech directed at the viewer) that in turn divides into

different movements, periods, and modes. In these terms, documentary proves to be one of the longest-lived and most richly varied of genres, offering many different approaches to the challenge of representing the historical world. These approaches share many of the qualities of standard fiction films, such as story telling, but remain distinct enough to constitute a domain of their own.

A CONSTITUENCY OF VIEWERS

The final way to consider documentary is in relation to its audience. The institutions that support documentary may also support fiction films; the practitioners of documentary may also make experimental or fiction films; the characteristics of the films themselves can be simulated in a fictional context, as works like *No Lies* (1973), *David Holzman's Diary* (1968), and *Bonito Noir* (1995) make clear. In other words, what we have taken some pains to sketch out as the domain of documentary exhibits permeable borders and a chameleon-like appearance. The sense that a film is a documentary lies in the mind of the beholder as much as it lies in the film's context or structure.

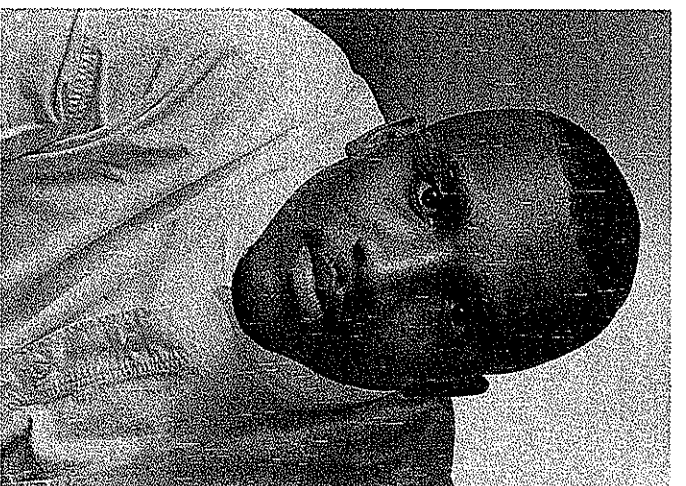
What assumptions and expectations characterize our sense that a film is a documentary? What do we bring to the viewing experience that is different when we encounter what we think of as a documentary rather than some other genre of film? Most fundamentally, we bring an assumption that the text's sounds and images have their origin in the historical world we share. On the whole, they were not conceived and produced exclusively for the film. This assumption relies on the capacity of the photographic image, and of sound recording, to replicate what we take to be distinctive qualities of what they have recorded. That this is an *assumption*, encouraged by specific qualities of lenses, emulsions, optics, and styles, such as realism, becomes increasingly clear as we bear in mind the ability of digitally produced sounds and images to achieve a similar effect: the sound we hear and the image we behold seem to bear the trace of what produced them.

Recording instruments (cameras and tape recorders) register the imprint of things (sights and sounds) with great fidelity. It gives them documentary value, at least in the sense of a document as something caused by the events it records. The notion of a document is akin to the notion of an image that serves as an index of what produced it. The indexical dimension of an image refers to the way in which the appearance of an image is shaped or determined by what it records: a photo of a boy holding his dog will exhibit, in two dimensions, an exact analogy of the spatial relationship between the boy and his dog in three dimensions; a fingerprint

will show exactly the same pattern of whorls as the finger that produced it; markings on a fired bullet will bear an indexical relationship to the specific gun barrel through which it was shot. The bullet's surface "records" the passage of that bullet through the gun barrel with a precision that allows forensic science to use it as documentary evidence in a given case.

Similarly, cinematic sounds and images enjoy an indexical relationship to what they record. What they record, together with the creative decisions and interventions of the filmmaker, is what produces them. The filmmaker may shoot the boy and his dog with a telephoto lens or a wide-angle one, with a camera fixed to a tripod or hand-held and moving slowly to the left, with color film and a red filter or with black and white film. Each variation will tell us something about the filmmaker's style. The image is a document of this style; it is produced by it and gives vivid evidence of the nature of the filmmaker's engagement with a subject, but each variation also tells us something about the boy and his dog that depends directly on the actual, physical relation between these two entities: it is a document of what once stood before the camera as well as of how the camera represented them. As an audience we are particularly attentive, in watching documentaries, to the ways in which sound and image attest to the look and sound of the world we share. It is this quality of an intimate relationship to an actual environment and its inhabitants, particularly to the two central characters, Arthur Agee and William Gates, that made *Hoop Dreams* a work of considerable significance.

This indexical relationship, however, is true of fictions as well as non-fiction. The distributor of *Hoop Dreams*, in fact, mounted a campaign to have the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences nominate the film not for Best Documentary but for Best Picture. The campaign failed, but it underscored the permeable and often arbitrary nature of sharp distinctions between fiction and documentary film. The camera documents the grain of an individual's voice, whether it is of Dustin Hoffman in *The Death of a Salesman* or of Paul Brennan in the Maysles brothers' *Salesman*. This is why we can say all films are documentaries, whether they represent documentaries or wish-fulfillment or of social representation. In fiction, however, we turn our attention from the documentation of real actors to the fabrication of imaginary characters. We suspend our disbelief in the fictional world that opens up before us. In documentary, we remain attentive to the documentation of what comes before the camera. We uphold our belief in the authenticity of the historical world represented on screen. We continue to assume that the indexical linkage of sound and image to what it records attests to the film's engagement with a world that is not entirely of its own design. Documentary *re-presents* the historical world by making an indexical record of it; it



LARRY MARCUS 1985



FINELINE FEATURES

William Gates, at age 23, (L) and from his senior year at St. Joseph High School, (R) in "*Hoop Dreams*." This award-winning documentary film follows Gates and his best friend Arthur Agee from high school to college as they pursue their dreams of scoring big in the NBA. "*Hoop Dreams*" premieres on PBS Wednesday, November 15, 1995, at 8PM (ET) (check local listing).

Hoop Dreams (Steve James, Fred Marx, Peter Gilbert, 1994). Photos courtesy of Fine Line Features.

William Gates is one of the two young men we follow in *Hoop Dreams*. These publicity shots, which signal a significant passage of time (from high school to the age of 23), promise a "coming of age" tale in which we will witness how these two individuals develop as basketball players and mature as men.

represents the historical world by shaping this record from a distinct perspective or point of view. The evidence of the *re-presentation* supports the argument or perspective of the *representation*.

We assume that documentary sounds and images have the authenticity of evidence, but we must be wary of this assumption. We must always assess the argument or perspective on grounds that include but go beyond factual accuracy. The shots of concentration camp victims and survivors in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* bear the same appearance as what we would have seen had we been there because the cinematic image is a document of how these individuals appeared at the moment when they were filmed

during and at the end of World War II. The perspective of the film on these events, however, differs considerably from Beryl Fox's *Memoirandum* (1965). Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), or James Moll's *The Last Days* (1998). Even if we can rule out special effects, digital manipulation, or other forms of alteration that could allow a photographic image to give false evidence, the authenticity of the image does not necessarily make one argument or perspective superior to another.

When we assume that a sound or image bears an indexical relationship to its source, this assumption carries more weight in a film we take to be a documentary than in a film we take to be a fiction. It is for this reason that we may feel cheated when we learn that a work we thought was nonfiction proves to be a fiction after all. The line dividing the two may be imprecise or fuzzy, but we tend to believe in its reality all the same. *No Lies*, therefore, angers some who consider it bad faith for the director to create a fiction that pretends to be a documentary; we believe we could have observed this historical occurrence for ourselves, only to learn that what we would have observed was the construction of a fiction, even if it is a fiction designed to imitate the qualities of a documentary.

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

Among the assumptions we bring to documentary, then, is that individual shots and sounds, perhaps even scenes and sequences will bear a highly indexical relationship to the events they represent but that the film as a whole will stand back from being a pure document or transcription of these events to make a comment on them or to offer a perspective on them. Documentaries are not documents in the strict sense of the word, but they are based on the document-like quality of elements within them. As an audience we expect to be able both to trust to the indexical linkage between

what we see and what occurred before the camera and to assess the poetic or rhetorical transformation of this linkage into a commentary or perspective on the world we occupy. We anticipate an oscillation between the recognition of historical reality and the recognition of a representation about it. This expectation distinguishes our involvement with documentary from our involvement with other film genres.

This expectation characterizes what we might call the "discourses of sobriety" in our society. These are the ways we have of speaking directly about social and historical reality such as science, economics, medicine, military strategy, foreign policy, and educational policy. When we step inside an institutional framework that supports these ways of speaking, we assume an instrumental power: what we say and decide can affect the course of real events and entail real consequences. These are ways of seeing and speaking that are also ways of doing and acting. Power runs through them. An air of sobriety surrounds these discourses because they are seldom receptive to whim or fantasy, to "make-believe" characters or imaginary worlds (unless they serve as useful simulations of the real world, such as in flight simulators or econometric models of business behavior). They are the vehicles of action and intervention, power and knowledge, desire and will, directed toward the world we physically inhabit and share.

Like these other discourses, documentary claims to address the historical world and to possess the capacity to intervene by shaping how we regard it. Even though documentary filmmaking may not be accepted as the equal partner in scientific inquiry or foreign policy initiatives (largely because, as an image-based medium, documentaries lack important qualities of spoken and written discourse, such as the immediacy and spontaneity of dialogue or the rigorous logic of the written essay), this genre still upholds a tradition of sobriety in its determination to make a difference in how we regard the world and proceed within it.

For this reason, the notion of the "history lesson" functions as a frequent characteristic of documentary. We expect more than a series of documents; we expect to learn or be moved, to discover or be persuaded of possibilities that pertain to the historical world. Documentaries draw on evidence to make a claim something like, "This is so," coupled to a tacit "Isn't it?" This claim is conveyed by the persuasive or rhetorical force of the representation. *The Battle of San Pietro*, for example, makes a case that "war is hell" and persuades us of this with evidence such as close-ups of a series of dead soldiers rather than, say, a single long shot of a battlefield that would diminish the horror and perhaps increase the nobility of battle. The impact of such a sight, in close-up, carries an impact, or "indexical whammy," that is quite different from the staged deaths in fiction films, such as *The Thin*

Red Line (Terrence Mallick, 1998) or *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), that also ponder the human price of waging war. The representations may be similar, but the emotional impact of close-up images of the dead and dying changes considerably when we know that there is no point at which the director can say, "Cut" and lives can be resumed.

Audiences, then, encounter documentaries with an expectation that the desire to know more about the world we already occupy will find gratification during the course of the film. Documentaries invoke this desire-to-know when they invoke a historical subject and propose their individual variation on the history lesson. How did a given state of affairs come to pass (poverty among migrant farm workers in *Harvest of Shame* [1960], the degradation of farm land in *The Plow That Broke the Plains*)? How does this institution work (in *High School* or *Herb Schiller Reads the New York Times* [1982])? How do people conduct themselves in situations of stress (female army recruits during basic training in *Soldier Girls* [1980], experimental subjects during tests of obedience that might cause harm to others in *Obedience* [1965])? What kind of interpersonal dynamics take place in a concrete historical context (during the campaigns of John F. Kennedy and Herbert Humphrey for the Democratic presidential primary of 1960 in *Primary*, among family members all trying to make a go of a marginal pizza parlor in *Family Business* [1982])? What is the source of a given problem and how might we address it (inadequate housing for working people in *Housing Problems* [1935], colonial history and exploitation in Argentina in *The Hour of the Furnaces* [1968])? For what reasons should men fight (the *Why We Fight* series on the reasons for the United States' entry into World War II, *People's War* [1969] on the North Vietnamese reasons for trying to unify Vietnam and oppose American intervention)? How do members of a different culture organize their lives and express their social values (among the Dani of the New Guinea Highlands in *Dead Birds* [1963], among the Turkana of Kenya in *Wedding Camels* [1980])? What happens when one culture encounters another, notably when western, colonial powers encounter so-called primitive people (for the first time in 1930s New Guinea in *First Contact* [1984], on a recurring basis along the Sepic River in New Guinea as tourists meet indigenous people in *Cannibal Tours* [1988])?

Documentary film and video stimulates epistophilia (a desire to know) in its audience. It conveys an informing logic, a persuasive rhetoric, or a moving poetics that promises information and knowledge, insight and awareness. Documentary proposes to its audience that the gratification of these desires to know will be their common business. He-Who-Knows (the agent has traditionally been masculine) will share knowledge with those who wish to know. We, too, can occupy the position of The-One-Who-Knows.

They speak about them to us and we gain a sense of pleasure, satisfaction, and knowledge as a result.

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