

## Chapter 6

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### What Types of Documentary Are There?

#### GROUPING THE MANY VOICES OF DOCUMENTARY

Every documentary has its own distinct voice. Like every speaking voice, every cinematic voice has a style or “grain” all its own that acts like a signature or fingerprint. It attests to the individuality of the filmmaker or director or, sometimes, to the determining power of a sponsor or controlling organization. Television news has a voice of its own just as Fred Wiseman or Chris Marker, Esther Shub or Marina Goldovskaya does.

Individual voices lend themselves to an *auteur* theory of cinema, while shared voices lend themselves to a genre theory of cinema. Genre study considers the qualities that characterize various groupings of filmmakers and films. In documentary film and video, we can identify six modes of representation that function something like sub-genres of the documentary film genre itself: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, performative.

These six modes establish a loose framework of affiliation within which individuals may work; they set up conventions that a given film may adopt; and they provide specific expectations viewers anticipate having fulfilled. Each mode possesses examples that we can identify as prototypes or mod-

els: they seem to give exemplary expression to the most distinctive qualities of that mode. They cannot be copied, but they can be emulated as other filmmakers, in other voices, set out to represent aspects of the historical world from their own distinct perspectives.

The order of presentation for these six modes corresponds roughly to the chronology of their introduction. It may therefore seem to provide a history of documentary film, but it does so only imperfectly. A film identified with a given mode need not be so entirely. A reflexive documentary can contain sizable portions of observational or participatory footage; an expository documentary can include poetic or performative segments. The characteristics of a given mode function as a *dominant* in a given film: they give structure to the overall film, but they do not dictate or determine every aspect of its organization. Considerable latitude remains possible.

A more recent film need not have a more recent mode as its dominant. It can revert to an earlier mode while still including elements of later modes. A performative documentary can exhibit many qualities of a poetic documentary, for example. The modes do not represent an evolutionary chain in which later modes demonstrate superiority over earlier ones and vanquish them. Once established through a set of conventions and paradigmatic films, a given mode remains available to all. Expository documentary, for example, goes back to the 1920s but remains highly influential today. Most television news and reality TV shows depend heavily on its quite dated conventions, as do almost all science and nature documentaries, biographies such as the *A&E Biography* series, and the majority of large-scale historical documentaries such as *The Civil War* (1990), *Eyes on the Prize* (1987, 1990), *The American Cinema* (1994), or *The People's Century* (1998).

To some extent, each mode of documentary representation arises in part through a growing sense of dissatisfaction among filmmakers with a previous mode. In this sense the modes do convey some sense of a documentary history. The observational mode of representation arose, in part, from the availability of mobile 16mm cameras and magnetic tape recorders in the 1960s. Poetic documentary suddenly seemed too abstract and expository documentary too didactic when it now proved possible to film everyday events with minimal staging or intervention.

Observation was necessarily limited to the present moment as filmmakers recorded what happened before them. But observation shared a trait, or convention, with poetic and expository modes of representation: it, too, camouflaged the actual presence and shaping influence of the filmmaker. Participatory documentary took shape with the realization that filmmakers need not disguise their close relationship with their subjects by

telling stories or observing events that seemed to occur as if they were not there.

Intertitles in *Nanook*, for example, tell us that Nanook and his family face starvation if this great hunter of the north cannot find food, but they do not tell us what Flaherty himself ate or whether he made food available to Nanook. Flaherty asks us to suspend our disbelief in the fictional aspect of his story at the price of a certain dishonesty in what he reveals to us about his actual relation to his subject. With filmmakers like Jean Rouch (*Chronicle of a Summer*, 1960), Nick Broomfield (*The Aileen Wourmos Story*, 1992), Kazuo Hara (*The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On*, 1987), and Jon Silver (*Watsonville on Strike*, 1989) what happens *because of* the filmmaker's presence becomes as crucial as anything that happens *despite* his presence.

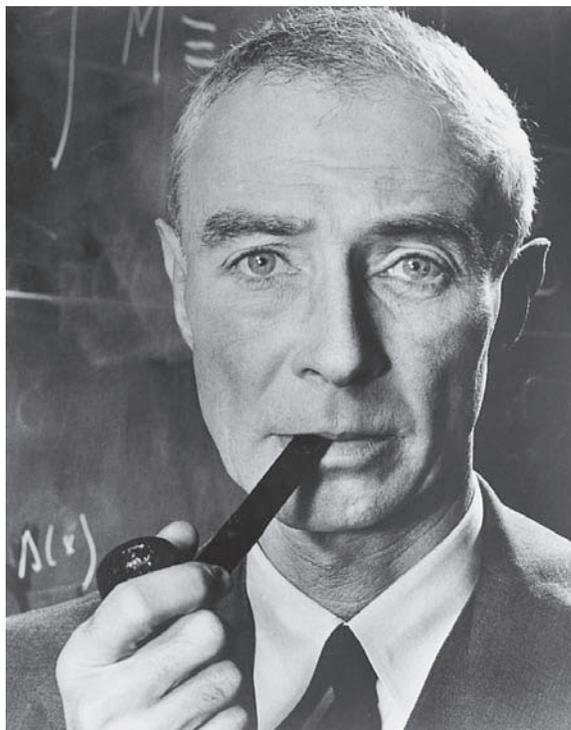
The desire to come up with different ways of representing the world contributes to the formation of each mode, as does a changing set of circumstances. New modes arise partly in response to perceived deficiencies in previous ones, but the perception of deficiency comes about partly from a sense of what it takes to represent the historical world from a particular perspective at a given moment in time. The seeming neutrality and "make of it what you will" quality of observational cinema arose at the end of the quiet fifties and during the heyday of descriptive, observation-based forms of sociology. It flourished in part as the embodiment of a presumed "end of ideology" and a fascination with the everyday world, but not necessarily of affinity with the social plight or political anger of those who occupy the margins of society.

Similarly, the emotional intensity and subjective expressiveness of performative documentary took shape in the 1980s and 1990s. It took strongest root among those groups whose sense of commonality had grown during this period as a result of an identity politics that affirmed the relative autonomy and social distinctiveness of marginalized groups. These films rejected techniques such as the voice-of-God commentary not because it lacked humility but because it belonged to an entire epistemology, or way of seeing and knowing the world, no longer deemed acceptable.

We do well to take with a grain of salt any claims that a new mode advances the art of cinema and captures aspects of the world never before possible. What changes is the *mode* of representation, not the quality or ultimate status of the representation. A new mode is not so much better as it is different, even though the idea of "improvement" is frequently touted, especially among champions and practitioners of a new mode. A new mode carries a different set of emphases and implications. It will eventually prove vulnerable, in turn, to criticism for limitations that yet another mode of rep-

*The Day after Trinity* (Jon Else, 1980). Photo courtesy of Jon Else.

Post-'60s reconsiderations of Cold War rhetoric invited a revision of the postwar record. Filmmakers such as Connie Field in *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* and John Else in *The Day after Trinity* recirculate historical footage in a new context. In this case, Else re-examines Robert J. Oppenheimer's hesitations and doubts about the development of the atomic bomb as a lost, or suppressed, voice of reason during a period of near-hysteria. Oppenheimer himself was accused of treason.



resentation promises to overcome. New modes signal less a better way to represent the historical world than a new dominant to organize a film, a new ideology to explain our relation to reality, and a new set of issues and desires to preoccupy an audience.

We can now say a bit more about each of the modes in turn.

## THE POETIC MODE

As we saw in Chapter 4, poetic documentary shares a common terrain with the modernist avant-garde. The poetic mode sacrifices the conventions of continuity editing and the sense of a very specific location in time and place that follows from it to explore associations and patterns that involve temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions. Social actors seldom take on the full-blooded form of characters with psychological complexity and a fixed view of the world. People more typically function on a par with other objects as raw material that filmmakers select and arrange into associations and patterns of their choosing. We get to know none of the social actors in Joris Ivens's *Rain* (1929), for example, but we do come to

appreciate the lyric impression Ivens creates of a summer shower passing over Amsterdam.

The poetic mode is particularly adept at opening up the possibility of alternative forms of knowledge to the straightforward transfer of information, the prosecution of a particular argument or point of view, or the presentation of reasoned propositions about problems in need of solution. This mode stresses mood, tone, and affect much more than displays of knowledge or acts of persuasion. The rhetorical element remains underdeveloped.

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *Play of Light: Black, White, Grey* (1930), for example, presents various views of one of his own kinetic sculptures to emphasize the gradations of light passing across the film frame rather than to document the material shape of the sculpture itself. The effect of this play of light on the viewer takes on more importance than the object it refers to in the historical world. Similarly, Jean Mitry's *Pacific 231* (1944) is in part a homage to Abel Gance's *La Roue* and in part a poetic evocation of the power and speed of a steam locomotive as it gradually builds up speed and hurtles toward its (unspecified) destination. The editing stresses rhythm and form more than it details the actual workings of a locomotive.

The documentary dimension to the poetic mode of representation stems largely from the degree to which modernist films rely on the historical world for their source material. Some avant-garde films such as Oscar Fischinger's *Composition in Blue* (1935) use abstract patterns of form or color or animated figures and have minimal relation to a documentary tradition of representing *the* historical world rather than *a* world of the artist's imagining. Poetic documentaries, though, draw on the historical world for their raw material but transform this material in distinctive ways. Francis Thompson's *N.Y., N.Y.* (1957), for example, uses shots of New York City that provide evidence of how New York looked in the mid-1950s but gives greater priority to how these shots can be selected and arranged to produce a poetic impression of the city as a mass of volume, color, and movement. Thompson's film continues the tradition of the city symphony film and affirms the poetic potential of documentary to see the historical world anew.

The poetic mode began in tandem with modernism as a way of representing reality in terms of a series of fragments, subjective impressions, incoherent acts, and loose associations. These qualities were often attributed to the transformations of industrialization generally and the effects of World War I in particular. The modernist event no longer seemed to make sense in traditional narrative, realist terms. Breaking up time and space into multiple perspectives, denying coherence to personalities vulnerable to eruptions from the unconscious, and refusing to provide solutions to insurmountable problems had the sense of an honesty about it even as it created



*Rain* (Joris Ivens, 1929). Photo courtesy of the European Foundation Joris Ivens.

Images such as this convey a feeling or impression of what a rain shower is like rather than convey information or an argument. This is a distinct and distinctly poetic perspective on the historical world. Pursuing such a perspective was a common goal of many who would later identify themselves more specifically as documentary or experimental filmmakers.

works of art that were puzzling or ambiguous in their effect. Although some films explored more classical conceptions of the poetic as a source of order, wholeness, and unity, this stress on fragmentation and ambiguity remains a prominent feature in many poetic documentaries.

*Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1928) and *L'Age d'or* (Luis Buñuel, 1930), for example, gave the impression of a documentary reality but then populated that reality with characters caught up in uncontrollable urges, abrupt shifts of time and place, and more puzzles than answers. Filmmakers like Kenneth Anger continued aspects of this poetic mode in films like *Scorpio Rising* (1963), a representation of ritual acts performed by members of a motorcycle gang, as did Chris Marker in *San Soleil* (1982), a complex meditation on filmmaking, memory, and post-colonialism. (At the time of their release, works like Anger's seemed firmly rooted in an experimental film tradition, but in retrospect we can see how they combine experimental and documentary elements. How we place them depends heavily on the assumptions we adopt about categories and genres.)

By contrast, work like Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934), on the untouched beauty of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) despite the inroads of commerce and colonialism, Bert Haanstra's *Glass* (1958), a tribute to the skill of traditional glass blowers and the beauty of their work, or Les Blank's *Always for Pleasure* (1978), a celebration of Mardi Gras festivities in New Orleans, return to a more classic sense of unity and beauty and discover traces of them in the historical world. The poetic mode has many facets, but they all emphasize the ways in which the filmmaker's voice gives fragments of the historical world a formal, aesthetic integrity peculiar to the film itself.

Péter Forgács's remarkable reworkings of amateur movies into historical documents stresses poetic, associative qualities over transferring information or winning us over to a particular point of view. *Free Fall* (1998), for example, chronicles the fate of European Jews in the 1930s and 40s through the home movies of a successful Jewish businessman, Gyorgy Peto, and *Danube Exodus* (1999) follows the journeys of a Danube cruise ship as it takes Jews from Hungary to the Black Sea on their flight to Palestine and then takes Germans from Bessarabia (the northern part of Romania at the time) as they are driven out by the Russians and evacuated to Germany, only to be relocated in Poland. The historical footage, freeze frames, slow motion, tinted images, selective moments of color, occasional titles to identify time and place, voices that recite diary entries, and haunting music build a tone and mood far more than they explain the war or describe its course of action.

## THE EXPOSITORY MODE

This mode assembles fragments of the historical world into a more rhetorical or argumentative frame than an aesthetic or poetic one. The expository mode addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that propose a perspective, advance an argument, or recount history. Expository films adopt either a voice-of-God commentary (the speaker is heard but never seen), such as we find in the *Why We Fight* series, *Victory at Sea* (1952–53), *The City* (1939), *Blood of the Beasts* (1949), and *Dead Birds* (1963), or utilize a voice-of-authority commentary (the speaker is heard and also seen), such as we find in television newscasts, *America's Most Wanted*, *The Selling of the Pentagon* (1971), *16 in Webster Groves* (1966), Robert Hughes's *The Shock of the New* (1980), Kenneth Clark's *Civilization*, or John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1974).

The voice-of-God tradition fostered the cultivation of the professionally trained, richly toned male voice of commentary that proved a hallmark of the expository mode even though some of the most impressive films chose



*Yosemite: The Fate of Heaven* (Jon Else, 1988). Photo courtesy of Jon Else.

The tension between public access and conservation is the focus of this film. Robert Redford's commentary falls into the category of voice-of-God address inasmuch as we never see Mr. Redford. To the extent that Mr. Redford's long-time advocacy for environmental issues makes him a more informed speaker than an anonymous commentator would be, he also fulfills the function of a voice of authority.

less polished voices precisely for the credibility gained by avoiding too much polish. Joris Ivens's great film urging support for the Republican defenders of Spanish democracy, *The Spanish Earth* (1937), for example, exists in at least three versions. None has a professional commentator. All three have identical image tracks, but the French version uses an ad-libbed commentary by the famous French film director Jean Renoir while the English versions rely on Orson Welles and Ernest Hemingway. Ivens chose Welles first, but his delivery proved a bit too elegant; it bestowed a humanistic compassion on the events where Ivens hoped for a tougher sense of visceral engagement. Hemingway, who had written the commentary, proved the more effective voice. He brought a matter-of-fact but clearly committed tone to a film that wanted to galvanize support more than compassion. (Some

prints still credit the voice-over to Welles even though the voice we hear is Hemingway's.)

Expository documentaries rely heavily on an informing logic carried by the spoken word. In a reversal of the traditional emphasis in film, images serve a supporting role. They illustrate, illuminate, evoke, or act in counterpoint to what is said. The commentary is typically presented as distinct from the images of the historical world that accompany it. It serves to organize these images and make sense of them just as a written caption guides our attention and emphasizes some of the many meanings and interpretations of a still image. The commentary is therefore presumed to be of a higher order than the accompanying images. It comes from some place that remains unspecified but associated with objectivity or omniscience. The commentary, in fact, represents the perspective or argument of the film. We take our cue from the commentary and understand the images as evidence or demonstration for what is said. Television news descriptions of famine in Ethiopia as “biblical,” for example, seemed proved by wide-angle shots of great masses of starving people clustered together on an open plain.

Editing in the expository mode generally serves less to establish a rhythm or formal pattern, as it does in the poetic mode, than to maintain the continuity of the spoken argument or perspective. We can call this evidentiary editing. Such editing may sacrifice spatial and temporal continuity to rope in images from far-flung places if they help advance the argument. The expository filmmaker often has greater freedom in the selection and arrangement of images than the fiction filmmaker. In *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) shots of arid prairie landscapes came from all over the Midwest, for example, to support the claim of widespread damage to the land.

The expository mode emphasizes the impression of objectivity and well-supported argument. The voice-over commentary seems literally “above” the fray; it has the capacity to judge actions in the historical world without being caught up in them. The professional commentator’s official tone, like the authoritative manner of news anchors and reporters, strives to build a sense of credibility from qualities such as distance, neutrality, disinterestedness, or omniscience. These qualities can be adapted to an ironic point of view such as we find in Charles Kuralt’s commentary for *16 in Webster Groves* or subverted even more thoroughly in a film such as *Land without Bread*, with its implicit attack on the very notion of objectivity.

Expository documentary facilitates generalization and large-scale argumentation. The images can support the basic claims of a general argument



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

The physical gap and hierarchical distinction between leader and followers again comes across clearly in this scene of Hitler's parade through the streets of Nuremberg.



*The Spanish Earth* (Joris Ivens, 1937)

Ivens's support for the Republican cause against the Nazi-backed rebellion of General Franco followed from his political commitment to democratic and socialist ideals. His de-emphasis on hierarchy in this shot of an officer and a soldier contrasts sharply with Riefenstahl's shooting style.



*Triumph of the Will*

The soldier's salute, above, parallels this low-angle view of the German eagle and Nazi swastika. Like Hitler, the eagle serves as a symbol of German power. It presides over the stream of marching troops that pass below it, galvanizing their movement into a tribute to national unity.



*The Spanish Earth*

In contrast to the pageantry of Riefenstahl's endless parades and speeches, Ivens captures the modest quality of everyday rural life in 1930s Spain. This image of the town, Fuenteduena, situated near the shifting battlefield, suggests how ordinary lives are jeopardized, not galvanized, by the fascist rebellion.

rather than construct a vivid sense of the particularities to a given corner of the world. The mode also affords an economy of analysis since points can be made succinctly and pointedly in words. Expository documentary is an ideal mode for conveying information or mobilizing support within a framework that pre-exists the film. In this case, a film will add to our stockpile of knowledge but not challenge or subvert the categories by which such knowledge gets organized. Common sense makes a perfect basis for this type of representation about the world since common sense, like rhetoric, is less subject to logic than to belief.

Frank Capra could organize much of his argument for why young American men should willingly join the battle during World War II in the *Why We Fight* series, for example, by appealing to a mix of native patriotism, the ideals of American democracy, the atrocities of the Axis war machine, and the malignant evil of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito. In the black and white alternatives of a “free world” versus a “slave world,” who would not choose to defend a free world? Common sense made the answer simple—to the predominantly white audience thoroughly imbued with a “melting pot” belief in American values.

Some fifty years later, Capra’s appeal seems remarkably naive and overblown in its treatment of patriotic virtue and democratic ideals. Common sense is less an enduring than a historically conditioned set of values and perspectives. For this reason some expository films that seem classic examples of oratorical persuasiveness at one moment will seem quite dated at another. The basic argument may still have merit, but what counts as common sense may change considerably.

## THE OBSERVATIONAL MODE

Poetic and expository modes of documentary often sacrificed the specific act of filming people to construct formal patterns or persuasive arguments. The filmmaker gathered the necessary raw materials and then fashioned a meditation, perspective, or argument from them. What if the filmmaker were simply to observe what happens in front of the camera without overt intervention? Would this not be a new, compelling form of documentation?

Developments in Canada, Europe, and the United States in the years after World War II culminated around 1960 in various 16mm cameras such as the Arriflex and Auricon and tape recorders such as the Nagra that could be easily handled by one person. Speech could now be synchronized with images without the use of bulky equipment or cables that tethered recorders and camera together. The camera and tape recorder could move freely about a scene and record what happened as it happened.



*Victory at Sea* (Henry Solomon and Isaac Kleinerman, 1952–53)

Like *Night and Fog*, *Victory at Sea* returns to the recent past to tell the story of World War II. Made as a television series for CBS, it adopts a commemorative stance. It recalls battles and strategies, setbacks and victories from the perspective of the survivor or veteran. It celebrates naval power and its contribution, giving scant attention to the ground war or the civilian consequences that are at the heart of *Night and Fog*. Both films, however, rely on compilation of footage shot contemporaneously with the events to which the films now return. Compilation films invariably alter the meaning of the footage they incorporate. Here, both films use footage for purposes that are possible only to those who reflect on the meaning of the past rather than report the occurrences of the moment.

All of the forms of control that a poetic or expository filmmaker might exercise over the staging, arrangement, or composition of a scene became sacrificed to observing lived experience spontaneously. Honoring this spirit of observation in post-production editing as well as during shooting resulted in films with no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music or sound effects, no intertitles, no historical reenactments, no behavior repeated for the camera, and not even any interviews. What we saw was what there was, or so it seemed in *Primary* (1960), *High School* (1968), *Les Racquetteurs* (Michel Brault and Gilles Groulx, 1958), about a group of Montrealers enjoying various games in the snow, portions of *Chronicle of a Summer*, which profiles the lives of several individuals in the Paris of 1960, *The Chair* (1962),

about the last days of a man condemned to death, *Gimme Shelter* (1970), about the Rolling Stones' infamous concert at Altamont, California, where a man's death at the hands of the Hell's Angels is partially caught on camera, *Don't Look Back* (1967), about Bob Dylan's tour of England in 1965, *Monterey Pop* (1968), about a music festival featuring Otis Redding, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, the Jefferson Airplane, and others, or *Jane* (1962), profiling Jane Fonda as she prepares for a role in a Broadway play.

The resulting footage often recalled the work of the Italian neo-realists. We look in on life as it is lived. Social actors engage with one another, ignoring the filmmakers. Often the characters are caught up in pressing demands or a crisis of their own. This requires their attention and draws it away from the presence of filmmakers. The scenes tend, like fiction, to reveal aspects of character and individuality. We make inferences and come to conclusions on the basis of behavior we observe or overhear. The filmmaker's retirement to the position of observer calls on the viewer to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done.

The observational mode poses a series of ethical considerations that involve the act of observing others go about their affairs. Is such an act in and of itself voyeuristic? Does it place the viewer in a necessarily less comfortable position than in a fiction film? In fiction, scenes are contrived for us to oversee and overhear entirely, whereas documentary scenes represent the lived experience of actual people that we happen to witness. This position, "at the keyhole," can feel uncomfortable if a pleasure in looking seems to take priority over the chance to acknowledge and interact with the one seen. This discomfort can be even more acute when the person is not an actor who has willingly agreed to be observed playing a part in a fiction.

The impression that the filmmaker is not intruding on the behavior of others also raises the question of unacknowledged or indirect intrusion. Do people conduct themselves in ways that will color our perception of them, for better or worse, in order to satisfy a filmmaker who does not say what it is he wants? Does the filmmaker seek out others to represent because they possess qualities that may fascinate viewers for the wrong reasons? This question often comes up with ethnographic films that observe, in other cultures, behavior that may, without adequate contextualization, seem exotic or bizarre, more part of a "cinema of attractions" than science. Has the filmmaker sought the informed consent of participants and made it possible for such informed consent to be understood and given? To what extent can a filmmaker explain the possible consequences of allowing behavior to be observed and represented to others?

Fred Wiseman, for example, requests consent verbally when he shoots but assumes that when he shoots in public institutions he has a right to

record what happens; he never grants participants any control over the final result. Even so, many participants in *High School* found the film fair and representative even though most critics have considered it a harsh indictment of school regimentation and discipline. A radically different approach occurs in *Two Laws* (1981), about Aboriginal land rights, where the filmmakers did not film anything without both the consent and collaboration of the participants. Everything from content to camera lenses was open to discussion and mutual agreement.

Since the observational filmmaker adopts a peculiar mode of presence “on the scene” in which he or she appears to be invisible and non-participatory, the question also arises of when does the filmmaker have a responsibility to intervene? What if something happens that may jeopardize or injure one of the social actors? Should a cameraman film the immolation of a Vietnamese monk who, knowing that there are cameras present to record the event, sets himself on fire to protest the Vietnamese war, or should the cameraman refuse or try to dissuade the monk? Should a filmmaker accept a knife as a gift from a participant in the course of filming a murder trial, and then turn that gift over to the police when blood is found on it (as Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky do in their film *Paradise Lost* [1996])? This last example moves us toward an unexpected or inadvertent form of participation rather than observation as it also raises broad issues about the filmmaker’s relationship with his or her subjects.

Observational films exhibit particular strength in giving a sense of the duration of actual events. They break with the dramatic pace of mainstream fiction films and the sometimes hurried assembly of images that support expository or poetic documentaries. When Fred Wiseman, for example, observes the making of a thirty-second television commercial for some twenty-five minutes of screen time in *Model* (1980), he conveys the sense of having observed everything worth noting about the shooting.

Similarly, when David MacDougall films extended discussions between his principal character, Lorang, and one of his peers about the bride price for Lorang’s daughter in *Wedding Camels* (1980), he shifts our attention from what the final agreement is or what new narrative issue arises because of it to the feel and texture of the discussion itself: the body language and eye contact, the intonation and tone of the voices, the pauses and “empty” time that give the encounter the sense of concrete, lived reality.

MacDougall himself describes the fascination of lived experience as something that is most vividly experienced as a difference between rushes (the unedited footage as it was originally shot) and an edited sequence. The rushes seem to have a density and vitality that the edited film lacks. A loss occurs even as structure and perspective are added:

The sense of loss seems to identify positive values perceived in the rushes and intended by the filmmaker at the time of filming but unachieved in the completed film. It is as though the very reasons for making films are somehow contradicted by the making of them. The processes of editing a film from the rushes involve both reducing the length overall and cutting most shots to shorter lengths. Both these processes progressively center particular meanings. Sometimes filmmakers appear to recognize this when they try to preserve some of the qualities of the rushes in their films, or reintroduce those qualities through other means. (“When Less Is Less,” *Transcultural Cinema*, p. 215)

The presence of the camera “on the scene” testifies to its presence in the historical world. This affirms a sense of commitment or engagement with the immediate, intimate, and personal as it occurs. This also affirms a sense of fidelity to what occurs that can pass on events to us as if they simply happened when they have, in fact, been constructed to have that very appearance. One modest example is the “masked interview.” In this case the filmmaker works in a more participatory way with his subjects to establish the general subject of a scene and then films it in an observational manner. David MacDougall has done this quite effectively in several films. An example is the scene in *Kenya Boran* where, without paying heed to the camera but in accord with the general guidelines established before shooting began, two Kenyan tribesmen discuss their views of the government’s introduction of birth control measures.

A more complex example is the event staged to become part of the historical record. Press conferences, for example, may be filmed in a purely observational style, but such events would not exist at all if it were not for the presence of the camera. This is the reverse of the basic premise behind observational films, that what we see is what would have occurred were the camera not there to observe it.

This reversal took on monumental proportions in one of the first “observational” documentaries, Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*. After an introductory set of titles that set the stage for the German National Socialist (Nazi) Party’s 1934 Nuremberg rally, Riefenstahl observes events with no further commentary. Events—predominantly parades, reviews of troops, mass assemblies, images of Hitler, and speeches—occur as if the camera simply recorded what would have happened anyway. At two hours running time, the film can give the impression of having recorded historical events all too faithfully and unthinkingly.

And yet, very little would have happened as it did were it not for the express intent of the Nazi Party to make a film of this rally. Riefenstahl had enormous resources placed at her disposal, and events were carefully planned to facilitate their filming, including the repeat filming of portions of

*Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* (Jill Godmilow, 1994).  
Photo courtesy of Jill Godmilow.

Godmilow's film, like many documentaries of music concerts, observes a public performance; in this case she records two one-man plays by Ron Vawter. Given that such events are understood to be performances in the first place, they allow the filmmaker to avoid some of the accusations that the presence of the camera altered what would have happened had the camera not been there.



some speeches at another time and place when the original footage proved unusable. (The repeated portions are reenacted so that they blend in with the original speeches, hiding the collaboration that went into their making.)

*Triumph of the Will* demonstrates the power of the image to represent the historical world at the same moment as it participates in the construction of aspects of the historical world itself. Such participation, especially in the context of Nazi Germany, carries an aura of duplicity. This was the last thing observational filmmakers like Robert Drew, D. A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, and Fred Wiseman wanted in their own work. The integrity of their observational stance successfully avoided it, for the most part, and yet the underlying act of being present at an event but filming it as if absent, as if the filmmaker were simply a “fly on the wall,” invites debate as to how much of what we see would be the same if the camera were not there or how



*Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* (Jill Godmilow, 1994).  
Photo courtesy of Jill Godmilow.

Godmilow makes use of editing to create a distinct perspective on Ron Vawter's performance as gay underground filmmaker Jack Smith and right-wing, anti-Communist (and closeted gay) lawyer Roy Cohn. By intercutting the two separate performances she draws increased attention to the contrasting ways in which the two men dealt with their sexuality during the 1950s.

much would differ if the filmmaker's presence were more readily acknowledged. That such debate is by its very nature undecidable continues to fuel a certain sense of mystery, or disquiet, about observational cinema.

## THE PARTICIPATORY MODE

The social sciences have long promoted the study of social groups. Anthropology, for example, remains heavily defined by the practice of field work, where an anthropologist lives among a people for an extended period of time and then writes up what she has learned. Such research usually calls for some form of participant-observation. The researcher goes into the field, participates in the lives of others, gains a corporeal or visceral feel for what life in a given context is like, and then reflects on this experience, using the

tools and methods of anthropology or sociology to do so. “Being there” calls for participation; “being here” allows for observation. That is to say, the field worker does not allow herself to “go native,” under normal circumstances, but retains a degree of detachment that differentiates her from those about whom she writes. Anthropology has, in fact, consistently depended on this complex act of engagement and separation between two cultures to define itself.

Documentary filmmakers also go into the field; they, too, live among others and speak about or represent what they experience. The practice of participant-observation, however, has not become a paradigm. The methods and practices of social science research have remained subordinate to the more prevalent rhetorical practice of moving and persuading an audience. Observational documentary de-emphasizes persuasion to give us a sense of what it is like to *be* in a given situation but without a sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be there, too. Participatory documentary gives us a sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be in a given situation and how that situation alters as a result. The types and degrees of alteration help define variations within the participatory mode of documentary.

When we view participatory documentaries we expect to witness the historical world as represented by someone who actively engages with, rather than unobtrusively observes, poetically reconfigures, or argumentatively assembles that world. The filmmaker steps out from behind the cloak of voice-over commentary, steps away from poetic meditation, steps down from a fly-on-the-wall perch, and becomes a social actor (almost) like any other. (Almost like any other because the filmmaker retains the camera, and with it, a certain degree of potential power and control over events.)

Participatory documentaries like *Chronicle of a Summer*, *Portrait of Jason*, or *Word Is Out* involve the ethics and politics of encounter. This is the encounter between one who wields a movie camera and one who does not. How do filmmaker and social actor respond to each other? How do they negotiate control and share responsibility? How much can the filmmaker insist on testimony when it is painful to provide it? What responsibility does the filmmaker have for the emotional aftermath of appearing on camera? What ties join filmmaker and subject and what needs divide them?

The sense of bodily presence, rather than absence, locates the filmmaker “on the scene.” We expect that what we learn will hinge on the nature and quality of the encounter between filmmaker and subject rather than on generalizations supported by images illuminating a given perspective. We may see as well as hear the filmmaker act and respond on the spot, in the same historical arena as the film’s subjects. The possibilities of serving as mentor, critic, interrogator, collaborator, or provocateur arise.



*Takeover* (David and Judith MacDougall, 1981). Photo courtesy of David MacDougall.

The MacDougalls have evolved a collaborative style of filmmaking with the subjects of their ethnographic films. In a series of films made on Aboriginal issues, of which *Takeover* is a prime example, they have often served as witnesses to the testimonial statements of traditions and beliefs that Aboriginal people offer in their disputes with the government over land rights and other matters. The interaction is highly participatory, although the result can seem, at first, unobtrusive or observational since much of the collaboration occurs prior to the act of filming.

Participatory documentary can stress the actual, lived encounter between filmmaker and subject in the spirit of Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer*, Jon Alpert's *Hard Metals Disease* (1987), Jon Silver's *Watsonville on Strike* (1989), or Ross McElwhee's *Sherman's March* (1985). The filmmaker's presence takes on heightened importance, from the physical act of "getting the shot" that figures so prominently in *The Man with a Movie Camera* to the political act of joining forces with one's subjects as Jon Silver does at the start of *Watsonville on Strike* when he asks the farm workers if he can film in the union hall or as Jon Alpert does when he translates into Spanish what the workers he accompanies to Mexico try to say to their counterparts about the dangers of HMD (hard metals disease).

This style of filmmaking is what Rouch and Morin termed *cinéma vérité*,

translating into French Dziga Vertov's title for his newsreels of Soviet society, *kinopravda*. As "film truth," the idea emphasizes that this is the truth of an encounter rather than the absolute or untampered truth. We see how the filmmaker and subject negotiate a relationship, how they act toward one another, what forms of power and control come into play, and what levels of revelation or rapport stem from this specific form of encounter.

If there is a truth here it is the truth of a form of interaction that would not exist were it not for the camera. In this sense it is the opposite of the observational premise that what we see is what we would have seen had we been there in lieu of the camera. In participatory documentary, what we see is what we can see only when a camera, or filmmaker, is there instead of ourselves. Jean-Luc Godard once claimed that cinema is truth twenty-four times a second: participatory documentary makes good on Godard's claim.

*Chronicle of a Summer*, for example, involves scenes that result from the collaborative interactions of filmmakers and their subjects, an eclectic group of individuals living in Paris in the summer of 1960. In one instance Marcelline Loridan, a young woman who later married the Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens, speaks about her experience as a Jewish deportee from France who is sent to a German concentration camp during World War II. The camera follows her as she walks through the Place de la Concorde and then through the former Parisian market, Les Halles. She offers a quite moving monologue on her experiences, but only because Rouch and Morin had planned the scene with her and given her the tape recorder to carry. If they had waited for the event to occur on its own so they could observe it, it never would have occurred. They pursued this notion of collaboration still further by screening parts of the film to the participants and filming the ensuing discussion. Rouch and Morin also appear on camera, discussing their aim to study "this strange tribe living in Paris" and assessing, at the end of the film, what they have learned.

Similarly, in *Not a Love Story* (1981), Bonnie Klein, the filmmaker, and Linda Lee Tracy, an ex-stripper, discuss their reactions to various forms of pornography as they interview participants in the sex industry. In one scene, Linda Lee poses for a nude photograph and then discusses how the experience made her feel. The two women embark on a journey that is partly exploratory in a spirit similar to Rouch and Morin's and partly confessional/redemptive in an entirely different sense. The act of making the film plays a cathartic, redemptive role in their own lives; it is less the world of their subjects that changes than their own.

In some cases, such as Marcel Ophuls's *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970), on French collaboration with Germany during World War II, the filmmaker's voice emerges primarily as a perspective on the subject matter of the film.



*Crumb* (Terry Zwigoff, 1994)

Terry Zwigoff adopts a highly participatory relationship to the cartoon strip artist R. Crumb. Many of the conversations and interactions clearly would not have occurred as they do had Zwigoff not been there with his camera. Crumb takes a more reflective attitude toward himself and a more probing attitude toward his brothers as he collaborates with Zwigoff's desire to examine the complexities and contradictions of his life.

The filmmaker serves as a researcher or investigative reporter. In other cases, the filmmaker's voice emerges from direct, personal involvement in the events that unfold. This can remain within the orbit of the investigative reporter who makes his own personal involvement in the story central to its unfolding. An example is the work of Canadian filmmaker Michael Rubbo, such as his *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* (1970), where he explores the ramifications of the Vietnam War among the civilian population of Vietnam. Another is the work of Nicholas Broomfield, who adopts a brasher, more confrontational—if not arrogant—style in his *Kurt and Courtney* (1998): his exasperation with Courtney Love's elusiveness despite unsubstantiated suspicions of her complicity in Kurt Cobain's death compels Broomfield to film his own, apparently spontaneous denunciation of her at a ceremonial dinner sponsored by the American Civil Liberties Union.

In other cases, we move away from the investigative stance to take up a more responsive and reflective relationship to unfolding events that involve the filmmaker. This latter choice moves us toward the diary and personal testimonial. The first-person voice becomes prominent in the overall

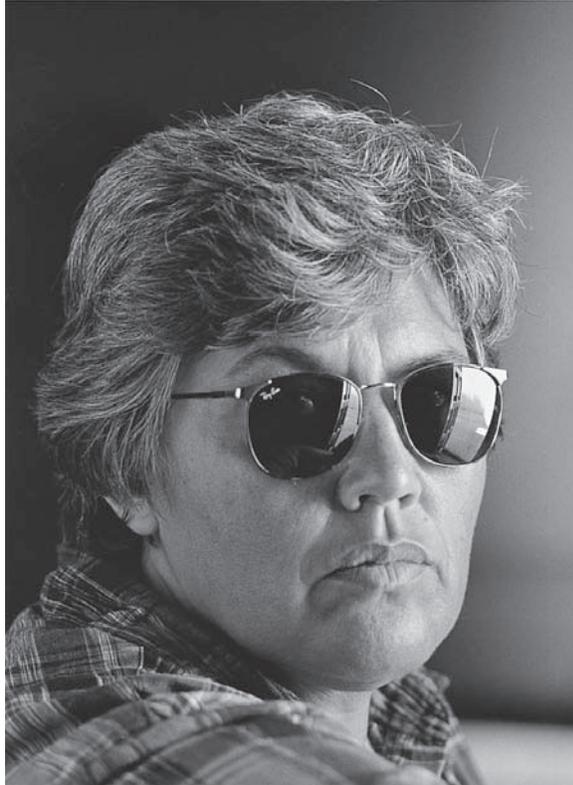


*Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (Susana Muñoz and Lourdes Portillo, 1985). Photo courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.

These two women filmmakers adopt a highly participatory relationship with the mothers who risked their lives to stage public demonstrations during Argentina's "dirty war." The sons and daughters of these women were among the "disappeared" whom the government abducted, and often killed, without any notice or legal proceedings. Muñoz and Portillo could not shape the public events, but they could draw out the personal stories of the mothers whose courage led them to defy a brutally repressive regime.

structure of the film. It is the filmmaker's participatory engagement with unfolding events that holds our attention.

Nicholas Necroponte's involvement with a woman whom he meets in New York's Central Park, who seems to have a complex but not entirely credible history, becomes central to the overall structure of *Jupiter's Wife* (1995). Similarly, it is Emiko Omori's efforts to retrace the suppressed history of her own family's experience in the Japanese-American relocation camps of World War II that gives form to *Rabbit in the Moon* (1999). Marilu Mallet offers an even more explicitly diary-like structure to her portrait of life as a Chilean exile living in Montreal married to Canadian filmmaker Michael Rubbo in *Unfinished Diary* (1983), as does Kazuo Hara to his chronicle of the complex, emotionally volatile relationship he revives with his former wife as he and his current partner follow her over a period of time in *Extremely Personal Eros: Love Song* (1974). These films make the filmmaker as vivid



*The Devil Never Sleeps [El Diablo Nunca Duerme]* (Lourdes Portillo, 1995). Photos courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.

Director Lourdes Portillo as a hard-boiled private eye. The film recounts her journey to Mexico to investigate the suspicious death of her uncle. Reflexive and ironic at times, Portillo nonetheless leaves the question of whether her uncle met with foul play, possibly at the hands of a relative, open.

a persona as any other in their films. As testimonial and confession, they often exude a power that is revelatory.

Not all participatory documentaries stress the ongoing, open-ended experience of the filmmaker or the interaction between filmmaker and subjects. The filmmaker may wish to introduce a broader perspective, often one that is historical in nature. How can this be done? The most common answer involves the interview. The interview allows the filmmaker to address people who appear in the film formally rather than address the audience through voice-over commentary. The interview stands as one of the most common forms of encounter between filmmaker and subject in participatory documentary.

Interviews are a distinct form of social encounter. They differ from ordinary conversation and the more coercive process of interrogation by dint of the institutional framework in which they occur and the specific protocols or guidelines that structure them. Interviews occur in anthropological or sociological field work; they go by the name of the “case history” in medicine



*The Devil Never Sleeps*

The filmmaker, in the course of an interview, in search of clues, and, ideally, the confession that will solve the mystery. Although she never obtains a confession, the sense that she *might* do so lends an air of narrative, film noir–like suspense to the film.

and social welfare; in psychoanalysis, they take the form of the therapeutic session; in law the interview becomes the pre-trial process of “discovery” and, during trials, testimony; on television, it forms the backbone of talk shows; in journalism, it takes the form of both the interview and the press conference; and in education, it appears as Socratic dialogue. Michel Foucault argues that these forms all involve regulated forms of exchange, with an uneven distribution of power between client and institutional practitioner, and that they have their root in the religious tradition of the confessional.

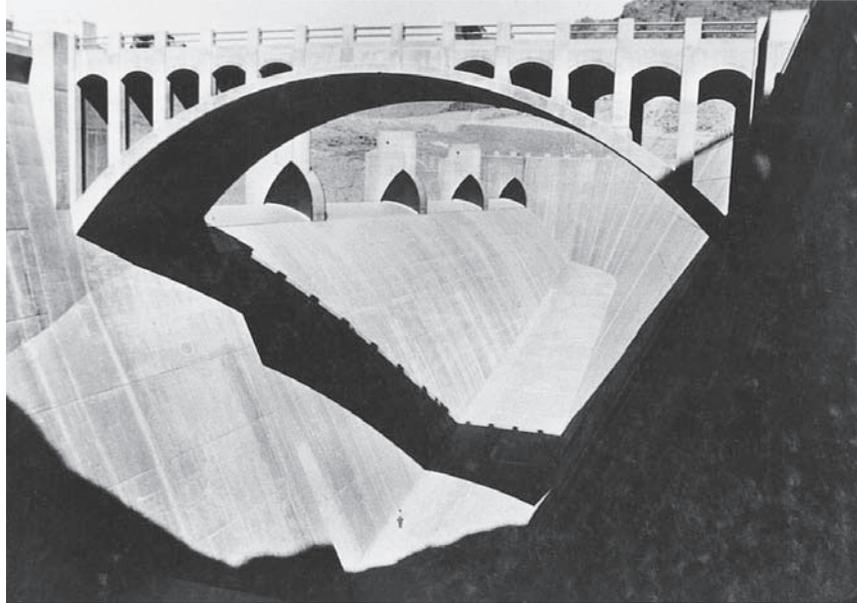
Filmmakers make use of the interview to bring different accounts together in a single story. The voice of the filmmaker emerges from the weave of contributing voices and the material brought in to support what they say. This compilation of interviews and supporting material has given us numerous film histories, from *In the Year of the Pig* (1969), on the war in Vietnam, to *Eyes on the Prize*, on the history of the civil rights movement, and from *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*, on women at work during World War II, to *Shoah*, on the aftermath of the Holocaust for those who experienced it.

Compilation films such as Esther Shub’s *The Fall of the Romanov Dy-*

*nasty*, which relies entirely on archival footage found by Shub and reedited to tell a social history, date back to the beginnings of expository documentary. Participatory documentaries add the active engagement of the filmmaker with her subjects or informants and avoid anonymous voice-over exposition. This situates the film more squarely in a given moment and distinct perspective; it enriches commentary with the grain of individual voices. Some, such as Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1977), on a coal miner's strike in Kentucky, or Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989), dwell on events in the present to which the filmmaker is a participant, while adding some historical background. Some, such as Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*, Leon Gast's *When We Were Kings* (1996), on the 1974 fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman, or Ray Mueller's *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (1993), on her controversial career, center on the past and how those with knowledge of it now recount it.

The experience of gays and lesbians in the days before Stonewall, for example, could be recounted as a general social history, with a voice-over commentary and images that illustrate the spoken points. It could also be recounted in the words of those who lived through these times by means of interviews. Jon Adair's *Word Is Out* (1977) opts for the second choice. Adair, like Connie Field for *Rosie the Riveter*, screened scores of possible subjects before settling on the dozen or so who appear in the film. Unlike Field or Emile de Antonio, Adair opts to keep supporting material to a bare minimum; he compiles his history primarily from the "talking heads" of those who can put this chapter of American social history into their own words. Like oral histories that are recorded and written up to serve as one type of primary source material, which this form resembles but also differs from in the careful selection and arrangement of interview material, the articulateness and emotional directness of those who speak gives films of testimony a compelling quality.

Filmmakers who seek to represent their own direct encounter with their surrounding world and those who seek to represent broad social issues and historical perspectives through interviews and compilation footage constitute two large components of the participatory mode. As viewers we have the sense that we are witness to a form of dialogue between filmmaker and subject that stresses situated engagement, negotiated interaction, and emotion-laden encounter. These qualities give the participatory mode of documentary filmmaking considerable appeal as it roams a wide variety of subjects from the most personal to the most historical. Often, in fact, this mode demonstrates how the two intertwine to yield representations of the historical world from specific perspectives that are both contingent and committed.



*Cadillac Desert* (Jon Else, 1997). Photos courtesy of Jon Else.

*Cadillac Desert* is another excellent example of a film that couples archival footage and the tradition of the compilation film with contemporary interviews that add a fresh perspective to historical events without resorting to a voice-over commentary. *Cadillac Desert* retraces the history of water use in California and its devastating impact on the inland valleys of the state.

## THE REFLEXIVE MODE

If the historical world provides the meeting place for the processes of negotiation between filmmaker and subject in the participatory mode, the processes of negotiation between filmmaker and viewer become the focus of attention for the reflexive mode. Rather than following the filmmaker in her engagement with other social actors, we now attend to the filmmaker's engagement with us, speaking not only about the historical world but about the problems and issues of representing it as well.

Trinh Minh-ha's declaration that she will "speak nearby" rather than "speak about" Africa, in *Reassemblage* (1982), symbolizes the shift that reflexivity produces: we now attend to *how* we represent the historical world as well as to *what* gets represented. Instead of *seeing through* documentaries to the world beyond them, reflexive documentaries ask us to *see documentary* for what it is: a construct or representation. Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin carry this to an extreme in *Letter to Jane* (1972), a 45-minute "letter" in which they scrutinize in great detail a journalistic photograph of Jane Fonda during her visit to North Vietnam. No aspect of this apparently factual photo goes unexamined.

Just as the observational mode of documentary depends on the filmmaker's apparent absence from or non-intervention in the events recorded, the documentary in general depends on the viewer's neglect of his or her actual situation, in front of a movie screen, interpreting a film, in favor of imaginary access to the events shown on the screen as if it is only these events that require interpretation, not the film. The motto that a documentary film is only as good as its content is compelling is what the reflexive mode of documentary calls into question.

One of the issues brought to the fore in reflexive documentaries is the one with which we began this book: what to do with people? Some films, like *Reassemblage*, *Daughter Rite* (1978), *Bontoc Eulogy* (1995), or *Far from Poland* (1984), address this question directly by calling the usual means of representation into question: *Reassemblage* breaks with the realist conventions of ethnography to question the power of the camera's gaze to represent, and misrepresent, others; *Daughter Rite* subverts reliance on social actors by using two actresses to play sisters who reflect on their relationship to their mother, using insights gathered from interviews with a wide range of women but withholding the voices of the interviewees themselves; *Bontoc Eulogy* recounts the family history of the filmmaker's own grandfather, who was taken from the Philippines to appear as part of an exhibit of Filipino life at the St. Louis World Fair in 1904 through staged reenactments and imagined memories that call conventional rules of evidence



*Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1989). Photos courtesy of Trinh T. Minh-ha.

These three successive shots, each an extreme close-up that omits portions of the interviewee's face, correspond to the pre-production storyboard designed by the filmmaker. Their violation of the normal conventions for filming interviews both calls our attention to the formality and conventionality of interviews and signals that this is not a (normal) interview.

into question; *Far from Poland's* director, Jill Godmilow, addresses us directly to ponder the problems of representing the Solidarity movement in Poland when she has only partial access to the actual events. These films set out to heighten our awareness of the problems of representing others as much as they set out to convince us of the authenticity or truthfulness of representation itself.

Reflexive documentaries also address issues of realism. This is a style that seems to provide unproblematic access to the world; it takes form as physical, psychological, and emotional realism through techniques of evidentiary or continuity editing, character development, and narrative structure. Reflexive documentaries challenge these techniques and conventions. *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), for example, relies on interviews with women in Vietnam who describe the oppressive conditions they have faced since the end of the war, but then halfway through the film we discover (if various stylistic hints haven't tipped us off) that the interviews were staged in more ways than one: the women who play Vietnamese women in Vietnam are actually immigrants to the United States reciting, on a stage set, accounts transcribed and edited by Trinh from interviews conducted in Vietnam by someone else with other women!

Similarly, in *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov demonstrates how the impression of reality comes to be constructed by beginning with a scene of the cameraman, Mikhail Kaufman, filming people riding in a horse-drawn carriage from a car that runs alongside the carriage. Vertov then cuts to an editing room, where the editor, Elizaveta Svilova, Vertov's wife, assembles strips of film that represent this event into the sequence we have,



*Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1989). Photos courtesy of Trinh T. Minh-ha.

Make-up and costume are a more frequent consideration for documentary filmmakers than we might assume. Here filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha prepares actress Tran Thi Bich Yen for a scene where she will play an interviewee describing her life in Vietnam. The interview appears to be set in Vietnam but was actually shot in California. Like *Far from Poland*, this film explores the question of how to represent situations not directly available to the filmmaker.

presumably, just seen. The overall result deconstructs the impression of unimpeded access to reality and invites us to reflect on the process by which this impression is itself constructed through editing.

Other films, such as *David Holzman's Diary* (1968), *No Lies* (1973), and *Daughter Rite* (1978), represent themselves, ultimately, as disguised fictions. They rely on trained actors to deliver the performances we initially believe to be the self-presentation of people engaged in everyday life. Our realization of this deception, sometimes through hints and clues during the film, or at the end, when the credits reveal the fabricated nature of the performances we have witnessed, prompts us to question the authenticity of documentary in general: what "truth" do documentaries reveal about the self; how is it different from a staged or scripted performance; what conventions prompt us to believe in the authenticity of documentary performance; and how can this belief be productively subverted?

The reflexive mode is the most self-conscious and self-questioning mode

of representation. Realist access to the world, the ability to provide persuasive evidence, the possibility of indisputable proof, the solemn, indexical bond between an indexical image and what it represents—all these notions come under suspicion. That such notions can compel fetishistic belief prompts the reflexive documentary to examine the nature of such belief rather than attest to the validity of what is believed. At its best, reflexive documentary prods the viewer to a heightened form of consciousness about her relation to a documentary and what it represents. Vertov does this in *The Man with a Movie Camera* to demonstrate how we construct our knowledge of the world; Buñuel does this in *Land without Bread* to satirize the presumptions that accompany such knowledge; Trinh does this in *Re-assemblage* to question the assumptions that underlie a given body of knowledge or mode of inquiry (ethnography), as Chris Marker does in *Sans Soleil* to question the assumptions that underlie the act of making films of the lives of others in a world divided by racial and political boundaries.

Achieving a heightened form of consciousness involves a shift in levels of awareness. Reflexive documentary sets out to readjust the assumptions and expectations of its audience, not add new knowledge to existing categories. For this reason, documentaries can be reflexive from both formal and political perspectives.

From a formal perspective, reflexivity draws our attention to our assumptions and expectations about documentary form itself. From a political perspective, reflexivity points toward our assumptions and expectations about the world around us. Both perspectives rely on techniques that jar us, that achieve something akin to what Bertolt Brecht described as “alienation effects,” or what the Russian formalists termed *ostranenie*, or “making strange.” This is similar to the surrealist effort to see the everyday world in unexpected ways. As a formal strategy, making the familiar strange reminds us how documentary works as a film genre whose claims about the world we can receive too unthinkingly; as a political strategy, it reminds us how society works in accord with conventions and codes we may too readily take for granted.

The rise of feminist documentaries in the 1970s provides a vivid example of the works that call social conventions into question. Films such as *The Woman's Film* (1971), *Joyce at Thirty-four* (1972), and *Growing Up Female* (1970) followed most of the conventions of participatory documentary, but they also sought to produce a heightened consciousness about discrimination against women in the contemporary world. They counter the prevailing (stereotypical) images of women with radically different representations and displace the hopes and desires fueled and gratified by advertising and melo-



*Wedding Camels* (David and Judith MacDougall, 1980). Photo courtesy of David MacDougall.

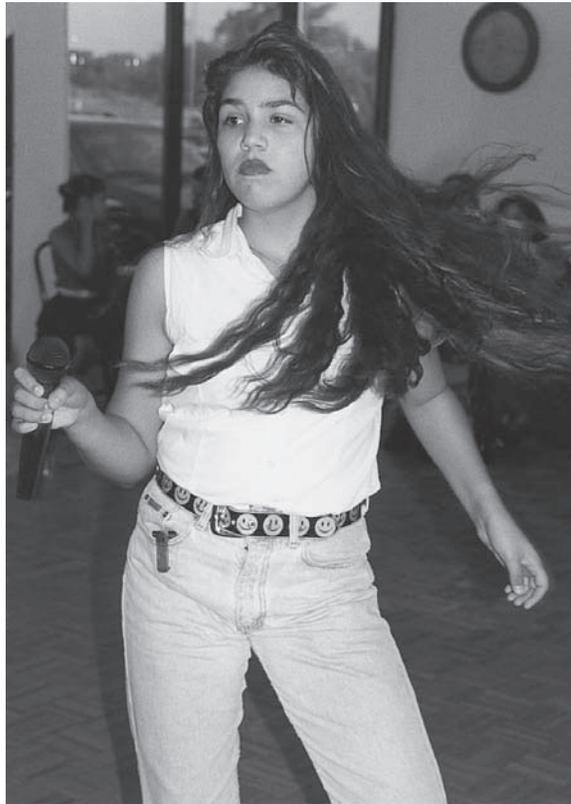
In this trilogy of films on the Turkana of northern Kenya, David and Judith MacDougall adopt several reflexive strategies to make us aware of the filmmakers' active involvement in shaping the scenes we see. Sometimes it is a question put by the filmmakers that prompts discussion, sometimes it is written titles that remind us of the complex process of representing members of another culture in a form members of an English-speaking culture can understand. Such reflexive acts were rare at the time in ethnographic film. Many such films want to give the impression *Nanook of the North* gave: we witness customs and behavior as they "naturally" occur, not as a result of interaction between filmmaker and subject.

dramas with the experiences and demands of women who have rejected these notions in favor of radically different ones. Such films challenge entrenched notions of the feminine and also serve to give name to what had lain invisible: the oppression, devalorization, and hierarchy that can now be called sexism. Individual experiences combine into common perceptions: a new way of seeing, a distinct perspective on the social order, emerges.

"Alienation" from prevailing assumptions may have a formal or cinematic component, but it is also heavily social or political in its impact. Rather than provoking our awareness primarily of form, politically reflexive documentaries provoke our awareness of social organization and the assumptions

*Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena* (Lourdes Portillo, 1999). Photo courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.

Director Lourdes Portillo investigates the repercussions that followed from the murder of the popular Tex-Mex singer Selena. Was she a positive role model for young women who learn to channel their energies into becoming popular singers, or was she herself a young woman encouraged to recycle stereotypical images of female sexuality? Portillo does not answer such questions so much as pose them in an engaging way. She does so partly by shooting in video to create a family portrait of Selena and her legacy.



that support it. They tend, therefore, to induce an “aha!” effect, where we grasp a principle or structure at work that helps account for what would otherwise be a representation of more localized experience. Instead we take a deeper look. Politically reflexive documentaries acknowledge the way things are but also invoke the way they might become. Our heightened consciousness opens up a gap between knowledge and desire, between what is and what might be. Politically reflexive documentaries point to *us* as viewers and social actors, not to films, as the agents who can bridge this gap between what exists and the new forms we can make from it.

## THE PERFORMATIVE MODE

Like the poetic mode of documentary representation, the performative mode raises questions about what is knowledge. What counts as understanding or comprehension? What besides factual information goes into our under-

standing of the world? Is knowledge best described as abstract and disembodied, based on generalizations and the typical, in the tradition of Western philosophy? Or is knowledge better described as concrete and embodied, based on the specificities of personal experience, in the tradition of poetry, literature, and rhetoric? Performative documentary endorses the latter position and sets out to demonstrate how embodied knowledge provides entry into an understanding of the more general processes at work in society.

Meaning is clearly a subjective, affect-laden phenomenon. A car or gun, hospital or person will bear different meanings for different people. Experience and memory, emotional involvement, questions of value and belief, commitment and principle all enter into our understanding of those aspects of the world most often addressed by documentary: the institutional framework (governments and churches, families and marriages) and specific social practices (love and war, competition and cooperation) that make up a society (as discussed in Chapter 4). Performative documentary underscores the complexity of our knowledge of the world by emphasizing its subjective and affective dimensions.

Works like Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989), Ngozi Onwurah's *The Body Beautiful* (1991), and Marlon Fuentes's *Bontoc Eulogy* (1995) stress the emotional complexity of experience from the perspective of the filmmaker him- or herself. An autobiographical note enters into these films that bears similarity to the diaristic mode of participatory filmmaking. Performative films give added emphasis to the subjective qualities of experience and memory that depart from factual recounting. Marlon Riggs, for example, makes use of recited poems and enacted scenes that address the intense personal stakes involved in black, gay identity; Onwurah's film builds up to a staged sexual encounter between her own mother and a handsome young man; and Fuentes enacts a fantasy about his grandfather's escape from captivity as an object of display at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Actual occurrences become amplified by imagined ones. The free combination of the actual and the imagined is a common feature of the performative documentary.

What these films and others such as Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1988), about the life of Langston Hughes, or Julien's *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin/White Mask* (1996), about the life of Frantz Fanon; Larry Andrews's video *Black and Silver Horses* (1992), about issues of race and identity; Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* (1985), about funeral practices in Benares, India; Chris Choy and Renee Tajima's *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988), about the murder of a Chinese American by two out-of-work auto workers who reportedly mistook him for Japanese; Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* (1991), about her efforts to learn the story of her family's internment in de-

tention camps during World War II; and Pratibha Parmar's *Khush* (1991), about being Asian-British and gay, share a deflection of documentary emphasis away from a realist representation of the historical world and toward poetic liberties, more unconventional narrative structures, and more subjective forms of representation. The referential quality of documentary that attests to its function as a window onto the world yields to an expressive quality that affirms the highly situated, embodied, and vividly personal perspective of specific subjects, including the filmmaker.

Ever since at least *Turksib* (1929), *Salt for Svanetia* (1930), and, in a satiric vein, *Land without Bread* (1932), documentary has exhibited many performative qualities, but they seldom have served to organize entire films. They were present but not dominant. Some participatory documentaries of the 1980s, such as *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (1985) and *Roses in December* (1982), include performative moments that draw us into subjective, "as if" renderings of traumatic past events (the "disappearance" of the son of one of the mothers who protested government repression in Argentina and the rape of Jean Donovan and three other women by El Salvadoran military men respectively), but the organizing dominant to the films revolves around a linear history that includes these events. Performative documentaries primarily address us, emotionally and expressively, rather than pointing us to the factual world we hold in common.

These films engage us less with rhetorical commands or imperatives than with a sense of their own vivid responsiveness. The filmmaker's responsiveness seeks to animate our own. We engage with their representation of the historical world but do so obliquely, via the affective charge they apply to it and seek to make our own.

*Tongues Untied*, for example, begins with a voice-over call that ricochets from left and right, in stereo, "Brother to Brother," "Brother to Brother. . .," and ends with a declaration, "Black men loving black men is the revolutionary act." The course of the film over a series of declarations, reenactments, poetic recitations, and staged performances that all attest to the complexities of racial and sexual relations within gay subculture strives to animate us to adopt the position of "brother" for ourselves, at least for the duration of the film. We are invited to experience what it is like to occupy the subjective, social position of a black, gay male, such as Marlon Riggs himself.

Just as a feminist aesthetic may strive to move audience members, regardless of their actual gender and sexual orientation, into the subjective position of a feminist character's perspective on the world, performative documentary seeks to move its audience into subjective alignment or affinity with its specific perspective on the world. Like earlier works such as *Listen to Britain* (1941), on resistance to German bombing by the British people



Angela Jendell, from the House of Jendell walking as futuristic femme queen.

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*Paris Is Burning* (Jenny Livingston, 1991)

*Paris Is Burning* enters into a distinct, black, gay sub-culture in which young men cluster into “houses,” which compete against each other in various categories of mimicry and drag at “balls.” Organized partly to explain this sub-culture to nonparticipants, *Paris Is Burning* also immerses us performatively in the quality and texture of this world to a degree that *16 in Webster Groves* or *Dead Birds* does not.

during World War II, or *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934), on the mourning of Lenin’s death by the Soviet people, recent performative documentaries try to give representation to a social subjectivity that joins the general to the particular, the individual to the collective, and the political to the personal. The expressive dimension may be anchored to particular individuals, but it extends to embrace a social, or shared, form of subjective response.

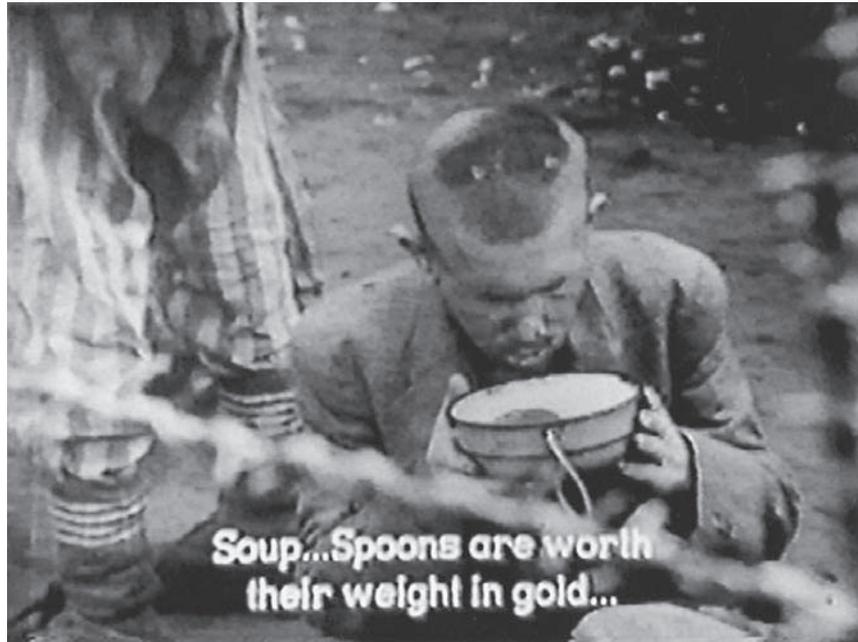
In recent work this social subjectivity is often that of the underrepresented or misrepresented, of women and ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians. Performative documentary can act as a corrective to those films where “We speak about them to us.” They proclaim, instead, that “We speak about

ourselves to you,” or “We speak about ourselves to us.” Performative documentary shares a rebalancing and corrective tendency with auto-ethnography (ethnographically informed work made by members of the communities who are the traditional subjects of Western ethnography, such as the numerous tapes made by the Kayapo people of the Amazon river basin and by the Aboriginal people of Australia). It does not, however, counter error with fact, misinformation with information, but adopts a distinct mode of representation that suggests knowledge and understanding require an entirely different form of engagement.

Like early documentary, before the observational mode placed priority on the direct filming of social encounter, performative documentary freely mixes the expressive techniques that give texture and density to fiction (point-of-view shots, musical scores, renderings of subjective states of mind, flashbacks and freeze frames, etc.) with oratorical techniques for addressing the social issues that neither science nor reason can resolve.

Performative documentary approaches the domain of experimental or avant-garde cinema but gives, finally, less emphasis to the self-contained quality of the film or video than to its expressive dimension *in relation to* representations that refer us back to the historical world for their ultimate meaning. We continue to recognize the historical world by means of familiar people and places (Langston Hughes, Detroit cityscapes, the San Francisco Bay Bridge, and so on), the testimony of others (participants in *Tongues Untied* who describe the experiences of black, gay men; the personal voice-over confidences of Ngozi Onwurah about her relationship to her mother in *The Body Beautiful*); and scenes built around participatory or observational modes of representation (interviews with various people in *Khush* and *I'm British but. . .*; observed moments of daily life in *Forest of Bliss*).

The world as represented by performative documentaries becomes, however, suffused by evocative tones and expressive shadings that constantly remind us that the world is more than the sum of the visible evidence we derive from it. Another early, partial example of the performative mode, Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955), about the Holocaust, makes this point vividly. The film's voice-over commentary and images of illustration nominate *Night and Fog* for the expository mode, but the haunting, personal quality of the commentary moves it toward the performative. The film is less about history than memory, less about history from above—what happened when and why—and more about history from below—what one person might experience and what it might feel like to undergo that experience. Through the elliptic, evocative tone of the commentary by Jean Cayrol, a survivor of Auschwitz, *Night and Fog* sets out to represent the unrepresentable:



*Night and Fog* [*Nuit et brouillard*] (Alain Resnais, 1955)

Much of the footage presented in *Night and Fog* was shot by concentration camp officers, then discovered after the war by the Allies. Alain Resnais compiles this footage into a searing testimony to the horrors of inhumanity. His film offers far more than visual evidence of Nazi atrocities. It urges us to remember, and never forget, what happened long ago in these camps. It links the past to the present and gives to memory the burden of sustaining a moral conscience.

the sheer inconceivability of acts that defy all reason and all narrative order. Visible evidence abounds—of belongings and bodies, of victims and survivors—but the voice of *Night and Fog* extends beyond what evidence confirms: it calls for an emotional responsiveness from us that acknowledges how understanding this event within any pre-established frame of reference is an utter impossibility (even as we may arrive at a judgment of the heinous monstrosity of such genocide).

In a similar spirit, Hungarian filmmaker Péter Forgács has described his goal as not to polemicize, not to explain, not to argue or judge, so much as to evoke a sense of what past experiences were like for those who lived them. His extraordinary documentaries are made from home movies re-organized into performative representations of the social turmoil caused by World War II: *Free Fall* (1998), recounts the life of a successful Jewish businessman in the 1930s, Gyorgy Peto, who is eventually caught up in



*Free Fall* (Péter Forgács, 1998). Photos courtesy of Péter Forgács.

Péter Forgács relies entirely on found footage, in this case, home movies from the 1930s and 1940s. Such footage reveals life as it was seen and experienced at a given time. Forgács reworks the footage, cropping images, slowing down motion, adding titles and music, to combine a sense of historical perspective with a form of emotional engagement. The result is quite poetic, radically different in tone from the classic World War II documentaries in an expository mode such as the *Why We Fight* series.

Germany's decision, late in the war, to apply their "final solution" to Hungarian Jews; and *Danube Exodus* (1999) tells of the forced migrations of Jews down the Danube en route to Palestine, in the face of British resistance to the arrival of any more refugees, and of Germans who flee upriver from Romania back to Germany when the Soviet army drives them from their land. The film relies primarily on home movies taken by the captain of a Danube cruise ship involved in transporting both of these groups.

*Danube Exodus* makes no attempt to tell the overall history of World War II. By focusing on these specific events, seen from the viewpoint of a participant rather than a historian, Forgács suggests something, however, about the overall tone of the war: he suggests how, for some participants, the war was primarily an enormous flux of peoples, in and out of various countries, for a wide variety of reasons. Loss occurs, along with dislocation. The war takes its toll not from bombs alone but from these cases of civilian exodus that transformed the face of Europe.

Forgács wants to leave evaluation and judgment to us but also to postpone this kind of reflection while we experience a more directly subjective encounter with these historical events. He invokes affect over effect, emotion over reason, not to reject analysis and judgment but to place them on a different basis. Like Resnais, Vertov, and Kalatozov before him, and like so many of his contemporaries, Forgács sidesteps ready-made positions and prefabricated categories. He invites us, as all great documentarians do, to see the world afresh and to rethink our relation to it. Performative documentary restores a sense of magnitude to the local, specific, and embodied. It animates the personal so that it may become our port of entry to the political.

We can summarize this general sketch of the six modes of documentary representation in the following table. Documentary, like the avant-garde, begins in response to fiction. (The dates in this table signify when a mode becomes a common alternative; each mode has predecessors and each continues to this day.)

Table 6.1

**Documentary Modes**

Chief Characteristics  
—Deficiencies

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**Hollywood fiction** [1910s]: fictional narratives of imaginary worlds  
—absence of “reality”

**Poetic documentary** [1920s]: reassemble fragments of the world poetically  
—lack of specificity, too abstract

**Expository documentary** [1920s]: directly address issues in the historical world  
—overly didactic

**Observational documentary** [1960s]: eschew commentary and reenactment; observe things as they happen  
—lack of history, context

**Participatory documentary** [1960s]: interview or interact with subjects; use archival film to retrieve history  
—excessive faith in witnesses, naive history, too intrusive

**Reflexive documentary** [1980s]: question documentary form, defamiliarize the other modes  
—too abstract, lose sight of actual issues

**Performative documentary** [1980s]: stress subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse  
—loss of emphasis on objectivity may relegate such films to the avant-garde; “excessive” use of style.