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# Introduction to Documentary

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## Chapter 4

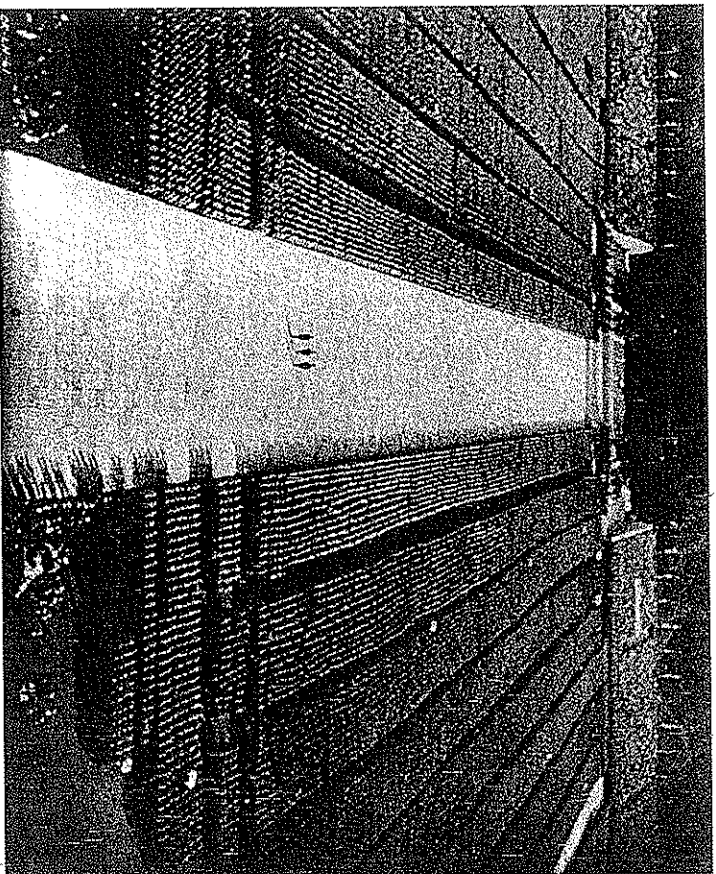
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### What Are Documentaries About?

#### THE TRIANGLE OF COMMUNICATION

For every documentary there are at least three stories that intertwine: the filmmaker's, the film's, and the audience's. These stories are all, in different ways, part of what we attend to when we ask what a given film is about. That is to say, when we watch a film we become aware that the film comes from somewhere and someone. There is a story about how and why it got made. These stories are often more personal and idiosyncratic for documentary and avant-garde film than they are for feature films. Leni Riefenstahl's production of *Triumph of the Will*, for example, remains a controversial story of Riefenstahl's artistic ambitions to make great films of emotional power but free of propagandistic intent—according to her own accounts—together with the story of Nazi party pressure for a film that would generate a positive image at a moment when its power was not fully consolidated and its leadership not fully concentrated in Hitler—from the point of view of most film historians. Interpretations of the film often pick up the thread of one or the other of these stories, praising the film as a great piece of film art or condemning the film as a blatant piece of Nazi propaganda.

We often want to consider how a film relates to the previous work and continuing preoccupations of the filmmaker, to how the filmmaker might un-

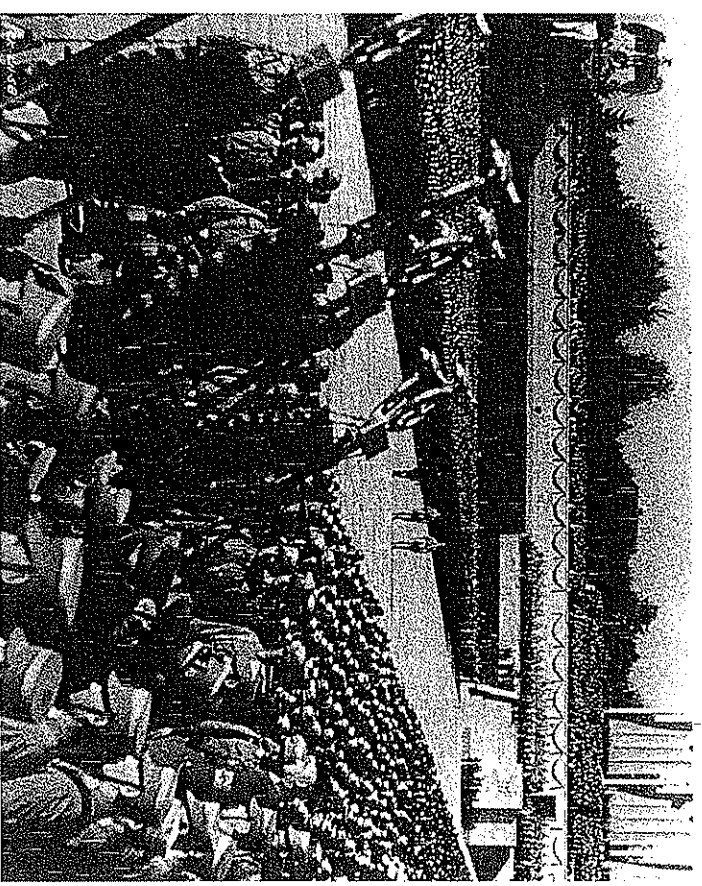


*Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935)

This dramatically choreographed entrance by the three Nazi leaders stresses the utter centrality of the all-powerful leader in relation to the attendant masses of troops. George Lucas replicated this choreography at the end of *Star Wars* as if the hero-worship could be extracted from its fascist context and applied to Han Solo, Chewbacca, and Luke Skywalker as "good old boys."

derstand and explain her intentions or motives, and how these considerations relate to the general social context in which the work was made. This reference back to the filmmaker and the context of production is one of the ways in which we can discuss what a film is about. Such background stories do not exhaust our curiosity, however, and we need to take statements of intention with a grain of salt since the effect of a work on others, and its interpretation, may be quite different from the intentions of its maker.

There is also the story of the text itself and our understanding and interpretation of this story. This is the standard task of critical analysis and the usual focus of film history and criticism. We now concentrate on what the film itself reveals to us about the relation between filmmaker and subject and what, for documentary, the film reveals to us about the world we occupy.



*Triumph of the Will*

By shifting to a different angle, Riefenstahl draws the leaders into closer proximity to the masses while still maintaining a vivid sense of physical distance and hierarchical distinction.

Finally, there is the story of the viewer. Every viewer comes to new experiences, such as watching a film, with perspective and motives based on previous experience. Jean-Luc Godard's great film *Contempt* (1963) refers to this phenomenon directly. A screenwriter, Paul, is given the task of revising an adaptation of Homer's *The Odyssey* for the screen. Meanwhile, his wife feels that he has betrayed their relationship by his complicity with the producer's advances toward her. The writer slowly becomes defensive and jealous. In the midst of his own marital conflict he claims that the central theme of *The Odyssey* is infidelity. Why? Because, according to Paul, Penelope has cheated on Odysseus for some time. He is, however, fully aware of it; he deliberately delays his return to postpone the moment of necessary confrontation when he must face the full consequences of this betrayal! Paul has reversed the usual interpretation of this classic text, where Penelope faithfully awaits her husband's return, as a result of projecting his own experiences onto the story itself. Although aberrant as an interpreta-

tion, this projection of personal experience onto Homer's story achieves a certain level of credibility. It is a perfect example of how the story of the viewer or audience changes the meaning of the story of the work itself.

As audience members we often find what we want, or need, to find in films, sometimes at the expense of what the film has to offer others. Different audiences will see different things; introducing or promoting a film in a particular way can coach viewers to regard it one way rather than others; this practice can help filter out interpretations that project stories of personal experience onto the story of the film. The practices of members of other cultures can seem bizarre and "unnatural" to viewers from a different culture, for example. Watching, without any preparation, *Les Maitres Fous* (1955), in which Hauka tribesmen enter into a trance and become Hauka spirits, during which they troth at the mouth, drool, sacrifice a live chicken, and eat the flesh of a dog, or *The Nuer* (1970), in which a Nuer boy has several cuts made across the width of his forehead as a rite of passage into male adulthood, can prompt some viewers to feelings of revision or nausea. These feelings tell us about the story of the audience. They say more about the audience's understanding of appropriate conduct, control of the body, and the sight of blood than they do about another culture's practices. Placing these films within an ethnographic frame that draws attention to the larger issues of cross-cultural interpretation and of cultural bias encourages a focus on the story told by the film over the story we may be inclined to project onto it.

Our own predispositions and experiences cannot be screened out entirely, nor should they be. Documentaries often pitch themselves to tap into the stories we bring to them as a way of establishing rapport rather than revision or projection. They may appeal to our sense of curiosity or our desire for an explanation of American policy toward the war against Vietnam, or Iraq, or Grenada, or Haiti, or Serbia, for example. Our desire to hear a story that strengthens our preexisting assumptions and predispositions often draws us to particular documentaries. Skill in the use of the rhetorical techniques for creating credible, convincing, compelling accounts depends on knowing one's audience and knowing how to enlist its common sense attitudes and pre-existing stories for specific ends.

For example, a film such as *Operation Abolition*, which describes protests against a set of hearings by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) into Communist agitation in the San Francisco Bay Area in May 1960 as the work of dangerous extremists, readily taps into the stories some audience members will already bring with them about a looming, sinister Communist menace to American society.

By contrast, *Operation Correction* (1961), which recounts the same

events and uses much of the same footage, argues that the violence surrounding the protests was instigated by the police. By showing the actual chronology of occurrences, it further claims that *Operation Abolition* deliberately reverses chronology and falsely juxtaposes events to blame the protestors for what the police provoked. *Operation Correction* has more ready-made appeal to audience members who come to film already suspicious of the perpetrators of the Red Scare in postwar America.

The assumptions and expectations we bring to a film, particularly a documentary, can have a significant effect on our reception of the film. They are one dimension of what we need to take into account as we ask what a documentary is about. The bulk of this book looks at the stories told by documentary films themselves, but alongside the subjects spoken about within the films hover the stories of filmmakers and their preoccupations, on the one hand, and of audiences and their predispositions, on the other.

## CONCRETE EVENTS AND ABSTRACT CONCEPTS

Before considering some specific topics that documentaries have frequently addressed, we should note that the concepts and issues we say documentaries are about are themselves invisible. We cannot see poverty as a concept, for example; we can see only specific signs and symptoms of a deprived or debased existence, to which we then assign the concept "poverty." (Some viewers, following other dispositions, might assign other concepts to the same images such as "white trash" or "ghetto life.") That is to say, the documentary value of non-fiction films lies in how they give visual, and audible, representation to topics for which our written or spoken language gives us concepts. Photographic images do not give us the concepts; they give us examples. (This is why so many documentaries rely on a spoken commentary to guide the viewer to the "correct" interpretation of the images that illustrate what's said.) Documentaries offer the sensuous experience of sounds and images organized in such a way that they come to stand for something more than mere passing impressions: they come to stand for qualities and concepts of a more abstract nature.

Frederick Wiseman's *Hospital* (1970), for example, observes a series of encounters between patients and staff in a generic urban hospital (New York City's Metropolitan Hospital), but amounts to more than an informational or instructional account of how the hospital works. The film becomes a representation of, or perspective on, how *hospitals* work. It possesses its own distinct voice or point of view. Wiseman's organization of these specific encounters come to stand for a perspective on basic concepts such as "med-

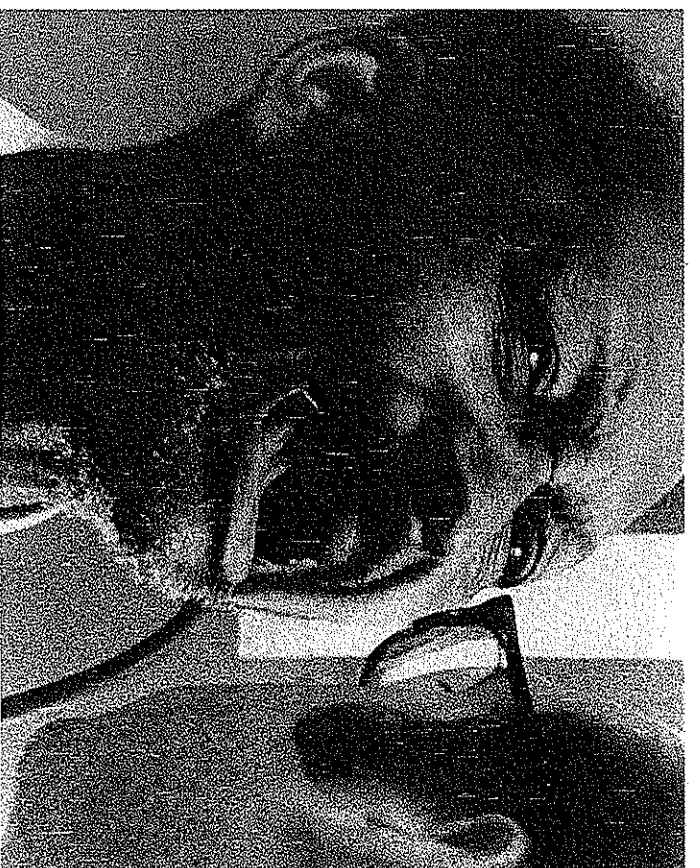
ical ethics," "bureaucracy," "class difference," and "quality of life." We derive these concepts, intangible and invisible themselves, from the scenes Wiseman puts before us, just as we infer from his editing and organization of the film what Wiseman's views are on how well this particular hospital fulfills its duties and obligations.

Similarly, John Huston could say, in written English, "War is hell" or "The ordinary soldier pays with his life for what generals decide," but his film *The Battle of San Pietro* shows us what war is like so that we may arrive at such thematic abstractions ourselves from the immediate experience of Huston's choice of specific moments of war. Huston's act of showing becomes more than a mere record or display because it is organized through specific acts of selection and arrangement, such as a voice-over comment, by Huston himself as the narrator, to "Note the interesting treatment of the chance" of the San Pietro town church when what we see is its bombed-out ruins. The "incidental" reference to carnage in the tone and vocabulary of architectural design creates a vivid sense of irony: it is as if Huston were saying, "War is hell—and even more so when we do not even see it as such."

Put differently, documentary films usually contain a tension between the specific and the general, between historically unique moments and generalizations. Without generalizing, potential documentaries would be little more than records of specific events and experiences. Were they nothing but generalizations, documentaries would be little more than abstract treatises. It is the combination of the two, the individual shots and scenes that locate us in a particular time and place and the organization of these elements into a larger whole, that gives documentary film and video its power and fascination.

Most of the topics that we identify as common topics in documentary filmmaking, such as war, violence, biography, sexuality, ethnicity, and so on, are abstractions derived from but not identical to specific experiences. They are ways of bundling experience into larger categories, or gestalts, that have the distinct qualities of their own. This is what we mean when we say that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Documentary films do precisely this: they bundle shots and scenes into larger categories or gestalts, what we call concepts. This is what allows us to treat them as something other than straightforward records or mere footage. Documentaries are *organized* sequences of shots that are about something conceptual or abstract because of this organization (such as a problem/solution structure, a story with a beginning and end, a focus on a crisis, an emphasis on a tone or mood, and so on).

What specific kind of concepts or issues do documentaries address? In general, they address those concepts and issues over which there is ap-



*Hospital* (Frederick Wiseman, 1970). Photo courtesy of Zipproah Films, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Frederick Wiseman exhibits a relentless empiricism that carries hints of surrealism and the alter of the absurd for some viewers. His focus on institutions and social practices from high schools to department stores provides a remarkable study of contemporary American life. His mosaic-like pattern of numerous events that do not follow a single character or issue and that are not united by a voice-over commentary demands that the viewer respond to the often intense charge of the immediate moment and discern the larger patterns of power and control, need and response within the specific social framework that the film addresses.

preciable social concern or debate. If a concept is not in doubt, such as the condensation of liquids as temperatures fall or the evaporation of liquids as temperatures rise, there is little call for a documentary film to address it. An informational or instructional film may still be of use to explain and exemplify the concept, but its organization is strictly devoted to conveying factual information and consolidating our grasp of an undisputed concept rather than coloring or inflecting our very understanding of the concept itself. Their interest as documentaries is close to nil. It is *debated concepts* and *contested issues* that documentaries routinely address.

Debates and contestation surround the basic social institutions and practices of our society. Social practices are precisely that: the conventional way

of doing things. They could be otherwise. For example, many serious issues of law are resolved by juries in the United States and by judges in Europe. A different judge or jury may very well come to a different conclusion about the same issue. Children may feel they owe a debt to their parents after they become adults themselves, or not, depending on the conventions of a culture and an individual's own relation to those conventions and to their actual parents. A woman may feel she deserves, and be prepared to demand, opportunity and treatment equal to that given men, or not, depending on the prevailing social practices and her personal attitude toward them.

Social practices gain support from the ways in which various ideals get attached to them. These ideals or values are then adopted by those engaged in a specific social practice. We believe women should remain at home and men work because this fulfills an ideal we have about family life and the raising of children, for example; or, conversely, we believe men and women should contribute to child-raising equally because this fulfills an ideal we have about equality between the sexes.

With most social practices, where more than one way of doing things is possible and where more than one set of values or ideals can be attached and adopted, different approaches must contend with each other. Dominant values must struggle to remain dominant. Alternative values must struggle to gain legitimacy. We enter contested terrain where different ideals and values compete for our allegiance. This competition gets played out in an ideological arena rather than by coercive means. Dominant and alternative practices seek to persuade us of their value rather than physically force us to comply. (Force remains a last resort.) Persuasion, though, requires a means of representing an acceptable way of doing things, a desirable course of action, a preferable solution that makes these options ones we will feel disposed to make our own. Persuasion requires communication, and communication depends on a means of representation, from written languages to dress codes, from television to film, from video to the web. These sign systems are the fundamental means of persuasive representation.

## THE CHALLENGE OF PERSUASION

In the Western tradition, the different uses to which spoken and written language can be put has led to a classification scheme that sketches out three broad categories: poetics and narrative (for telling stories and evoking moods), logic (for matters conducted in the spirit of scientific or philosophic inquiry), and rhetoric (for creating consensus or winning agreement on issues open to debate). Each of these three great divisions of language has

a particular sphere to which it is most appropriate, but they are not mutually exclusive: elements of narrative (suspense or point of view) and poetic figures of speech (metaphor or simile) color both scientific and rhetorical discourse; persuasive tactics sometimes play a central role in both story telling and scientific reasoning. (Galileo, for example, had to couch much of his argument against considering the earth as the center of the universe in terms that would persuade the Church hierarchy and not seem blasphemous; this challenge called for rhetorical skill as much as for logical proof.)

In general, then, we can say documentary is about the effort to convince, persuade, or predispose us to a particular view of the actual world we occupy. Documentary work does not appeal primarily or exclusively to our aesthetic sensibility; it may entertain or please, but does so in relation to a rhetorical or persuasive effort aimed at the existing social world. Documentary not only activates our aesthetic awareness (unlike a strictly informational or training film), it also activates our social consciousness. This is a disappointment to some, who yearn for the pleasure of escaping into the imaginary worlds of fiction, but it is a source of stimulation for others, who hunger for imaginative, passionate engagement with the pressing issues and concerns of the day.

In ancient times rhetoric, or oratory, garnered less respect than logic, or philosophy, because it seemed to be a concession to those aspects of human affairs not yet subject to the rule of reason. Our experience of the course of some two thousand years of additional history, our acquaintance with Sigmund Freud and the idea of the unconscious, and our awareness of the links between power and knowledge, belief and ideology give us reason to suspect that rhetoric is not the bastard child of logic but more likely its master. At the very least we can say that rhetoric is an indispensable ally in those situations where we must speak about issues for which widespread agreement does not exist. Put differently, if an issue has not yet been definitively decided, or if agreement cannot be definitively achieved, documentary film is one important means for disposing us to see that issue from a specific perspective. Most social practices—from family life to social welfare, from war to urban planning—occupy contested territory. Documentary film and video engages us on just such territory.

Rhetoric, or oratory, then, is the use of language of particular interest to the study of documentary film and video. The topics that documentary is about often belong to the three kinds of issues that were considered the proper domain of rhetoric. These issues fall into the three classic divisions of rhetoric. These divisions identify most, but not all, of the issues documentaries address.



## Legislative or Deliberative

This is the domain of encouraging or discouraging, exhorting or dissuading others on a course of public action. Political issues of social policy such as war, welfare, conservation, abortion, artificial reproduction, national identity, and international relations belong to this domain. Deliberations face toward the future and pose questions of what is to be done. A problem/solution structure fits deliberation comfortably; it allows the expediency or harmfulness of different choices to receive careful scrutiny. Films from *Smoke Menace*, favoring gas heat over smog-producing coal, and *Housing Problems*, favoring government-sponsored housing to eliminate slums, to *Why Vietnam?*, supporting American involvement in Vietnam, and *It's Elementary: Gay Issues in School*, attacking homophobia and supporting efforts to eliminate stereotyping and violence, exemplify the deliberative use of rhetoric in documentary.

## Judicial or Historical

This is the domain of evaluating (accusing or defending, justifying or criticizing) previous actions. The judicial orator looks toward the past and poses questions of "What really happened?" These are questions of fact and interpretation, where guilt or innocence is at stake in relation to the law and truth or falsehood at stake in relation to history. The orator sets out to see justice done or to establish the truth, matters that would call for definitive resolution, although such resolution is seldom achieved in undisputed form (verdicts are appealed, laws changed, and histories revised).

In judicial as in deliberative rhetoric, public issues of morality and tradition, value and belief are put to the test. These are cases where "the truth" in any definitive sense is not entirely certain. The issue is open to doubt. Trials exist to put doubt to rest, but do so on the basis of evidence and argument that is, in its totality, less than scientific.

Were logic to prevail, the outcome of trials would not be subject to appeal, and questions of guilt and innocence would not persist despite the verdict of a jury. That we rely on verdicts rather than scientific proofs, and turn to the judgment of our peers rather than allow experts and specialists to decide, hints at the fundamental undecidability of issues involving the past.

Similarly, history writing functions like a trial, putting the past into the witness box to tell its story of what happened while we, the readers or viewers, attend, noting the point of view or line of argument of the historian as we arrive at a judgment. That we turn to more than one account of events to form our own view hints at the fundamental undecidability of the past. *Shoah*, on questions of guilt and responsibility for the Holocaust, *The Thin*



## FAR FROM POLAND

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135 Hudson Street, NY, NY 10013  
(212) 226-2462

TOP: Anna Walentynowicz, Gdansk, 1980  
BOTTOM: Ruth Maleszewska in the role of Anna Walentynowicz

*Far from Poland* (Jill Godmilow, 1984). Photos by Mark Magill, courtesy of Jill Godmilow.

Jill Godmilow explores the dilemma facing the documentarian who cannot be there, on the spot where events occur. The Solidarity movement transformed Polish society, but Godmilow could not secure a visa to enter Poland as a filmmaker. How could she represent the movement and her own dilemma? She opted for a technique older than Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*: reenactment.

Instead of treating reenactments as if they were fully authentic, however, Godmilow makes it clear to us that what we see represents situations and events we cannot see directly. Godmilow recruits individuals to play the roles of Solidarity participants for her film. She herself plays the role of a filmmaker trying to make a film about the Solidarity movement.

*Blue Line*, on an individual case of guilt or innocence, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, on the history of Russia leading up to the revolution of 1917, and *Eyes on the Prize*, about the history of the civil rights movement in the United States, exemplify the range of documentary filmmaking in the judicial or historical domain.

### Ceremonial or Panegyric

This is the domain of praising or blaming others, of evoking qualities and establishing attitudes toward people and their accomplishments. This rhetoric of assessment complements deliberative and judicial rhetoric to enhance the moral weight of an argument. The orator often looks to the present but may draw heavily on the past to prove worthiness or unworthiness. Rules of evidence and argumentative procedure, however, are less firmly established for ceremonial rhetoric than for deliberative or judicial. Character can be made, or unmade, by a variety of means; fairness and impartiality are not always honored.

Much of what we can categorize as ceremonial rhetoric could also be called biographical, essayistic, or poetic: it addresses a person or situation and sets out to supply an affective, moral coloration to it. It seeks to render people, places, and things in pleasing or displeasing tonalities.

In some ways ceremonial rhetoric is similar to description in narrative: at times description seems extraneous to the primary business of advancing the plot; at other times it seems vital if the plot is to have any texture or resonance at all. "Boy meets girl" is altogether too bare-boned a plot to hold interest until descriptive strategies give some distinctiveness and life to a particular "boy" and "girl."

Similarly, commemorative rhetoric can give life to deliberative and judicial rhetoric as well as stand on its own as a more poetic form of description. In this way it differs from a prosaic biography that sketches the chronological details of a given life. Commemorative rhetoric sets out to give moral coloration to a person's life so that we may deem it worthy of emulation and respect or of demonization and rejection. That we remain uncertain of our final judgment of others, that no single, agreed-upon set of standards exists in our society, and that no one set of procedures for consistently applying such standards enjoys universal acceptance are factors that make rhetoric necessary. We are once again in the realm of the contested or undecidable. It is the task of rhetoric to move us toward decision and judgment.

*Nanook of the North*, with its portrait of Nanook as a worthy hunter and father; *Nai: Story of a Kung Woman*, as the portrait of a hard-pressed but strong-willed Kung woman over a period of some twenty years; *Lone Boy*,

on Paul Anka as a dubious example of the making of a young male singing sensation; and *Paris Is Burning*, as a sympathetic and respectful description of the lives of individuals within a black and Latino urban gay subculture of masquerade and performance, give some idea of the range of films that take up topics for which commemorative rhetoric is appropriate.

### THE POWER OF METAPHOR

One final generalization about the topics of documentaries is that they are about those concepts and issues that we need metaphors to describe. That is to say, some topics lend themselves to straightforward description; few issues are involved, and a prosaic, linear account is all we want or need. The manufacture of silicon chips might be such a topic, and the use of various grips and strokes in tennis another. Love, war, and family, on the other hand, are topics that a straightforward, dictionary-style definition does not exhaust. We may know what these subjects mean in a dictionary sense ("strong affection for or attraction to another," "armed, hostile conflict between states," "the basic unit in society, having as its nucleus at least one parent and one child"), but still debate whether they are a blessing or a curse, heaven or hell. We may debate such questions about love, war, family, and other topics in general, or we may focus on specific instances. Perhaps war is a necessary evil, but is America justified in bombing Vietnam, or Kosovo? Maybe families are a sacred form of union, but is the Loud family exemplary of such union? (The Louds are the family at the center of the multi-part documentary *An American Family*.) Documentary films enter into the debate to offer persuasive accounts or arguments. They furnish us with a way of saying, "War is hell" or "Families are snake pits" or "a haven." These metaphors enrich and enliven our grasp of dictionary definitions and give them a moral, social, and political coloration.

Social practices, basic domains of human experience, lend themselves to metaphor. We can know what a family is in a dictionary sense and still want to know what family is like in a more metaphorical sense. Metaphors come into service to give us ways of likening war or love or family to something else that has similar qualities or values. Depending on whether we say that a family is a haven in a heartless world, as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* suggests, or a family is a battlefield, as *A Married Couple* (1970) suggests, our view of family life will differ considerably. Similarly, if war is a kind of hell and if hell is a painful, undesirable state, then war must be something to avoid, as *The Battle of San Pietro* suggests. If war is a rite of passage or test of manhood, and if such rites and tests provide a sense of iden-



tivity and even glory, then war must be something to embrace, as *The Spanish Earth* suggests. It all depends on the values we assign to war in general or to a specific war or a given side in a war. The values we favor or reject are often indicated by metaphor.

Documentary film as an organized sequence of sounds and images constructs metaphors that assign or infer, affirm or contest values that surround social practices about which we as a society remain divided. They use deliberative, judicial, and panegyric rhetoric, among other strategies, to persuade us of their orientation, judgment, or particular argument.

Metaphors help us define or understand things in terms of how they look or feel; they establish a likeness that involves our own physical or experiential encounter with a situation rather than our knowledge of a standard dictionary definition. Metaphors draw on basic forms of personal experience like physical orientation (up, down, above, below) to assign values to social concepts. Success, for example, may be represented as *rising* to a higher station in life, not literally moving to a place of greater altitude but metaphorically moving to a social position of greater esteem.

Such representations are readily available to film, where we can show someone ascending an actual slope as a metaphor for success or show images of dead bodies as a metaphor for war as hell. The selection and arrangement of sounds and images are sensuous and real; they provide an immediate form of audible and visual experience, but they also become, through their organization into a larger whole, a metaphorical representation of what something in the historical world is like.

What is it like to negotiate the marriage of a young woman in Turkish society? It is *like this* when, in *Wedding Camels*, we see the particular negotiations surrounding a particular wedding but understand them to stand for a representation of wedding negotiations in the culture as a whole. Love is *like this* in *A Married Couple*, *Sherman's March*, or *Silverlake Life*; war is *like this* in *Frank, A Vietnam Veteran*, *The Anderson Platoon*, or *Victory at Sea*; family is *like this* in *Finding Christa*, *The Body Beautiful*, or *Nobody's Business*.

We may know the dictionary definition for these social practices and still hunger for metaphorical representations to help us understand what values to attach to these social practices. Documentaries give us the sense that we can understand how other social actors experience situations and events that fall into familiar categories (family life, health care, sexual orientation, social justice, death, and so on). Documentaries offer an orientation to the experience of others and, by extension, to the social practices we share with them.

Whether we accept the perspectives and arguments of documentary

films as our own or not will depend heavily on the stylistic and rhetorical power of the film. The oscillation between the specific and the general in documentary, though, results from the effectiveness of allowing a particular representation to (metaphorically) stand for a general orientation or assessment of a given issue or topic. Metaphorical understanding is often the most meaningful and persuasive way of convincing us of the merit of one perspective over others. A definition of genocide may sound appalling ("the deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group"); but the sound and image of a specific bulldozer pushing a large mass of individual naked bodies into an open trench at a given, historical moment is appalling in a more vivid, indelible way. If genocide is *like this*, as the representation of it in *Night and Fog* suggests, the metaphor presents us with a perspective and orientation of formidable power.

What we speak about in documentary then are those subjects that engage us most passionately, and divisively, in life. These subjects follow the pathways of our desire as we come to terms with what it means to take on an identity, to have intimate, private connection to an other, and to belong in the public company of others. Personal identity, sexual intimacy, and social belonging are another way of defining the subjects of documentary film.

Along the paths marked out by our desires in these three directions we find such basic subjects as biography and autobiography, gender and sexuality, family and intimate relationships, labor and class, power and hierarchy, violence and war, economics, nationality, ethnicity, race, social justice and social change, history and culture. Documentaries provide us with representations of what encounters with these different forms of social practices have been like for other people in other places from a perspective designed to predispose us toward a particular perspective of our own.

*The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), for example, recounts the story of the final years of Romanov rule in Russia and the early days of the Soviet revolution. It sets up a series of striking parallels and contrasts between life for the Czar, his family, and his court and life for the majority of the Russian people. Life under the Romanovs becomes a world of vivid oppositions: leisure or labor, wealth or poverty, elegance or necessity. Esther Shub provides this perspective by way of archival film material that she reassembles into an indictment. She accentuates the contrasts with intertitles, juxtapositions, and individual shots that sometimes ironically and sometimes causally declare the moral bankruptcy of a regime indifferent to the condition of its subjects.

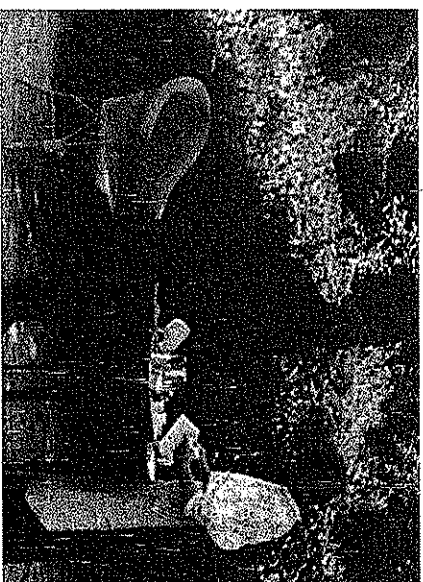
In one shot, for example, a count and his wife take tea at an outdoor table. After they rise to leave, a servant appears to remove the tea service. The class relation is clearly revealed through these actions alone, but Shub's

archival clip goes one step further: when we look closely we see that the servant is standing in the deep background of the shot all along, waiting for his cue to move forward and reclaim the tea service. Shub has found an early home movie that this count staged to document his estate life in the way that landscape paintings documented the wealth of the landed gentry, only now the document's moral value is reversed: it stands as a condemnation of what it once celebrated. The very act of staging the rituals of domination and servitude, which was perhaps meant to pass unnoticed originally, becomes, itself, evidence of the willingness to use others to maintain privilege that Shub argues brought the Romanovs down.

In another documentary of social change, Jill Godmilow provides an account of the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland and the collapse of Communist rule. In contrast to Shub, Godmilow does not have access to a bounty of archival footage, nor does she even have access to events as they unfold. Various obstacles keep her in New York as Solidarity makes its advances toward power. How can Godmilow represent what she cannot witness? *Far from Poland* (1984) adopts a reflexive rather than an expository strategy. Godmilow makes the film into a work that is, all at once, *about* the difficulties of representation, about the convention of "being there" as testament to the truth of what is said, about the motivations filmmakers have for representing others when this act distorts as readily as it reveals, and about this specific historical moment of social transformation. The perspective is one that warns us about the powers of documentary representation at the same time as it expresses a clear solidarity with the social movement it can only partially and incompletely represent.

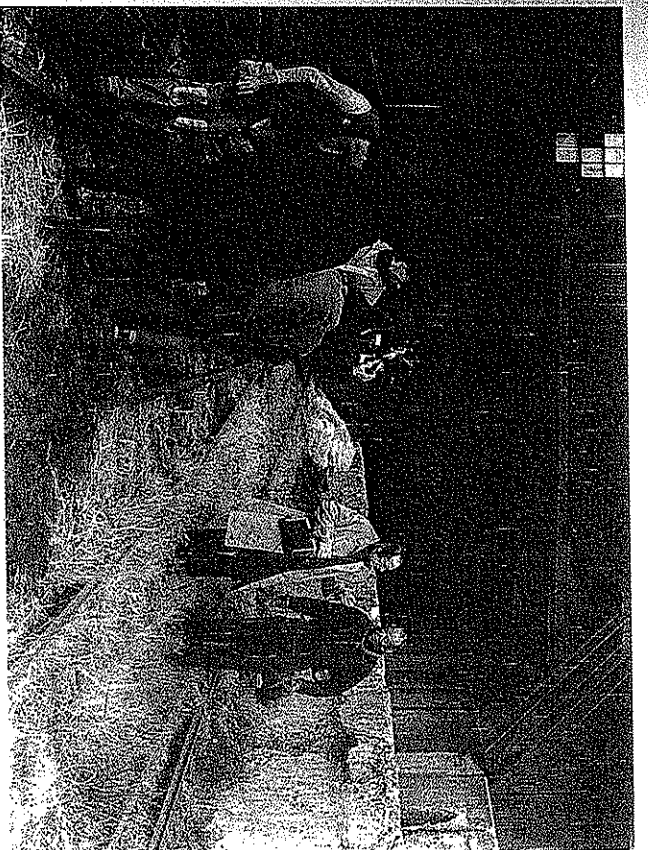
Similarly, *Dead Birds* is an ethnographic account of life among the Dani of the New Guinea Highlands, a tribe still living in a nearly pre-contact state at the time of this expedition in 1961. The film has as a central preoccupation ritual violence among the Dani. Adopting a poetic, reflective tone, Gardner suggests that the rigors and hazards of ritual warfare, in which large contingents of men from neighboring groups hurl spears and shoot arrows at each other until someone is wounded or killed, play a vital role in defining individual and cultural identity. Life is *like this*, Gardner suggests, when we engage in regulated forms of social aggression, the better to maintain a sense of social coherence.

By contrast, Mitchell Block's *No Lies*, like Godmilow's *Far from Poland*, takes a more reflexive view of ritual violence. Block uses the psychic violence of an intrusive, tactless filmmaker who persists in drawing out, and judging, the story of how his friend was raped as a commentary not only on the problem of rape and our social attitudes toward it, as men and women, but also on the problem of the ritual violence of representing the



*The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (Esther Shub, 1927)

This documentary image of a count and his wife clearly required not simply its subjects' consent but their active orchestration: as a home movie, it demonstrates their everyday ritual, in pre-revolutionary Russia, of taking tea in the garden. The couple leaves the frame, and we may assume the shot has fulfilled its usefulness. But no: the shot continues, and a pair of servants enters to remove the used tea service. Shub converts the home movie into a social document of class structure and hierarchy. In a good print it is even possible to see the male servant waiting in the background, behind the shrubs, for his cue to enter the foreground, or, no doubt in Shub's mind, the historical stage.



Far from Poland. Photo by David Dekok, courtesy of Jill Godmilow.

Shooting "on location" for the film, but with Shamokin, Pennsylvania, adds a reflexive note that makes us aware of the substitutions. This may prompt us to question the limitations and values of the trade-off between a sense of authenticity and the forms of truth it supports. Her tactics, at the very least, contrast strikingly with those of the television newscasts of the same events.

victims of rape as targets for a medium that perpetuates the victimization of the original act. The filmmaker psychically abuses his subject just as her assailant physically abused her. By representing this process of abuse as a function of documentary representation, Block calls into question the ethical underpinnings of the relation between filmmaker and subject in a direct and pointed way. He asks whether the act of filming an interview with a woman who has been raped in *this* way is *like* the actual rape she has already experienced.

As a final example, consider two representations of family relations. In *Four Families* (1959), Margaret Mead adopts the expository mode (a voice-over commentary) to compare and contrast family life among four families from four different cultures: France, India, Japan, and Canada. She applies conceptual categories such as child raising, discipline, male and female roles, and so on to make points about the many similarities and some of the

differences among cultures. The specific families we see serve as examples. We do not get to know individual family members in any complex sense. Examples of their behavior and interaction are selected to illustrate qualities of the culture as a whole rather than of the social actors as individuals. Margaret Mead informs us that family life in these cultures is *like this*.

This representation of the family as a culturally homogenous entity, best understood when compared to families from another culture, contrasts sharply with the view we have in Ngozi Onwurah's *The Body Beautiful* (1991). Onwurah adopts a performative approach to the subject of her relationship to her own mother. The filmmaker is the product of a mixed-race marriage between her African father and her British mother. Via a poetic voice-over and reenacted childhood scenes that feature her actual mother, the filmmaker describes the ambivalence she felt as a child toward her working-class and, from her youthful perspective, unattractive mother. Only in retrospect does she come to recognize the hardship her mother experienced and the sacrifices she made, beginning with the choice to see her pregnancy with Ngozi to term, even when it meant that she would have to undergo a radical mastectomy for a cancer that might have been treated without removing her breast had she done so during the pregnancy, but at risk to her growing fetus.

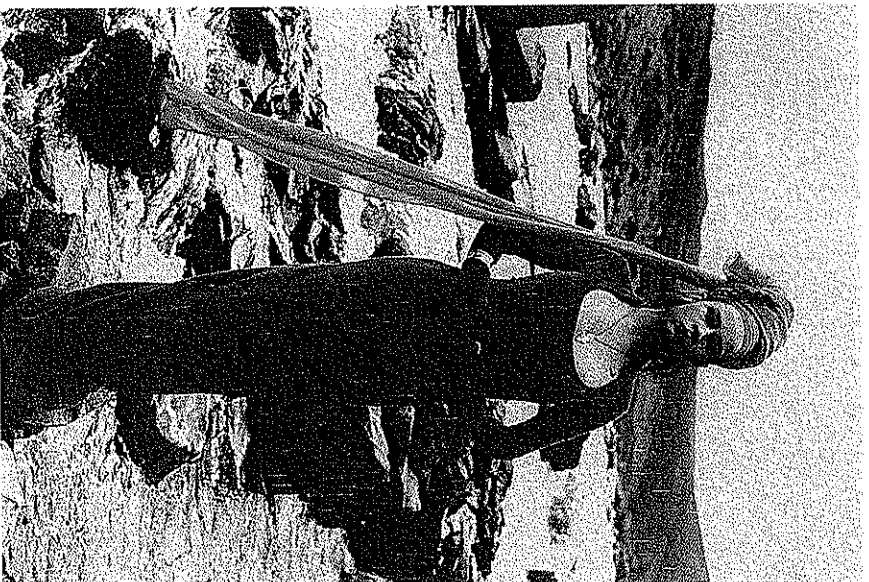
Onwurah enacts a drama of reconciliation and love that is highly performative in its emphasis on the filmmaker's own subjective investment in the subject. (At one point, Onwurah stages an imaginary seduction and love scene between her mother and a younger black man that would not have occurred had Onwurah not chosen to stage it.) We learn no statistical facts about mixed-race marriages or the complexities of identifying differences in family structure at the level of national cultures. Instead, *The Body Beautiful* immerses us in a representation that suggests, "An ambivalent relationship to one's own mother is *like this*." The metaphor is all the more rooted and powerful when based on her own specific family.

The affective power of these two films is radically different, as are the claims to general social knowledge that each makes. Mead's film suggests that families can be understood in terms of a cross-cultural, comparative examination of categories that are given concrete exemplification via the four families selected to stand for the four cultures, whereas Onwurah's film suggests that families can be understood in terms of a highly localized, embodied sense of what the conflicts and dilemmas in one particular family, her own, were like. Just as Mead's film allows for particularization through the four families selected, but downplays it, Onwurah's film allows for generalization to issues of race, class, and nationality, but downplays that di-

tics and values of our culture. Rhetorical techniques are crucial in this arena since neither logic nor force can readily prevail. The arena is a small but compelling one in *The Body Beautiful* and a large but galvanizing one in *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*. In either case, documentary film and video moves us to understand and engage the historical world in ways that matter.

*The Body Beautiful* (Ngozi Onwurah, 1991).  
Photo courtesy of Women Make Movies.

Stan Martin poses during a fashion shoot in Onwurah's film about her relation to her own mother. The world of fashion photography represents an escape from the drab existence associated with her mother. An imaginary seduction scene that Onwurah stages with her own mother as one of the participant/actors suggests an attempt to transport her mother out of her ordinary existence into a world of fantasy. The larger theme of the film, however, is the process by which Onwurah comes to accept both her mother and all of the blunt realities of her mother's own life.



mension in favor of specificity. Both films adopt a "Family life is *like this*" form of metaphorical assertion, but they do so in very different ways.

In sum, documentary films and videos speak about the historical world in ways designed to move or persuade us. They tend to dwell on those aspects of experience that fall into the general categories of social practices and institutionally mediated relations: family life, sexual orientation, social conflict, war, nationality, ethnicity, history, and so on. They take up these issues from a particular point of view; they represent one way of seeing, and valuing or assessing, their subject. As such they become one voice among the many voices in an arena of social debate and contestation. This is the arena in which we vie for the support and belief of others in the name of a particular cause or system of values. It is, ultimately, an ideological arena that establishes our commitment to or detachment from the dominant prac-