

# A GUIDE TO THE STUDY OF DOCUMENTARY FILMS

By Mark Freeman

## The Documentary from Flaherty to Verité and Beyond

What is a documentary? Dull? Educational? Boring? Perhaps you think of Cops, America's Most Wanted and reality television? What about 60 Minutes and the evening news?

The world of documentary filmmaking is much broader and much more compelling. Documentary filmmaking can capture vanishing ways of life (Nanook of the North), poetically transform our vision (Koyaanisqatsi) and expose injustice (Harlan County, USA). Documentary filmmaking combines the power and grace of fictional filmmaking with the boldness and authenticity of stories taken directly from life.

Today some of the most challenging, stimulating, provocative filmmaking in the world is nonfiction. Perhaps you've heard of a few of the more recent films ---- Crumb and Hoop Dreams or maybe you remember Roger and Me and the Thin Blue Line. But in today's theatrical marketplace ---a world of blockbusters and action films-- there is all too little opportunity to see and appreciate the art of the documentary. The ability to access a video archive makes the study of documentaries possible.

In this course you will have a unique and all too rare opportunity to survey the history of documentary filmmaking. Our discussion begins with the first filmed images of the Lumiere brothers more than a hundred years and goes on to examine the techniques of documentary expression as they've developed throughout the past century. We'll challenge ourselves to develop a critical eye. In the process, we will also deepen our appreciation of the documentary and its uncanny ability to capture and (re)present the world around us.

## INTRO TO COURSE

First let me introduce myself. You can better understand the point-of-view I'm presenting in these classes if you know a little about me. I'm both a college instructor and a documentary filmmaker. In fact it's my own creative work, which informs my take on both the history and process of documentary film production.

As a filmmaker the struggle is to identify an idea worth expressing and to discover/invent the most appropriate form of expression. To this extent I'm interested in films that were created by the passion of their makers. For this reason I have generally not selected commissioned films or examples from television documentaries, which tend to be more conventional in their form, even if sometimes risk taking in their content.

This course will be challenging because it surveys work over a nearly hundred-year period. (It's in some ways equivalent to trying to present a history of fictional narrative filmmaking with only 7 films to show.) In order to understand and appreciate the art of the documentary, we'll need to place the documentary ----as an art form---- within an historical context. We need to understand what it is exactly that makes a film a documentary. How do we define and refine our notion of documentary or nonfiction filmmaking? We'll want to become familiar with the growth and development of the documentary over the 100-year history of film. And because film is a dynamic medium we'll want to trace how changes in technology ----changes in our physical ability to capture life on film --- have affected the ways in which filmmakers tell their documentary stories.

Studying documentary practice is an opportunity to consider larger philosophical questions too. We'll have a chance to examine our basic notions of "reality" and "truth" and "fairness." We'll consider the role of politics and economics in

documentary production. We'll pay close attention to form and technique. It's futile to attempt to discuss moving images without understanding the techniques employed. There is a grammar of film. There is a healthy dynamic between what is technically possible and what can be imagined. Both working within technical limits and pushing beyond them are vital to the process of creativity and imagination.

We'll come to develop our own ideas about what makes a documentary important and vital. And finally we'll know more about both how and why the most successful documentaries move us emotionally, enlarge our view of the world and challenge our beliefs and preconceptions. We'll view an outstanding example of documentary art every week for seven weeks. We'll consider different aspects of documentary practice. I've chosen to use each week's lectures to talk about the problems and challenges of documentary filmmaking, and to closely consider the historic context of the films we'll view. I think the films are best understood as examples of a particular approach to the documentary. For each film we see there are many, many more equally important films for you to discover on your own. (And I will make suggestions for additional viewing as we go along.)

Each class will contain a "Before You Watch" and "After You Watch" lecture. Let me sketch out the approach we'll take.

### 1. Documentary Traditions ---- 1895 to 1945

Nanook of the North Robert Flaherty 1922

The Plow that Broke the Plains Pare Lorentz 1934

This first week will create the foundation for our work together. It may be a truism, but it is too important to ignore: "You can't know where you're going, unless you know where you've been." While it may not be strictly true that history "progresses," I would argue that the practices and assumptions of the present cannot be fully appreciated without an understanding of film history.

In this case we need to understand how the idea of "documentary" developed. Who were the earliest nonfiction filmmakers? What were they trying to accomplish? How was this work different from or similar to fictional filmmaking? How did they fashion their films? And how did their style and approach set the agenda for future filmmakers? We will look at the first ever documentary ---Nanook of the North, as well as an example of sponsored filmmaking (The Plow that Broke the Plains), which owes a great deal to the early British documentary movement.

### 2. Avant Garde Influences

Koyaanisqatsi Godfrey Reggio 1983

This week we'll see what documentary filmmaking has in common with experimental film. Is there room for the poetic? For nonlinear storytelling? What happens if a documentary filmmaker privileges visual expression over narrative exposition?

Koyaanisqatsi is a Hopi word meaning "world out of balance." This film relies only on visuals and music (by Phillip Glass) to create an emotionally powerful portrait of life in the late 20th century.

### 3. Compilation and Historical Documentaries

Atomic Cafe Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader, Pierce Rafferty 1982

These are found films----films created from the pieces and fragments of other films. This week will give us an

opportunity to consider the impact of editing in documentary film. How can new meanings be shaped and created by the juxtaposition of sounds and images from disparate sources? These films reconstruct the past to tell us something relevant to the present.

Atomic Cafe is a controversial look at government sponsored "educational" films, which were designed to have us all "duck and cover" our way through a thermonuclear war.

#### 4. Direct Cinema or Cinema Verité

The War Room Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker 1993

In the 60's new technologies ----portable equipment----made it possible for filmmakers to capture life with an apparent spontaneity never before seen. The excitement generated by these new techniques seemed revolutionary----guaranteed to show us life with an immediacy that that was unprecedented.

The War Room made by D.A Pennebaker, one of the pioneers of Direct Cinema gives us an inside view of Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign. You'll decide if it beats the impact of "Primary Colors"

#### 5. Committed Films

Harlan County USA Barbara Kopple 1976

The political upheavals of the 60s and 70s ----the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-War Movement, the Women's Movement----enlisted the talents of a new generation of documentary filmmakers. They were young people who grew up consuming the powerful images of film and television. And they were determined to harness the "means of expression" to their strong sense of social justice and their political concerns.

Harlan County is testimony from filmmaker Barbara Kopple. Her immersion in the struggles of Kentucky coal minors creates a passionate portrait of that community.

#### 6. Biography/Autobiography

Sherman's March--- An Improbable Search for Love Ross McElwee 1991

While many documentaries are about "important issues" and/or views of "other people," there is also a place for more narrowly defined portraits. Filmmakers are increasingly turning their cameras on themselves. This raises more questions than usual about what's revealed and what's hidden by documentary practice.

Ross McElwee takes us on a tour through his love life as he retraces General Sherman's march to the sea.

#### 7. Blurred Boundaries

David Holzman's Diary Jim McBride 1967

We've reached a stage in our culture ---some call it post-modernism---- where it's often difficult to separate fact from fiction. Today fictional filmmakers like Oliver Stone (JFK) appropriate documentary techniques and nonfiction filmmakers like Errol Morris (Thin Blue Line) use re-enactments and other trademarks of fiction.

David Holzman's *Diary* is one of the earliest films to explore this contested edge. It's an unusual work, which plays with viewer expectations with unpredictable results.

#### VIEWING SUGGESTIONS.

I strongly recommend that you view the films in the suggested order. The course is designed to build systematically. Ideas we've covered in one section will be reconsidered in another. Give yourself some uninterrupted time to view these films. Unplug the phone. Put the kids to bed. Whatever is necessary.

What makes these films worth viewing is that they tend to be unusual---less predictable than your average sitcom. Be patient. Allow the films to unfold at their own pace. Some may be more slow or lyrical. Others may deal with issues or situations with which you are unfamiliar. Try and watch each film completely at a single sitting. Then view it again after you've read the "After You Watch Lecture." This time take advantage of the features of your remote control. Pause. Take notes. Develop your own questions. Closely examine intriguing sequences. Consider the structure and editing. Does slow motion reveal anything to you? Be bold. Ask questions and become involved in your on-line discussion group. Actively engage these films and you will be rewarded with a fresh view of the world.

#### A Note about Film Grammar

Documentary filmmaking shares in all of the technical devices available to fiction film. Most audiences traditionally have remained unaware of the process and technique that all filmmaking requires.

I think you will find it useful to critically consider these elements in each film that we view:

#### Cinematography

Consider FRAMING---what is included and equally important what is excluded. COMPOSITION ---the angle of view, which lenses are used, the visual "distortions" which are chosen. COLOR--- The effect of color in filmmaking is paradoxical. Color mimics our normal vision, and ought to give a heightened sense of realism to motion pictures. But the historical primacy of black and white, and the absence of color in early newsreels has often tended to make black and white footage seem more credible than color.

#### Sound

Sound includes DIALOG (and NARRATION), EFFECTS, MUSIC and SILENCE. All of which are selected, mixed and placed to heighten the impact of a given scene.

#### *Mise en Scene*

What is the setting, dress, decor, style of lighting, the movement and placement of the human figures? How does it affect the interactions depicted?

#### Acting

In documentaries we often speak of real life participants as "characters" who are pre-selected for inclusion in the film. This is a casting process. Narrators can also be considered a kind of actor.

#### Editing

The extraordinary power of editing allows creative freedom outside the boundaries of normal time and space; instantly a viewer can be transported to any time or location---not to mention control of sequence and context.... omissions and ellipses.

## Suggested Readings

There are two classics of documentary history.

Documentary: A History of the Nonfiction Film by Erik Barnouw is organized thematically. It's somewhat anecdotal. It gives a good sense of the major personalities and trends of documentary filmmaking.

Nonfiction Film: A Critical History by Richard Barsam is very comprehensive. It includes a vast amount of information and includes a good deal of work made outside of the US and Britain.

I find that the two books complement each other and can be profitably consulted in tandem.

## CLASS 1

Documentary Traditions ---- 1895 to 1945

Nanook of the North Robert Flaherty 1922

The Plow that Broke the Plains Pare Lorentz 1934

### Before You Watch

Let's see if we can establish some basics that will serve as the basis of our discussions throughout the course. Just what do we mean by "documentary?" Usually when I'm teaching this course in person, this is the first question I ask students to consider.

I suggest you take a minute or two and jot down your own answers. How do we know that a film is a documentary?

Student definitions of documentary often describe these films by their intention. They suggest that documentaries are fact-based films designed to be:

Educational  
Informational  
Instructional

This is a good beginning. But it tends to emphasize the didactic potential of documentaries at the expense of other values. Documentaries can be highly emotional, extremely personal, technically adventuresome and not infrequently actually entertaining.

However, it is true that we tend to take documentaries seriously. We treat documentaries as if they are more significant, more important than mere fiction. Documentaries are traditionally given a place among the "discourse of sobriety" which includes philosophy, politics and science. This may have something to do with the western idea that capturing nature is equivalent to understanding, controlling and ultimately taming the world. Emile Zola--the French realist novelist wrote "You cannot claim to have really seen something until you have photographed it."

The invention of the motion picture was in many ways a part of the scientific obsession with observing nature, analyzing the phenomenal world and replicating experimental results. Cinema with its apparent mastery of time and motion was considered an objective observer ----a transparent window on the world.

Let me suggest a definition of documentary as it has traditionally been practiced. A documentary is work, which derives its contents from actual (rather than imagined) events, persons and places. The subjects of documentary practice are social actors--- human beings and human society--- and historical events. Documentarians shape their raw materials into an organized, coherent artistic structure. This structure is a balance among information, argument, human interest (entertainment value), and formal filmic elements like composition, lighting, sound, rhythm etc.

I believe that among the primary concerns of documentary is a search for truth. We can debate the nature of truth---but I think it fair to posit a search for truth as a shared goal of the best and most successful of documentary work.

Why do audiences tend to believe in the truth of the documentary? The power of the documentary comes from an agreement between filmmaker and audience regarding the authenticity of the events portrayed. The viewer is asked to trust the image before his eyes. Ultimately this trust is based upon our willingness to believe in the integrity and honesty of the filmmaker. As critical viewers we need to understand the strategies that filmmakers employ to gain and retain our confidence. This is one of the most important threads in our discussion and we will examine this issue in the context of each of the films we view.

Traditionally, audiences have expected congruence between the filmed record and events, which have actually occurred in the real world. From the earliest days of filmmaking, audiences have acted from the notion that "seeing is believing."

On Dec. 28, 1895 the Lumiere brothers projected 10 short films in the basement of the Grand Cafe in Paris to a paying audience of thirty-five. This event marked the birth of commercial cinema. Among the first films ever shown was "Train Arriving at the Station." The power of filmed images was such that spectators reportedly ran out of the theater when confronted with the image of a (silent) steam locomotive bearing down on them.

The Lumieres set out to create a record of life at the end of the 19th century. By 1897 they had created a catalog of over 750 films, and until about 1907 nonfiction films outnumbered fiction films. These films were called "actualities." For the most part they are artless filmed records of continuous events. They are shot in a single location from a stationary camera. They are short and unedited. While they are important artifacts of a time gone by, they lack an intentional artistic structure. These early films represent the first tentative steps ---pioneering but primitive--- toward the development of the documentary as a distinct category of filmmaking.

### Nanook of the North

Robert Flaherty is generally credited for creating the first documentary ---Nanook of the North (1922). As late as 1964 filmmakers still considered Nanook the "greatest documentary ever made." Flaherty was the prototype of the brave, adventuring filmmaker who travels to difficult and exotic locations. Overcoming a series of difficult obstacles, he returns and delivers "never before seen" views to astonished audiences. By all accounts the reality of Flaherty's life and work was extraordinary.

Robert Flaherty began his career as a prospector and explorer. In 1914 and 1915 he made prospecting expeditions to northern Canada for railroad baron William MacKenzie. At the urging of his sponsor, he packed a camera. With only a three-week cinematography course as a guide, he was basically a self-taught filmmaker. Filmmaking became his obsession and he returned to his home with 30,000 feet of negative. Early films were shot on a highly flammable nitrate base. And Flaherty's cigarette ignited the film. It exploded and burned him badly. His entire film was destroyed.

Flaherty returned again to the Hudson Bay area of extreme northern Canada in 1920 and began a collaboration with Nanook a renowned hunter of the Itivimuit (Eskimos or Inuit). The film is remarkable for many achievements. Not the least of which was overcoming the sheer logistical barriers to working in remote, frozen landscapes. These included blizzards and unsuccessful hunting trips, hauling tons of water by dog sled for film processing and repairing a camera dropped in the sea. Flaherty convinced Nanook and his companions that the "aggie" ---the film-- came first. And they offered Flaherty their total cooperation.

Watch the film with as few preconceptions as possible. Allow yourself to imagine seeing it in a theater with an audience totally unexposed to few or any images of life in the far north. The restored version of the film created by David Sheppard (distributed by Home Vision Cinema) looks great. Projected at the correct speed the photography is compelling. I found the score by Stanley Silverman pleasant. But for me it seems to undercut the inherent drama of the film. If you find the music distracting you can always turn it off. Or try choosing your own music. (Even today few of us own cd's of traditional northern native songs. The world of Nanook remains in the realm of the strange and exotic even in this era of the global village.)

Nanook is not for the squeamish. The shots of bloody butchering and close-ups of eating raw walrus ground the film in its basic structure as a primeval tale of the struggle for survival.

#### After You Watch the Film

What did you make of the film? How do you think audiences would have reacted to it in 1922? In what ways does it still seem fresh. (I think the easy affection among Nanook's family is appealing in a timeless way.) How did you evaluate the "truth" of the images you were presented with?

Flaherty had come north seeking a vision. But often his vision corresponded to a different reality than that currently lived by his "subjects." Flaherty said, "Sometimes you have to lie. Often one has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit." In fact Flaherty very much constructed a view of the Inuit living in a world, which even by 1920 no longer existed.

Flaherty was a romantic -- a very persuasive romantic-- who convinced his subjects to recreate the world of their forefathers, often at considerable risk to themselves. Look at the scene of the walrus hunt again. The wounded beast nearly drags Nanook into the sea. If you look closely you can see Nanook looking over his shoulder back at the camera. What we don't hear is Nanook asking Flaherty to stop filming and shoot the walrus with his rifle. Flaherty pretended not to hear his request. He wanted to capture his image of Nanook. Flaherty writes in his diary that he wanted Nanook to know he was hunting film, not walruses.

Because Nanook is silent ----without dialog or natural sound, its impact comes only from the power and structure of the images. Flaherty establishes a dramatic structure ---- "Man against Nature." And then he directed his "characters" to perform for the camera. He was the first of reality-based filmmakers to master the grammar of film as it had developed in fictional features. More than a simple recording of a single action, in Nanook Flaherty builds sequences, showing us action from different angles and distances. (Examples include the ice fishing sequence, racing in kayaks for the walrus hunt, capturing the white fox, building the igloo etc.) Flaherty sustains viewer interest by letting us make discoveries for ourselves. (After Nanook hacks his ways out of the completed igloo, it needs just one more thing. We're surprised and perhaps delighted as he creates a clear ice window and solar reflector.)

Audiences of the day were enthralled by the "naturalism" Flaherty created. Every cut offered a fresh view of a "lost world." Yet to make the pieces flow together Flaherty has to move the camera and re-stage the action. This is how a single camera is able to cover an event from multiple angles. While we take these conventions for granted today, this way of visually creating a story was one that had to be discovered and developed. (The master of visual story creation through editing, D.W. Griffith had established the predominate narrative conventions in the previous decade. See for example his *Way Down East* or *Broken Blossoms* or his epics *Birth of a Nation* or *Intolerance*.) Editing gives Flaherty total control over time. It can be condensed (ice fishing) or expanded (Nanook falls down again and again before his companions arrive to help him drag the harpooned seal from the ice hole.) Flaherty even includes simple cross cutting ("Meanwhile" reads the intertitle.) While Nanook builds the igloo, his kids tumble down the icy slopes. Flaherty repeatedly cuts between the hunting bands and their dogs to heighten the emotional impact of hunger, cold and wildness.

Flaherty used his skills as a photographer to imply objectivity. This includes long takes from a single perspective. (The camera looks down as the hunters are sledding over the "ice dunes.") Often his images (the floating ice floes for example) have great depth of field. They are in focus in both foreground and background. At other times he uses telephoto lenses, bringing the action to us unobtrusively (Nanook kayaking). These techniques suggest that the camera is an unobtrusive observer, revealing reality directly to us.

The appearance of naturalism, as pioneered by Flaherty, became one of the on-going issues of documentary practice. Many of us instinctively most value those documentaries that seem the most spontaneous, the most lifelike and realistic. But as we will see, audience's tastes, judgments and expectations have changed over the years. For example, audiences in 1922 saw the few moments when Nanook clowns or looks directly at the camera, as distracting. (See Nanook biting the phonograph record.) They would be reminded of earlier travelogues presenting smiling natives waving for the camera. Yet today (as we will discuss when we view *Sherman's March*) nothing seems more contemporary than documentary techniques, which acknowledge the presence of the camera---- allowing audiences to share the "dirty secret" of all documentaries--- "It's only a movie. It's never real life."

Flaherty went on to document the people of Polynesia (*Moana*), the Celts of the Aran Islands (*Man of Aran*) and the Louisiana Bayou country (*Louisiana Story*). He remained ever fascinated with the story of "man against nature" and times gone by.

#### Discussion Questions

Could you see any evidence of the reconstructions Flaherty employed? (Look at the sequence of building the igloo. Flaherty had Nanook and his family sleep in a half dome igloo, so that there would be enough light to film "inside" when they awoke in the morning.)

What is the filmmaker's responsibility to his subjects? Can people of a vastly different culture truly give their informed consent to participate in a documentary? Can they imagine the possible consequences of their participation? Should they share in the financial return of the project? (Nanook was ill and coughing up blood during the filmmaking. He died in hunting trip in 1924.)

How do you read the ambiguous ending? In a way the film seems to come to almost an abrupt halt. Nanook and his family are caught in the cold vastness of the icy desert. It's not at all certain what may happen next. Is this a bleak view, undercutting Flaherty's romantic vision? Or is Nanook's perseverance and resourcefulness so well established that we have no doubts about his ability to survive on his own terms in his own environment?



### Before Watching *The Plow that Broke the Plains*

For the audiences who watched the early-filmed records created by the Lumiere brothers, the sheer novelty of moving images was enough to hold their attention. The first-generation film viewers were prepared to accept the "reality" of nonfiction films without question. The commercial and critical success of Flaherty's *Nanook* attracted worldwide attention to the potential of the documentary. John Grierson a Scottish social scientist came to the U.S. where he met Flaherty and proclaimed him the "father of the documentary." It was Grierson who coined the classic definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality." And it was Grierson who created (with Paul Rotha and others) the British documentary film movement of the 30s. This was a unique partnership between documentary filmmakers and government agencies. Among Grierson's first undertakings was hiring Flaherty to direct *Industrial Britain* in 1933.

Grierson had strong, clearly defined ideas about the proper role of the documentary. He maintained that a serious social analysis was essential to distinguishing the documentary from the "merely descriptive" pictures of everyday life in travelogues, nature films etc. This preference followed from the school of "Socialist Realism" a Marxist analysis, which required art to reflect "objective conditions." Grierson was very much influenced by the great Russian filmmaker and theoretician Sergei Eisenstein. Grierson was responsible for helping to create the first American and British version of Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*. Like Eisenstein, Grierson considered himself a propagandist who believed that "art is a hammer, not a mirror."

How amazing that Grierson was able to convince government agencies like the General Post Office, the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board and the Empire Marketing Board to create a body of socially concerned filmmaking. The classics they produced (e.g. *Drifters*, *Night Mail*---include on the tape distributed by Video Yesteryear with *Plow that Broke the Plains*---and *Song of Ceylon* ) defined the techniques of nonfiction filmmaking through out the 30's and into the 40's when filmmakers were mobilized for total war.

In retrospect the techniques of these documentaries seems formulaic. They often are structured in terms of "the problem" and "the solution." But in fact the style and approach embraced by Grierson met his political and social goals within the limitations imposed by the technology of the time. He was committed to producing films that photographed the living scene and the living story. (He rejected historical themes and the exotic romanticism of typical of Flaherty.) Grierson and his filmmakers worked with cumbersome 35mm equipment. Given the technical difficulties of shooting anywhere other than a sound stage, Grierson had no compunction about staging, re-staging or rearranging reality. Films were shot in black and white because color film stock was not yet available. The films were tightly scripted and were invariably accompanied by a "voice-of-god" all knowing narration and with specially composed music. (The long inter-titles in *Nanook* served a similar function for a silent film.) During the 30s and 40s, audiences were neither skeptics nor cynics. They welcomed the confident, reassuring, and (always) male voice declaiming: "Trust me. I'll tell you how things are."

Government support for documentary filmmaking was much less forthcoming in the United States than in Britain. But the crisis of the depression and the election of Franklin Roosevelt created an opportunity for American documentarians.

The 1930's were a time of economic collapse, bank failures, mortgage foreclosures, massive unemployment---the apparent end of the American Dream. By 1934 farm property in the Great Plains was being destroyed at the rate of \$1 million per day. 500,000 cattle were too weakened to be sold or eaten. Up to 50,000 people per month left their homes on the plains and headed for California. (See John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and the 1943 John Ford film.) It was a time when there seemed little left to lose, and many people were ready to try radical measures.

Aware of the success of government-sponsored films in Britain, the Roosevelt administration through the US Resettlement Administration hired Pare Lorentz to produce the *Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936). The film was intended to show the extent and causes of the crisis in rural America, and to mobilize public support for government action.

This was Lorentz's first film. And he turned to radical filmmakers Ralph Steiner, Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz of Frontier Films for assistance. These were filmmakers who wanted to make a Marxist critique of capitalism. Lorentz saw the problem of unemployment in the countryside as an environmental one amenable to government planning. He soon had strong disagreements with his more politicized colleagues. He complained that "they wanted it to be all about human greed and how lousy our social system was." He couldn't see what that had to do with dust storms.

Hollywood's response to the crisis of the depression was escapist offerings and pleas for "neighborliness." Musicals, romantic comedies, and costume dramas shared the screens with mystery, horror and gangster films. Hollywood resisted "government sponsored" film production and was uncooperative in making stock footage available for *Plow*. (It was the director King Vidor who was finally instrumental in obtaining the library footage.) The Hollywood industry did in fact prevent *Plow* from receiving widespread commercial distribution in industry-controlled theaters. Advertised as "The Picture They Dared Us to Show", the film was eventually exhibited in some 3,000 independent theaters out of a universe of 14,000 theaters in the country.

*Plow* has formal similarities with the techniques made popular in Britain. It is of course shot in black and white, which seems especially appropriate to the images of dust bowl suffering. A strong narration guides your perceptions throughout the production. Like *Nanook* the film opens with a simple animated map. Pay particular attention to voice of the narrator Thomas Chalmers. This is the articulated voice of the filmmaker. The original music composed by Virgil Thompson draws its inspiration from American folk tunes.

Visually the film uses a number of techniques to re-enforce its message. This is a very formal film with a strong emphasis on visual parallelisms. Notice that new destructive forces (e.g. mechanized farm machinery) first enter the scene on a diagonal from upper right to lower left. Forces that are defeated tend to be on the opposite diagonal---quite small in the upper left---cattle and the children on the truck piled up with family belongings for example.

Pay attention to how the stock market crash is presented. (Note the falling ticker tape machine.) Does the film suggest that the stock failures caused the suffering in the plains or is it merely asserting a sequential relationship: "The stock market crashed and next there was a drought."

#### After You Watch *The Plow that Broke the Plains*

Shortly after its release *Plow* was proclaimed to be propaganda and was banned from viewing for 20 years as "propaganda." In U.S. usage propaganda is a pejorative term, which implies government-sponsored brainwashing. In other countries the idea of the government using the mass media in pursuit of public policy goals is well accepted. But for the most part in America the mass media is nearly exclusively market driven. Advertising is the only approved mechanism for shaping public opinion.

In deciding whether you believe that *Plow* was propaganda that deserved to be banned we need to establish a working definition of propaganda. First of all I think it's important to recognize that a distinct and well-argued point of view does not in itself make a film propaganda. Let me propose the following definition. Propaganda is a film, which purports to be nonfiction. It is usually created by the government or by a political party or organization. It is

designed to persuade and inflame viewers--to force them to a specific commitment. It relies on lies, distortions, omissions and half-truths. Propaganda is addressed to the emotions. In these films good and evil are so clear-cut that the viewer had little emotional choice but to react with the violent emotions called for. Propaganda is the anti-thesis of critical analysis, distancing and rationality. Its basis is a psychological need to see the world in morally simplistic terms either/or, good/bad black/white. Examples of films that are clearly propaganda include wartime movies Like Why We Fight (Frank Capra) or Triumph of the Will (Leni Riefenstahl).

The case for Plow being propaganda is not so clear. It's important to note that in the original version of the film there was a 3-minute epilogue, which in part focused on the construction of "planned rural communities." Roosevelt's response to the massive unemployment in America had included some experimentation with the notion of rural resettlement of the urban poor. In 1933 the National Industrial Recovery Act provided for Subsistence Homesteads Divisions with rural resettlement a major goal. About 100 experimental communities were established under New Deal auspices. Reaction was swift. The Republican National Committee accused Roosevelt of being the sponsor of farm communities, which are "communistic in conception---communal farms in which each member of the community will work on cooperative projects and share the proceeds." In 1933 the in a response to an effort to run cooperative gardens in Muncie, Indiana the press declared it "the first attempt to apply socialistic principles to a relief program sphere. "

But by 1935 a reorganization of federal agriculture projects had aborted most of these experiments. "Most Americans " wrote Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "were children of an individualistic and competitive culture, lacking any faith in the community ideal."

Perhaps it was the film's controversial ending as much as the content of the film as a whole, which led to the film's banning. Even in it's currently available form the film exist without the original epilogue.

Lorentz went on to make The River. This portrait of the Mississippi River was considered his best work. And it lead for a brief time to the creation of the U.S. Film Office. This office produced Joris Iven's The Power and the Land and a Flaherty film, The Land. Eventually Congress prohibited use of relief funds to finance such films and that was pretty much the end of Lorentz's career. The government turned its filmmaking energies to military targets. The armed forces made extensive use of nonfiction films for both training and civilian morale building during World War II. (For a banned army sponsored film see John Huston's Let There Be Light.)

### Discussion Questions

What is uniquely cinematic in these films (Nanook and Plow)? What forms of expression are used that are unavailable to other art forms? What do these films say about (your notion of) reality?

What is the period and setting of these films? How is this signaled? What do you make of the covered wagon scenes in Plow? Do you think the land rush filmed specifically for Plow? Re-enacting for Plow? Or are they outtakes from a Hollywood western? Does it matter? Why or why not? What about the handbills advertising land? Are they actual documents?

For Plow describe the use of sound effects and music. How is language used? Consider tone, volume, delivery, pacing etc. Is it realistic or not? How would you describe it? What's the dramatic effect of the way language is used here?

Is Plow persuasive? Why or why not? How does it make its strongest points? Is it propaganda? Should it have been made? Censored? Is there a role for government sponsorship of documentaries?

## Class 2

### Avant Garde Influences

Koyaanisqatsi Godfrey Reggio 1983

#### BEFORE YOU WATCH

Last week's films were important to the development of the documentary, but by any account they were also distinctly "old-fashioned." The predominate influence on early documentaries was a reliance on the kind of filmed actualities pioneered by the Lumiere brothers. These early documentaries had added story and structure to the Lumires's simple capturing of lifelike images. They told their stories in a direct, if somewhat plodding way. They tended to be information heavy; designed as message films. They were straightforward and meant to be easily accessible to a broad general audience.

This week we turn to something completely different. Nonfiction films --- films taken from life--- have also drawn on a tradition of experimentation. Cinema may have been invented by the Lumiere brothers, but it was their contemporary George Melies who led the way in discovering film's potential for magic. (See *The Trip to the Moon*). It wasn't long before painters and poets began to look to film as the most powerful means of artistic expression. (For nonfiction examples see Luis Bunuel's *Land Without Bread* and Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin: The Symphony of a Great City*.)

The ferment of revolutionary Russia was particularly fertile ground for the development of films like Eisenstein's *Strike*, Pudovkin's *Mother* and Dovzhenko's *Earth*, fictional films about workers and peasants. But more importantly, in terms of our discussion, there was also room in Russia for radical experimentation in documentary production.

I want to spend some time introducing you to the work of Dziga Vertov (in Russian ---*Spinning Top*). Vertov is important historically and I believe it's worth our while to closely consider his most experimental work, *The Man With the Movie Camera* (1928). We'll see some very interesting parallels between this film and Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983)

It's difficult to summarize this essentially plotless, non-narrative work. More than anything *Man* is about the process of filmmaking itself. It is a documentary poem to the power of cinema. It is dizzying in the scale of its inventiveness. Vertov asks us to bear witness as he re-invents and re-envisions the glories of everyman's everyday life. The film's subject is the mundane world ---sleeping, waking, working, and playing. But Vertov is attempting nothing less than a deconstruction of our ordinary perceptions of reality. And he uses and invents countless cinematic tricks and techniques to make us really see the world afresh.

Vertov (1896-1954) is a seminal figure. His manifestos and experimental filmmaking are the roots of many contemporary trends in documentary. (Yet surprisingly Vertov's films were not readily available in the States until the '70s.) For our purposes his most interesting work coincided with the experimental opening in the first years of the successful Russian revolution 1917-1929.

Vertov was influenced by the experiments of avant-garde painters and sculptors especially "futurists" and "constructivists" like Vladamir Mayakovsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold. These artists were fascinated by the potential of

modern technology. They believed that the role of the artist was to construct useful objects, which would play an active role in the building of the new revolutionary society.

The Man with the Movie Camera is a worker among other workers. He is using his tools ---the film--to build a new society. Vertov was incredibly inventive. He used hand tinting and subliminal cuts of one or two frames ---- 1/16 or 1/8th of a second. Other effects include stop action, pixilation (animation of photos rather than drawings), microphotography, multiple exposure (superimpositions), freeze frames and split screens, as well as, fast and slow motion.

Remarkable sequences include a camera setting itself up and then walking off on its tripod; a frozen scene becomes a series of stills. The stills are frames of a 35mm film being cut by the editor of the film we're watching.

Vertov was a prolific writer of manifestos. He coined the expressions Kino-Pravda (Film Truth --- a precursor of the notion of cinema verite) and Kino-Eye (the Film Eye). He believed that the vision of the camera is superior to that of the human eye. Vertov had no use for fiction film and he declared that Kino-Eye must replace "leprous old romantic theatrical films." He saw the cameraman as an auteur taking his direction from life. He believed in a moving rather than static camera, in speed and the value of the quick response and in non-intervention even including concealed cameras. (This is in stark contrast to Flaherty's and Grierson's willingness to stage and manipulate events.) Man with the Movie Camera is particularly notable for its resolute insistence on revealing the process of filmmaking and editing. This follows the constructivist injunction to "bare the device." To show the process of creation is a very modern aesthetic indeed.

What's most remarkable about Vertov is his reliance on editing. (For example he cuts together shots of a wedding, childbirth, death and divorce--- the life cycle in an instant.) He believed that Kino Pravda, cinema-truth, must be created from fragments of actuality assembled by filmmakers --- craftsman of seeing -- the organizers of visible life. Perhaps this shouldn't be all that surprising. For Vertov was a contemporary of Pudhovkin and Eisenstein, Russian formalists responsible for critical developments in editing theory and practice.

Koyaanisqatsi Godfrey Reggio 1983

Koyaanisqatsi shares with The Man with the Movie Camera a concern for exploring the formal and technical potential of cinema. Koyaanisqatsi is a challenging film designed to affirm Hopi prophecies concerning our modern life.

Both Vertov and Reggio make the case for the primacy of images in documentary cinema. Both dispense with dialog and conventional narrative. And both recognize the potential of music to add layers of emotion and complexity to the images. (Although Man was originally released as a silent film. Vertov had made extensive notes for the inclusion of "industrial music." A recently released laser version of Man does include a very successful score by the Alloy Orchestra. The Philip Glass soundtrack for Koyaanisqatsi is a successful and exciting composition that stands on its own. Try watching the film silently to get a sense of just how powerfully Glass's score affects your mood and perception.)

Koyaanisqatsi is a Hopi word having several meanings. These include crazy life, a life in turmoil, a life disintegrating. The title and the film suggest that our contemporary life is "out of balance." The final meaning of Koyaanisqatsi is a "state of life that calls for another way of being." The film juxtaposes breathtakingly beautiful photography of the natural world with images of rushing crowds of cars and people and the cacophony of modern urban life.

Koyaanisqatsi is a film about time. And the techniques of time-lapse and slow motion photography are wonderfully suited to visually represent the invisible surge and flow of time. Extreme telephoto lenses are used to especially good effect. (See the crowd scenes and especially the wonderful approach of the shimmering 747's, which advance inexorably toward us.) Aerial photography is artfully used to establish scale. And stock footage from NASA and government archives blends nearly seamlessly with the original photography by Ron Fricke.

The first section of the film presents images of the primary elements---fire, earth and water. Then the film turns its attention from the natural landscape to the built environment. While most of the photography is in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco the cities are presented generically representing any crowded over-developed urban environment. (No images of golf courses or gated communities.) The editing is built on large cycles of day and night, and more tellingly by association. For example, the film cuts between commuters being spit out of escalators and wieners sliding out of their assembly line slots.

When watching the film try and identify as many kinds of film tricks and special effects as you can. See if you can summarize how Reggio visually presents his arguments and makes his points. Is the film convincing? Why or why not?

#### After You Watch the Film

Both Vertov and Reggio are obsessed with the visual power of film. But they have radically different attitudes about the benefits of technology. Like Vertov, Reggio uses an array of cinematic tricks especially fast motion (pixilation) and slow motion photography. Both Reggio and Vertov use their technical prowess to deconstruct the ordinary processes of life. Vertov uses the tools of cinema to celebrate filmmaking itself as a symbol of the power and benefits of technology. Reggio, on the other hand, uses the technology of cinema to build a powerful critique of the destructiveness of technology. ("If we dig things from the land, we will invite disaster." And "A container of ashes (i.e. nuclear weapons) might one day be thrown from the sky, which could burn the land and boil the oceans.": Hopi prophecies sung in the film.)

Koyaanisqatsi uses the powerful technology of cinema in a most ironic way. Cinema is capital-intensive form of mass media, which depends upon sophisticated, complex industrial processes. Stop for a moment and consider all the various types of raw materials, the chemicals and machines necessary to manufacture cameras, lenses and film stock. Now add the financial and economic structures---contracts, investments, advertising, promotion and distribution. (Koyaanisqatsi is "Presented by Francis Ford Coppola.") The film suggests that the very capitalist, industrial technical processes that make cinema possible are in fact threatening the existence of the world.

Koyaanisqatsi is a film that communicates on many levels. But it's a film that cannot escape from the world it criticizes. It begins with an expansive vision of Monument Valley---- the archetype of the western (U.S.) landscape. It's true that the awe-inspiring geology of the southwest desert is appropriate for a film framing its discussion from a Hopi point of view. But the choice of Monument Valley to represent the power and strength of untrammelled nature is also ironic. For Monument Valley has achieved its symbolic power---its status as an icon---- in no small measure because this is the geography of the western as envisioned in John Ford films. (Stagecoach is an excellent example.) In Ford's world the desert is a savage, empty wilderness to be conquered. Only the manly virtues of John Wayne are up to the challenge.

Koyaanisqatsi also uses the desert and Monument Valley for symbolic and mythical purposes. Reggio's fast motion cloudscapes emphasize the untouched, unchanging power of the landscape. While the politics of Koyaanisqatsi are a

strong statement explicitly condemning the values of a consumerist, industrial society, the film itself---as a product designed for the marketplace-- -conspires with us to consume the landscape. No longer conquering the desert with military force as in a Ford film, Koyaanisqatsi presents "desert beauty" as entertainment. In one sense Koyaanisqatsi is a product --- a simulated experience offered for sale. We can purchase and consume its wondrous images for the pleasures they offers us--- visual, aural, intellectual and emotional. As much as the film may aspire to present Hopi spirituality, a Hopi worldview, there is no escaping that "the medium is the message. " The spirit of a place is not readily captured by the facile "reality" of film, which owes it existence to its ability to capture a piece of the marketplace. (Perhaps we should date the death of Monument Valley---in terms of any status as an icon of spirituality---from the Oscar Meyer weinermobile's commercial set there a few years ago.)

Ultimately the origins of Hopi spirituality come from a time when technology was simpler, and human impact on the natural world was significantly less threatening. In some ways Koyaanisqatsi may be just as romantic as Nanook --- looking back with nostalgia to a simpler world where the interdependent relationship of man and nature was clear and obvious to everyone.

#### Discussion Questions

How is the film manipulated technically to make story points? In what way do the techniques used enhance or distort our understanding of the processes of modern life?

Are the techniques of the film effective in grabbing our attention. Or has their power been dulled by time and the development of even more eye-catching graphics and special effects? What is the role of "eye-candy" in a documentary?

Koyaanisqatsi includes a short sequence of manufacturing circuit boards, but it was created before the emergence of pc's, the web and our information-based economy. Is computer-based technology qualitatively different from the technologies that Reggio is criticizing? What visual techniques could be used to address concerns about these new technologies?

Are the ideas of the film dated? Or do they still represent a fresh point-of-view that is relevant to our current predicaments.

#### Other Films

Powaqqatsti Reggio's 1988 sequel

Baraka 1992 directed by Ron Fricke the Director of Photography for Koyaanisqatsi

San Soleil 1983 Chris Marker

#### 3. Compilation and Historical Doc

Atomic Cafe Atomic Cafe Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader, Pierce Rafferty 1982

This week we're going to discuss the film as history. In particular we will consider a special case of the documentary, the compilation film. Compilation films are truly found films made on the editing bench. They are created by assembling bits and pieces from pre-existing films into a totally new film--- a film which if successful will be much

richer and more meaningful than the sum of its parts. Compilation films use other films as raw material. They are transformed by editing, by creating new scripts, narration, and music. They are much more than summaries giving capsule versions of a number of earlier works. Rather they are like collages, which create entirely new meanings based upon the sometimes startling juxtapositions of elements from quite disparate sources.

Once again we can find one of the earliest examples of this technique from the Russian revolutionary period. Esther Shub created the *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927). This is the first part of a trilogy, which used non-Russian newsreel footage to chronicle thirty years of Russian political history from 1897 to 1927. Sixty years later we can still appreciate her ability to transform her material ---- expressing a coherent point-of-view never envisioned by the original filmmakers.

Film functions on two levels as history. The first and perhaps the most obvious is as a form of visual evidence. Newsreels and documentaries have historic value in a way similar to written documents of a particular period. They are part of the surviving record of a particular time. (Obviously film has been able to perform this role only for the last 100 years.) The value of the filmed record is based on our belief and trust that there exists a close correspondence between a given reality that exists in the world independently of the film and the filmed recording of that event. As time passes the film itself (fiction or nonfiction) becomes an artifact of the time and place it was created. The film's outlook, subject matter and style all are influenced by the time of its production. A critical examination of any film can result in surprising revelations about the social relationships and realities existing at a particular moment in history.

The passage of time changes the relationship of audiences to a film. When viewed by an audience at the time of production, films tend to model prevailing values and norms of behavior. A retrospective viewing--looking at "old" films" today ----gives us evidence of how society was at the time of production. We can try to understand how the "mood of the times" shaped the filmmakers' perceptions of the events recorded in the film. *The Atomic Cafe* is a compilation film created from government and educational films from the 40s and 50s. It's a film of found objects, newsreels, propaganda films, and industrial training films. It also includes excerpts from radio and television programs, stills and music and sound effects (in addition to music and effects that may have been included in the original programs.) Identifying titles and dates have also been added to the material.

We can't really understand *Atomic Cafe* unless we are familiar with the roots of its historical material. The setting is the stifling conformity of suburban 50s America. The enemy is the threat of domination by a worldwide conspiracy of godless communists. The fear is of nuclear annihilation.

At first, the film appears to be a straightforward capsule history of America's development and use of atomic weapons. It begins chronologically with the testing of the first bomb in New Mexico followed by the destruction of Hiroshima. Here the historical footage is used to add credibility to the information presented. The dramatic footage of the Trinity test establishes the power of the bomb. An interview with Paul Tibbets the pilot who attacked Hiroshima is eyewitness testimony. The graphic footage of burn victims documents the impact of the weapon. (Much of this footage was shot by Japanese cameraman. Declassified in 1970 by the U.S. Pentagon, it was released in 1970 as *Hiroshima-Nagasaki, August 1945*.)

Critical viewing soon demonstrates that *Atomic Cafe* is not intended to be a careful, objective, factual historical accounting. Rather the film is designed to make us question the nature of the information presented. Form and function are closely matched in this film. The filmmakers have chosen the compilation film precisely because it allows them to emphasize the absurdity and surrealism that can be created by deliberately jarring juxtapositions. It's the



intention of the filmmakers to challenge and subvert the intended messages of the original footage.

In many ways the success of *Atomic Cafe* is predicated on an "in-joke." It is a send up of the attitudes, values and assumptions common to American social, political and popular culture of the 40s and 50s. The ironic view of the filmmakers is neatly summarized at the end of the film. After apparently surviving the blast from an atomic attack, a suburban patriarch turns to his unfrightened and uninjured family and calmly declares "Nothing to do now but wait for orders from the authorities and relax."

In order to really get the joke you have to either have lived through the period or have more than a passing acquaintance with the history of that time. Without this background it's possible to ridicule the styles, fashions and pompous arrogance captured in the period footage. But deeper resonance and references may be lost. In fact it seems to me that especially in the first part of the film some of the anti-communist rhetoric, which the film intends to satirize ---as paranoid and jingoistic--- may actually be taken at face value by some of today's audiences.

We also need to be aware of the time that the film itself was made. Fifteen years ago is almost a generation. The political climate in 1982 needs to be established. This was a period when the Reagan administration was introducing nuclear-armed cruise and Pershing II missiles in Western Europe. There was a great fear that these weapons ---capable of a first strike on the Soviet Union --- would be destabilizing and increase the chance of accidental nuclear war.

The *Atomic Cafe* was made at the height of the Nuclear Freeze Movement. The Nuclear Freeze was an international, grass roots campaign calling for an immediate end to the testing, development and deployment of all nuclear weapons. The Freeze was a nonviolent social movement, which mobilized thousands for massive demonstrations and civil disobedience.

The release of *The Atomic Cafe* coincided with the availability of a number of more conventional anti-nuclear documentaries. These included *The Last Epidemic*, *If You Love This Planet* and *Dark Circle* among others. In contrast to the earnest and impassioned testimonies of these films, *The Atomic Cafe* cast a jaundiced eye at the past. It used humor and satire to rally a new generation of anti-nuclear activists to the Freeze Movement.

Today the changed political climate internationally since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the apparent success of a conservative consensus in the U.S. makes it somewhat difficult to appreciate the pleasure anti-establishment demonstrators took in mocking and satirizing the pro-nuclear pieties of a previous generation.

Let's look at the history, which *Atomic Cafe* takes such delight in attacking. The Bomb was brought to life in the desert of the American Southwest at Los Alamos and Alamogordo, NM. It was a ceremony of terror. Nuclear physicists working on the development of the first atomic bomb seriously debated the possibility that the test would set off a worldwide atomic chain reaction---- exploding the earth like the surface of the sun. J. Robert Oppenheimer was the father of the bomb, the leader of the entire weapons design team. At the time of the first test he quoted the Bhagavad-Gita "Now I am become Death, shatterer of words"

This creation of nuclear weapons changed the world forever. The atomic age would come to define America's role in the world and the social and political values of America in the 50s. To oversimplify just a bit here is the premise (as it's set-up in *The Atomic Cafe*). Victorious in World War II and originally the sole possessor of the bomb, the US is fated by God and technology to be the dominant world power. However an evil, cruel and atheistic rival --- communism ---threatens the American Way of Life. If Americans are strong--politically, militarily and morally--- we will prevail. Our strength is predicated on conformity, respect for authority and a belief in a technological fix for every

problem. In a complex technological society we have to trust the experts. And if we do, and if we cooperate, the rewards of consumer society --more and better, faster, cheaper goodies ---- shall be ours and our children's. But if we are weak, preyed-on by subversives, than we shall be slaves.

These "hidden assumptions" about the American way of life are what *The Atomic Cafe* is holding up for critical examination. The approach here stands out in sharp contrast to the depiction of the 50's in many popular films. For example movies like *American Graffiti* paint the period with nostalgia ---a simple time when cars had fins, gas was cheap, mom was at home and father knew best. In reality this was a period when House Un-American Activities Committee and the political inquisitions of Joseph McCarthy cast a long shadow of fear.

But some fictional films did at least symbolically confront our nuclear nightmares. *Nuclear Movies* by Mike Broderick identifies over 850 films and TV shows about nuclear issues. Generally they are genre films--war, sci-fi, action-adventure or horror. They illustrate threads of both accommodation and resistance.

Anti-communist "atom-spy films" were the first to appear. Examples include *The Atomic City* 1952 and *The Thief* in the same year. Atomic physicists were portrayed both as those who worked unquestioningly for the government and as subversives in the employ of foreign powers. No room for moral ambiguity here. Notable science fiction films include *Them!* 1954 ---post atomic monster film with 12-foot tall black ants. *Giant Locusts* starred in the 1957 *Beginning of the End*. And we should perhaps include the Japanese *Godzilla* films. A mutant created by nuclear testing and weapons can be read as a warning ---created as it was in the only country to experience nuclear war. Susan Sontag writes that "The accidental awaking of the super-destructive monster, who has slept in the earth since pre-history, is often, an obvious metaphor for the bomb."

After *You Watch the Movie* Let's look in more detail at how *The Atomic Cafe* selects and juxtaposes its various elements to support its point-of-view. There are hints from the very beginning of the film. The first inter-titles describe the allied victory and the imminent defeat of Japan. ("In the Pacific, Japan was desperately fighting a losing battle against America and her allies.") Nowhere does the film mention the conventional argument that dropping the bomb would prevent an allied invasion of Japan and the great loss of lives such an invasion would cost.

After the bomb is dropped on Nagasaki the voice of over from an interview with Paul Tibbets, the pilot who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, describes how military planners insisted on virgin targets so that they could conduct bomb blast studies. He characterizes it almost a "class room experiment." Meanwhile the film cuts to the Nagasaki Infectious Hospital (sic) and then to horrifying images of burned children. The obvious conclusion is that the U.S. military conducted cruel experiments, callously and intentionally inflicting suffering on innocents. Not a pretty picture; certainly not the way U.S. motives and intentions are depicted flag-waving histories.

The reverential and lingering attention to the execution of the Rosenbergs for stealing atomic "secrets" also signals the filmmakers sympathies. The addition of funereal music to the detailed description of the executions pushes this scene over the top in my opinion. One of the visual and aural motifs of the film is its constant referencing to radio receivers (and to a lesser extent television sets.) Why do you think the filmmakers chose to do this? One obvious, practical reason is that the image of the radio is a neutral bridge --- a cut-away--- which allows the film to make transitions from one time and place to another. Symbolically I think that the radio (as well as images of TV's and a 16mm projector) is used to re-enforce the notion that this is a film about the power of the mass media. It's a film, which is intended to sensitize us to the danger of uncritical media consumption. It's as if the listeners in the old films are all too similar to the passive radio receivers. Like them we may be in danger of airing whatever is sent to us. One of the most telling pieces of footage in *The Atomic Cafe* is a re-enactment by an American Legion Post of a commie take-over in a small

Midwestern town. This warning about the dangers of communism is sponsored by two California shopping malls whose smarmy spokesman boasts that the malls offer plenty of free parking for all the cars "we capitalists seem to acquire." This connection between consumerism, car culture and anti-communism is, to my mind, the underlying theme of *The Atomic Cafe*. (It's interesting to note that the implied critique here is in some ways similar to issues raised in *Koyaanisqatsi* with totally different techniques.)

*The Atomic Cafe* develops these themes in greatest detail and with a real sense of black humor in its treatment of civil defense. It was precisely the impossibility of a successful civilian response to the Reagan era notion of fighting and winning a nuclear war that had galvanized the Nuclear Freeze Movement. And it is *The Atomic Cafe's* ridicule of a "duck and cover" response to Armageddon that remains the most energized and successful portion of the film. Look at the ending sequence again and see just how many different kinds of footage the filmmakers cut together to create the ultimate nuclear explosion. Finally let me raise some questions about the effects of a filmmaking strategy based on a strategy of irony. On one level it may be tempting for some viewers to ignore the political message of the film and concentrate on the naiveté of the period. The film and the issues it raises are reduced to a slapstick joke. "How silly (and stupid) people were way back then." It's true that people were more trusting in a pre-Vietnam, pre-assassination, pre-Watergate, pre-3 Mile Island, pre-Iran-Contra, pre-Gulf War Syndrome era. But it would be a mistake, I believe, if audiences become smug, if we now believe that we can't be misled because we're too hip or too jaded. In fact an argument might be made that the 90s with its resurgent conservatism, emphasis on family values and roll back of affirmative action have more in common with the 50s than might be obvious at first glance.

#### Discussion Questions

Recall our definition of propaganda from our discussion of *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. (Propaganda is a film, which purports to be nonfiction. It is usually created by the government or by a political party or organization. It is designed to persuade and inflame viewers--to force them to a specific commitment. It relies on lies, distortions, omissions and half-truths. Propaganda is addressed to the emotions. In these films good and evil are so clear-cut that the viewer had little emotional choice but to react with the violent emotions called for. Propaganda is the anti-thesis of critical analysis, distancing and rationality. Its basis is a psychological need to see the world in morally simplistic terms either/or, good/bad black/white.) Would you describe the films as originally conceived ---- the films quoted from by *Atomic*--- as propaganda? How about *Atomic Cafe* itself, is it propaganda? What does it say about the nature of "filmed reality" if the same piece of film can have diametrically opposed meanings, depending upon intention and context? What are the strengths of filmed history? The weaknesses? How would you compare the credibility of film as a source of historical truth as compared to other kinds of material ----newspapers, books, radio and TV?

#### Suggestions for Additional Viewing

##### Fiction

*On the Beach* Stanley Kramer

*Dr. Strangelove* Stanley Kubrick

Nonfiction *Dark Circle* C. Beaver, J. Irving and R. Landy

*Building Bombs* Mark Mori

4. Direct Cinema *The War Room* Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker 1993

By now we've seen a variety of documentary techniques. From the "voice-of-god" narration of earlier documentaries,

to the purely visual storytelling of Koyaanisqatsi. This week I'd like to turn to a very exciting period in the history of documentary development. Up until the end of World War II and into the 50s as evidenced in the film fragments we saw in *The Atomic Cafe*, audiences were by-and-large content to have information delivered in a straightforward, authoritative (if not authoritarian) way. The Voice of Authority said "trust me" I know more than you do and I'm telling you how things are." But the 60s were a time of radical dislocation and cultural change. Politically the era is defined by the birth of the Civil Rights Movement and the assassination of JFK. In popular culture, Rhythm and Blues leaves the ghetto, meets Elvis and gives birth to Rock 'n Roll. Documentary audiences and filmmakers became dissatisfied with the static and staid.

The techniques of Flaherty, Grierson and Lorentz --- of earlier generations--- began to seem obvious, dated, overly manipulative, even boring -- and therefore less effective. To hold and capture the attention of audiences in the 60s new approaches were called for. Filmmakers and audiences struggled to apprehend "documentary reality" with more sophisticated strategies. This new approach was called *cinéma vérité* (truth) in France and *direct cinema* in the U.S. It relied on technological innovation, which I'll detail shortly. Of primary importance was a claim of "non-intervention" on the part of documentary makers. "Non-intervention" simply means filmmakers would no longer script, stage, re-stage and generally direct the process of filming. These older conventions of documentary practice would be replaced by an agreement among filmmakers, subjects and the audience. All conspired together to create a shared belief in the invisibility of the filmmaker.

The notion was that if filmmakers merely observed their subjects, refusing to direct their actions, people would go about their lives as they would have if they were not being filmed. This shared assumption became an article of faith for the new generation of documentary filmmakers. They believed this new relationship between filmmakers and their subjects guaranteed the authenticity of their work, distinguishing it from what they considered the trite and contrived approaches of the past.

Among the technology breakthroughs that marked this era of documentary making were: a) Faster, or more light-sensitive, film stocks, which allowed shooting in available light. Previously, the need to elaborately light interiors had slowed down productions, and made the process of filmmaking hot and intrusive for subjects. b) Faster lenses, which also reduced the need for lights. c) Zoom lenses, which allowed the filmmaker to bring the action to the camera. Filmmakers could more easily shoot close-ups without having to literally be "in the face" of their subjects. d) Lightweight portable 16mm synchronous sound equipment. This was the most significant development, because it allowed two- or three-person teams to film the ephemeral world and record live sound with much less of an obvious impact on the unfolding chain of events. (35mm sound production was incredibly cumbersome work. The equipment was bulky and heavy. British documentarians shooting on sound stages often had large crews comparable to those of Hollywood features.) Interviews, narration and unmotivated music were all dismissed by the new documentary makers as artifice. Long takes, shaky, hand-held, out-of-focus camera work and poor sound were the signature of a raw, immediate style of filmmaking committed to catching life on the fly.

Basically, the view of the filmmaker now was: "This is a window. Have a look for yourself." This was a very powerful paradigm. And one, which Robert Drew believed, would make for exciting television. Funded by Time Magazine, Drew produced the work of a new generation of filmmakers including Ricky Leacock (*Primary*) ---who had worked with Flaherty on *Louisiana Story*, Albert and David Maysles (*What's Happening! The Beatles in the U.S.A.*) and Don Pennebaker (*Jane*). ABC aired the programs, which were sponsored by Bell and Howell. This was an all too rare exception to the rule that commercial broadcast television never acquires outside. Some of the most important films produced by Drew include: *Primary* about the 1960 Kennedy-Humphrey contest for the Democratic presidential nomination. (This early *direct cinema* film does in fact include some narration.) *Football*

about high school sports      The Chair is portrait of Paul Crump as he awaits execution      in the electric chair.  
Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment      a look at      John and Robert Kennedy enforcing desegregation at the  
University of Alabama. While Drew Films was the cradle of the direct cinema movement, the most prolific and  
successful practioner of this style is Frederick Wiseman, a lawyer and self-taught filmmaker.

No discussion of direct cinema would be complete without mention of this extraordinary filmmaker. For the past  
thirty years Wiseman has been a relentless chronicler of American institutions. From his unflinching examination of a  
hospital for the criminally insane (The Ticut Follies^S Frederick Wiseman and John Marshall US 1967) to his  
portraits of hospitals, welfare offices, basic training and high schools, Wiseman has produced a rigorously shot and  
meticulously edited portrait of American society. Wiseman self-distributes his work only on 16mm film. His newest  
(and in my view less hard- hitting) work often premieres on public television, his primary source of support at this  
time.

Direct cinema, even more than more conventionally shot films, is a creation of the editing process. Given the  
unpredictability of unscripted filming, shooting ratios sometimes are as great at 100:1. That is 100 hours of film are  
exposed to generate the chosen footage for a one-hour program. One of the most relied upon formulas for making  
sense of this overwhelming amount of material is what is known as the "Crisis Structure." The idea is a simple one.  
Topics are selected because they are inherently dramatic. Filmmakers expect a crisis and anticipate its resolution  
during the course of the filmmaking. The editor's job is to structure the material in a dramatic arc--- building tension to  
keep viewer interest and resolving the crisis at the end of the film to provide a satisfying conclusion. The War Room  
is a perfect example of this technique. The crisis --- -similar to that of Primary shot 30 years earlier---is whether  
Clinton will win the 1992 presidential election against George Bush. While Primary was about the candidates  
themselves (Kennedy and Humphrey), and the camera's unprecedented access to them, the War Room is about spin.  
Spin is the art of public,, relations applied to politics. Its practioners attempt to cultivate access to the press, putting  
the best face on breaking developments in the campaign. In this film it's the strategists George Stephanopoulos and  
especially James Carville who are the real protagonists. Except for the opening sequence of Clinton eating breakfast in  
his sweats, we see virtually nothing of Clinton except in public appearances. (How different his casual appearance  
from the patrician composure of his idol JFK in Primary.)

The heart of this film is the planning and strategizing that takes place in the war room. The "crisis structure" depends  
upon problems. The complications here come at furious pace and include among others Jennifer Flowers's accusations  
of Clinton infidelity. (The high point of her press conference--- a question about condom use.) For the spin doctors  
there is one crisis after another: charges about draft avoidance, concerns about a student trip to Moscow, and the  
rumor (milked at much greater length in the novel Primary Colors) that Clinton is the father of a black infant. The  
resolution of the film is Clinton's victory and the triumph of his campaign staff. This crisis structure is a distinctly  
different approach than that of the first generation of documentary films who tended to created "problem-solution  
films." (Describe the depression; Prescribe repairing the land and putting people to work. "All they ask is a chance  
to start over, and a chance for their children to eat. To have medical care; to have homes again." : Plow that Broke the  
Plains )

While it's undoubtedly true that the techniques of direct cinema have produced engaging films with the appearance of a  
high degree verisimilitude, there are definite limits to working within the formal constraints of this style. Because  
direct cinema values chance over planning, and editorial structuring over scripting, these kinds of films can be  
superficial. The filmmaker may be well aware of context, causality and have a compelling analysis of the "facts" but  
the techniques of direct cinema preclude sharing this view directly. Instead we need to ferret out a point of view by  
our own analysis of the makers choice of subject, the relationships revealed in the film, the hints delivered by editing

etc. . These limitations led to a rejection of purely direct cinema by a generation of politically committed makers as we'll discuss next week.

So let's screen *The War Room*. Pay particular attention to how the camera frames the action, how long the takes run and how the editor creates transitions from one event and location to the next. After you watch it's worth noting that *The War Room* was made as a collaborative piece with Pennabaker's partner Chris Hegedus. She convinced him to return to filmmaking after a long hiatus; she convinced him that Clinton's campaign was a worthy subject; and she was instrumental in their decision to shoot in video rather than film. (Lower cost is the obvious motivator here. And in fact the tape was transferred to film for theatrical screenings.) *The War Room* follows a familiar chronological approach to its crisis structure---starting in the snows of New Hampshire and ending in Little Rock with victory. Breaking from the strictures of pure direct cinema music not recorded at the same time as the picture is added to heighten emotions.

Let's examine some of the editing in this work in more detail. How does the editing of *The War Room* structure our experience? Like *Primary* and many other similar films, *The War Room* has the look of a film made on the run with shoots in cars, corridors, hotel rooms and auditoriums. The most dramatic example is after the third presidential debate. Stephanopoulos is breathlessly on the run, ready to spin for the waiting press and desperately trying to find out the last thing Bush had said in the last seconds of the debate. From an editor's point of view the challenge of this film is how to get from one meeting to the next, how to convey the passage of time, and how to present the issues as they arise. Some of the devices are pretty thin, but they do the job. To establish the sense of waiting for bad news two extended shots of Clinton merely listening on the phone precede the Flowers press conference. (More likely than not these were natural pauses in conversations having nothing to do with Jennifer Flowers.) Similarly we see Clinton just for an instant sitting on a bench glancing at a newspaper. The film cuts to a headline about the choice of Al Gore for Vice President. This is an economical if somewhat clumsy way to introduce the information. Or we see someone just long enough to have them request on the phone, "Can you all have Marla come up to the war room....?" Again this is a transition, which advances the film, but doesn't really give us much information or insight.

Another example of an editor's device: we see a swish from Carville implying that the next subject Stephanopoulos was filmed at the same time. But the film actually cuts from the out of focus end of the pan to a new scene of Stephanopoulos talking at some other time.

The film relies on TV coverage, radio voice-overs and newspaper headlines to advance the action and of course to re-enforce the notion that the real subject of the film is media manipulation. To that end it is probably intentional that the editors have left in numerous shots of the film crew's microphones intruding into the picture. The filmmaker's challenge is to humanize the media and policy wonks of the war room. Their technique is to try and develop Carville as the main character. We get glimpses of him as a "personality." His salty language and Lousianisms set him apart from the slicker Manhattan types. He seems to bring genuine passion and conviction to what some would characterize as cynical professional role. There is great irony in the fact of his romantic involvement with Mary Matlin who spins for the Bush campaign. (They married after the election.) Finally the most emotional (and maudlin) moment in the film is Carville's chin-quivering farewell speech to his supporters in spin.

At this point perhaps we should turn our attention to the basic question I raised at the start of this course. It's our presumption that documentaries exist as a search for truth. The techniques and style of direct cinema arose, in part, because of a belief that capturing life in an unpremeditated fashion is more likely to reveal reality. Is this in fact the case? Some of the unanswered questions regarding direct cinema might be called the "rules of engagement." Audiences are left wondering how the filmmakers gained access to their subjects. When and where is filming

permitted? What kinds of privacy will the subjects be able to maintain? Often we can only speculate about whether the subjects of the film are truly capable of giving their informed consent ----whether they fully understand the impact that the filmmaking process and the film itself will have on their lives. These questions are more troubling in anthropological films. They don't seem so critical in a film focusing on the machinations of the political process. Nevertheless, there were understandings, which shaped the construction of the War Room. Pennebaker and Hegedus explained to one of my classes of budding videographers, that they were only allowed access to their subjects if they agreed to stop filming and leave the room whenever they were asked. Rather than risk expulsion, not knowing when they might be able to return, they were alert to building tensions. And they would stop filming --- a kind of self-censorship---before they might have been asked to leave.

Today the markers of direct cinema ----shaky camera work, looking for focus, intrusive microphones, risk taking and in your face cinematography--- are just as likely to be part of a music video or AT&T ad than as part of a search for documentary truth. The style and technique of filmmaking is no guarantee of authenticity or even of a concern for these issues. In our day there is no coherent or necessary relationship between a film's style and its substance. Post modern aesthetics appropriates whatever it needs willy-nilly --divorced from content, context and consequences. This reflects a world without commonly shared values. It's not possible to tell from the way a film is shot---from format and technique--- exactly what the maker's intentions are. Or even if we are watching fiction or nonfiction. As was made clear in *The Atomic Cafe* there is no single meaning, which adheres to any particular shot. And direct cinema as much as any compilation documentary depends upon the power of editing to create meaning from the fragments recorded on tape or on film.

Discussion Questions: Was *Primary* with its focus on the candidates themselves only possible in a more innocent time before the age of professional media consultants? Direct cinema filmmakers insist that if you stay long enough and shoot enough film people eventually forget about the presence of the camera and behave naturally. Do you believe that people react differently to the presence of the camera now as compared to 30 years ago? Is the spin less effective if we watch the process of its creation? Is politics only a game between the press and the handlers? Recalling the technical innovations that made direct cinema possible, give examples of these techniques and their effects in this film. How would a more traditional filmmaker approach the topic of spin politics ----say on *Nightline* or *Frontline*? Wiseman has said "My films are totally subjective. The objective-subjective argument from my view, at least in film terms, is a lot of nonsense. The films are my response to a certain experience." In what way is *The War Room* subjective? or objective?

Suggestions for Additional Viewing Documentary *Feed* 1992 Kevin Rafferty and James Ridgeway ; *Perfect Candidate* 1992 co-produce and Directed by R.J. Cutlet, who also produced *The War Room* *Ollie's Army* by Brett Morgen 1996

Fiction Bob Roberts Tim Robbins

##### 5. Committed Films *Harlan County USA* Barbara Kopple 1976

The Civil Rights Movement of the 60s sparked a generation's commitment to political activism. With the escalation of the Viet Nam war by President Lyndon Johnson and rising draft calls more young men and women became mobilized. They organized massive demonstrations and engaged in civil disobedience. These baby boomers---- described by some as the most pampered generation in history--- were also the first television generation. Taking to the streets of Chicago at the 1968 Democratic National Convention they were tear gassed and clubbed indiscriminately. Their response to this police riot was to turn to the TV cameras while chanting, "The whole world is watching." (See

Haskell Wexler's fictional *Medium Cool*, which was shot in the midst of actual demonstrations.) Young people who came of age politically during the anti-war movement later turned their attention to related issues of social justice.

This period---the early 70s---marked the re-birth of feminism. (For example *Growing Up Female* 1974 and *Antonia: Portrait of a Woman* also 1974.) There was also renewed interest in more traditional "left" concerns including labor struggles. The "new left" was very concerned with recapturing the lost history of the "old left." (*Seeing Red* 1984 and the Warren Beatty directed fictional feature *Reds* 1981.) Labor history became a specialty of emerging young filmmakers like Julia Reichart, Jim Klein, Lorraine Gray and Deborah Shaffer. (See for example *Union Maids* 1976, *With Babies and Banners* 1977, and *The Wobblies* 1979.) This naturally led to a focusing of attention on contemporary union issues.

The 1976 Academy Award winning *Harlan County USA* by Barbara Kopple is among the best films of this generation. The story of Harlan County is rooted in a history of militant unionism--- the "Bloody Harlan" of the 30s.. The film's music of traditional union songs like *Which Side Are You On, Boys?* provides an emotional link between past and current struggles for workers rights in the coal mining industry. This is the story of the bitter thirteen-month struggle of striking miners of the Brookside mine in eastern Kentucky to join the United Mine Workers of America. Kopple's role in this film is nearly as much as a participant than as an observer. She and her crew lived and worked in Harlan County over a period of more than four years, immersed in the daily life of the people they filmed. Hart Perry, the cinematographer, says, "The filming wouldn't have been possible without the support of the community---in a real way because we were [actually] living with them." Barbara Kopple: "We did everything from butchering hogs with them to starting a newspaper called *The Harlan Labor News*." Kopple knew and understood the situation in way totally unavailable to television journalists of the "fly-in and fly-out" school of reporting. She and her crew also shared in the beatings doled out to the strikers by the "gun-thugs," not to mention getting their equipment trashed.

Like other militant filmmakers Kopple was attracted to the sense of immediacy conveyed by the techniques of direct cinema. But she was of the "urgent school of filmmaking" which insisted on telling her story by any means necessary. (For Kopple filmmaking was a way to communicate with larger audiences about political struggles that were important to her. Before *Harlan* she had worked on Peter Davis's antiwar documentary *Hearts and Minds*.) Putting aside arguments about objectivity and "non-intervention," Kopple was determined to seize the "means of production," using whatever technical resources were at hand to help give voice to the powerless. Among the most potent devices she employed was the testimony of participants in the struggle to unionize the coalmines. Some of the best documentaries are "crimes of passion."

These films freely employ a variety of techniques. They are most interested in communicating content than adhering to any predefined notions of documentary purity. Often they appropriate the techniques of the socially concerned expository documentaries of the 30s as well as the observational approach of direct cinema. But they do not hesitate to include interviews, to provoke action and to include narration if it will advance the "story."

Perhaps we should pause here and consider the evolution of the use of the interview in documentary film. The "talking-head" shot has not always played a dominant role in documentary production and practice. The on-camera interview dates from 1935 in the British film *Workers and Jobs* by Arthur Elton, but is most clearly demonstrated in *Housing Problems* also by Elton and Edgar Anstey (1935). These Government Post Office (GPO) films produced by John Grierson were the first that gave the power of speech to the subjects of the film. Although the people interviewed were no longer passive objects to be explained by an omniscient narrator, the filmmakers invariably had the last word in the final voice over commentary. Television was really responsible for making the interview format appear to be the most natural way to impart information. Television interviews tend to be formulaic. The designated



reporter stands (or sits) on camera alongside the interviewee. In a "stand-up" the interviewer wields his (or less often her) microphone like a scepter ---- allowing the subject to talk, interrupting or interjecting new questions or comments at will. The result is often unenlightening fragments of information without much context and too often with too little content.

In response to the limitations of both the "interviewless" direct cinema of the 60s and the banality of TV style interviews, committed, political filmmakers often created "masked interviews" in their films of the 70s and 80s. (For example Connie Field's *Rosie the Riveter* 1980 and Peter Adair and the Mariposa Film Group's *Word Is Out* 1978.) In these interviews, the director set up a situation, requested the discussion of a certain topic, and then proceeded to record the resulting conversation observationally, as if the filmmaker weren't present. The subjects spoke directly to the camera/audience or to other "interviewees seated by their side. Often these interviewees were witnesses to important social, cultural, and/or political struggles. The implied credibility of witnesses could be summarized as: "If you were there, you must have something to say." The voice of authority in these films moved from the narrator (in the "voice-of-god" early documentaries) to the interviewee -- from expert to witness. The interviewees are saying in effect, "What I am telling you is the truth." These kinds of films never raised the question, or even acknowledged the possibility, that it might be otherwise---that they may not be telling the truth. The pitfall for viewers in this situation is that even the best-intentioned witnesses may have faulty or rosy memories. We have to rely upon the skill and honesty of the filmmaker to protect us from duplicity. Filmmakers sometimes let opponents each offer their version of the truth in filmed interviews (*Who Killed Vincent Chin?* 1988). Sometimes this enriches the film, providing a more three dimensional view of relevant events. But usually these films are building an argument. And the editing structures the interviews in a way that makes it clear to the audience where the filmmaker believes the truth lies. (Harlan County's conversations with the Basil Collins, the Brookside mine foreman and with strikebreakers are a good illustration of this point.) Filmmakers employ whatever devices they can in their effort to convince us of the accuracy and truth of their documentary vision. Ultimately it is our belief in the integrity of the filmmaker that establishes the credibility of the film.

It's my contention that no matter how compelling the evidence and arguments a filmmaker presents, a viewer's belief in the truth of the film is, at bottom, an act of faith. It's an act of faith I have no trouble making for the work of Barbara Kopple. I believe *Harlan County* is utterly convincing in its portrayal of working people organizing and struggling to improve their lot in life. How does it work for you?

#### After You Watch the Movie

Were you surprised by the strong role that women play in this film? A male filmmaker might not have recognized that the dramatic hook in this union story was the leading role played by women. As you recall, it was a court decision limiting the number of men on the picket line that created an opportunity for women to seize the initiative in carrying on the strike.

This is remarkably similar to the situation portrayed in the classic film *Salt of the Earth* directed by Howard Biberman 1954. *Salt* is an incredible historic precedent for *Harlan*. It was made by members of the Hollywood Ten, filmmakers who had been blacklisted. After refusing to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee's (HUAC) anti-communist witch hunt, progressive filmmakers were unable to work in Hollywood. Like Kopple they turned to a union struggle ---zinc miners in New Mexico--- as the basis of their film. The story in *Salt* is also one in which women---despite the opposition of their husbands--- take an ever more active role in the strike. The film was made collaboratively with the community whose struggle it portrays.

Based on a true story, Salt enlisted community members as actors who played themselves. They were joined by experienced professionals including Will Geer and the Mexican actress Rosaura Revueltas in a screenplay written by Michael Wilson (Bridge on the River Kwai). Unlike the Academy Award winning Harlan County, Salt of the Earth was essentially banned in the U.S., receiving extremely limited distribution until 1965 (only eight years before Kopple began working on Harlan County.) In fact Kopple did bring Salt of the Earth down to Harlan to show to the miners---a case of life imitating art. Too predictably some people began red-baiting, calling her a communist. (The bugaboos of the 50s were still alive and kicking in the mid 70s.)

In any film, even one as seemingly comprehensive as Harlan County, there are stories that get left behind. (One of my editing room truisms is that "the best is left on the floor." There are always wonderful tidbits that never manage to thread themselves into the film.) The extent of segregation and racism in the community isn't treated in any detail. And the role of the Ku Klux Klan in Harlan County isn't covered. Many of the strikebreakers shown in the film actually became active Klan members subsequently. They even arranged with the home economics class at a local school to make their robes. When Kopple brought Harlan County to screen for the local community, the Klan strung up a goat with KKK carved on its belly nearby the screening. On the other hand, the ending of the after the murder of Lawrence Jones and the settling of the strike is, in dramatic terms, too much. Documentaries like all films are most effective in engaging our emotions. And certainly the emotional conclusion of the film is the end of the strike we've witnessed for the length of the film. But the film goes on to treat the internal politics of the union movement in great detail. Yes, this is important information. But it's the kind of information and analysis that works much better in print. In an interview Kopple acknowledges that most people wanted the film to end with the story of the strike in Harlan. But it was her belief that the underlying political message of the film was best served by the last ten minutes of news style reporting. What do you think?

#### Discussion Questions

A politically committed film like Harlan makes no pretense of neutrality or objectivity. Is this an advantage or disadvantage -- for the filmmaker? for audiences? to a concern for truth? Does a story have to tell both sides in order to be truthful? Should Night and Fog (one of the first explorations of the death camps) include the Nazi point-of-view? Is the film too emotional? Does it romanticize, idealize the miners and their wives? Why are stories like Harlan seldom seen? (What working class families exist on TV besides the canceled Roseanne and imbecilic Married with Children?)

#### Suggestions for Additional Viewing

Documentaries American Dream Barbara Kopple  
Roger and Me Michael Moore

Fiction Molly Maguires Martin Ritt  
Norma Rae Martin Ritt  
Matewan John Sayles  
Blue Collar Paul Shrader

6. Biography/Autobiography and Reflexivity in the Documentary Sherman's March--- An Improbable Search for Love Ross McElwee 1985

The documentary tradition has always included portraits and biographies. These have tended to be of the great and famous, sometimes notorious, and usually always men. Statesman, generals, and artists: we are introduced to the heroes and anti-heroes of our era. (Barsam's Nonfiction Films cites the 50s as a period when bio-docs were especially

popular. He mentions Helen Keller in Her Story, Bernstein in Israel and Albert Schweitzer.

Today PBS and the History Channel are regular sources of more serious nonfiction biographies.) This venerable approach to documentary delivered the goods, but made little impact on the development of documentary art. These kinds of biographies tended to tell sometimes interesting stories in a straightforward, usually predictable manner. This began to change by the 80s. Exhausted by the political ferment of the 60s and 70s, some filmmakers began to turn their cameras on their friends and families and even on themselves. They began to create smaller scale, more personal documentaries. Unfortunately, but perhaps not surprisingly, many of these films are not readily available. Film and video makers like Ralph Arlyck, Tony Bubba and Skip Sweeney built on a tradition of the diary films pioneered by the experimental filmmaker Jonas Mekas. They took the intimate material of their everyday lives and subjected it to the scrutiny of the camera. The danger with this approach is that the films can be too small, too precious, too self-indulgent. A successful autobiographical documentary calls for discipline as much as for self-awareness and revelation. All of the films we've considered have a strong point-of-view, and they employ a variety of techniques to enhance their credibility with audiences.

Autobiographical films, with the filmmaker as the protagonist, generally side-step questions of objectivity. Believing that objectivity is neither possible, nor desirable they set out to tell filmed stories that self-consciously recognize and record the process of their construction. The premise---or conceit if you will--- is that of a magician who claims to be showing you how he performs his tricks. If we as viewers are privy to the process of the film's creation, how can we be concerned with issues of truthfulness or manipulation? This preoccupation with self-conscious recognition of the filmmaking process ---reflexivity-- is not new.

Recall our discussion of how Vertov's Man with a Movie Camera pioneered this approach in the days of heady experimentalism, which marked early Soviet cinema. Ironically reflexivity has quickly become just another narrative device with which to imply immediacy and authenticity-- without necessarily delivering a greater quotient of truth or reality.

In fact, it seems to me that reflexivity has become a fashionable marker of postmodernism. What do I mean? Today in many circles it is a commonplace to assert that truth is multi-faceted, that the intention of the artist or creator is irrelevant to our understanding of the text, and that the recognition of power relationships is key to any possibility of extracting meaning from experience. If this is our point-of-view, the reflexive stance of the filmmaker seems to be saying: "Look I don't have any secret power. I've shown you exactly what I'm doing. If you know what I'm up to, how can you be concerned about 'truth,' 'objectivity,' and 'fairness?'" Including the filmmaker and the process of filmmaking can give viewers some insight into the film-behind-the film, but it is in itself no guarantee that what we're seeing accurately represents people and events. My point is that reflexive gestures never reveal the entire process of filmmaking. And that films that tried to do so would probably be exceedingly tedious and boring. (No one cares how difficult it was to set up an interview, why the sound is so bad, what the filmmaker was trying to do ---but failed.) In the final analysis the filmmaker is still deciding what to include and what to delete; how to shape and structure the film; how to get an audience to respond to a particular series of sounds and images. In reflexive filmmaking the audience is allowed to see the reflected image of the filmmaker while the film apparently mirrors reality. But it is still the filmmaker that selects the mirror, shapes it, polishes it and positions it. And then the film artist has access to the power inherent in editing--- to select and order the fragments of film, to create structure and meaning.

Sherman's March is subtitled, " A Documentary Mediation upon the Possibilities of Romantic Love in the South during an Era Nuclear Weapons Proliferation. This lengthy listing of attributions is typical of the writing style of 19th century authors. It sets the tone for the piece and stylistically connects McElwee with the era of General Sherman.

This film is structured around McElwee's romantic obsessions. The setting is the mythic South, where the ghost of General Sherman meets Ross's fantasies of contemporary southern womanhood. Just as Sherman burns and pillages the South, a region he claims to love, Ross McElwee tears his way through a succession of attempted (sexual) conquests. The filmmaker seems to subject himself --- or at least a constructed persona of himself--- to the same kind of revealing and embarrassing revelations as his subjects. Ross's self-deprecating sense of humor goes a long way toward convincing us of his sincerity and of the "nonfictionness" of his film. McElwee has said that writing and rewriting are central to this film. "I labor for hundreds of hours over the narration, revising endlessly." Yet this is a part of his process, which he doesn't share with the audience. What evidence do we have of how he writes? We only see the results in his monologues. The monologues---- seemingly spontaneous and confessional---are artfully constructed. Pay careful attention to them. They provide the core and structure of the film.

### After You Watch

You probably have a sense that you know Ross from his filmed diary. Let's consider how he's told us about himself. Let's start with those carefully crafted monologues. For the most part the on-camera self-portraits seem to have been filmed in media res ---in the middle of things. I'm thinking especially of his lonely musings in the motel room when his brother's car broke down, and his slightly drunken report in the darkness of his father's home after the costume ball. We know that Ross had to take a number of unseen deliberate steps to shoot these self-interviews. He had to charge the camera batteries, load the camera, set it on the tripod, check and adjust the lights, focus the camera, and choose the proper exposures, put the battery in the microphone, adjust the microphone and turn on the tape recorder, and turn on the camera. This is a very lengthy process, which in itself belies Ross's casual and spontaneous air. We don't know for sure that he hadn't outlined his thoughts before turning on the camera. Or if in fact these thoughts from the heart might not have been shot months or years after the events they describe. In fact several of the monologues are constructed with cut-aways ----to the moon in the night sky for example. It is precisely here that the filmmaker has total freedom to rewrite, reconfigure, re-remember, re-create and reconstruct his memory and experience. And of course there is the great preponderance of voice-over commentary when Ross doesn't appear on camera. This is where we see the part of McElwee that wanted to be a writer before he wanted to be a filmmaker. I don't mean to imply that this writing is done with the intention of falsifying events or (personal) history. Ross is not misleading us. In fact he is artfully exercising his craft to quite intentionally lead us ---to engage our feelings, to make the filmed Ross a protagonist we care about enough to see the next chapter, the next installment in his romantic saga. The point I'm trying to make here, is that despite the film's claims to show all-- - of transparency, if you will--- we still believe or don't believe the images before our eyes based upon the filmmaker's skill in crafting his story. As McElwee cheerfully admits, "I'm definitely playing that game....I'm making the audience aware that it's only a movie, but in doing that of course, it's a way of drawing people into the movie." It's a very effective strategy. The film was extremely well received. McElwee has gone on to apparently resolve his search for love, marrying someone who not only understands, but also shares his obsessions. He collaborated with his wife Marilyn Levine on *Something to Do with the Wall* (1990), and he continues to include his family including his son Adrian in his filmmaking.

### Discussion Questions:

Discuss the filmmaker's treatment of his subjects. Do you think he is fair to them? Why or why not? What happens when the filmmaker is the ostensible subject of the film? Is the film made more or less credible? How and why? This film reveals pieces of the process of filmmaking. What does it leave out? Why do you think that is? What does it reveal? Why? What is the effect of this self-consciousness on you as a viewer? On the subjects of the film?

### Suggestions for Additional Viewing

Crumb Terry Zwigoff

Hoop Dreams S. James, F.Marx and P.Gilbert

28 Up Michael Apted  
Best Boy Ira Wohl

7. Blurred Boundaries David Holzman's Diary Jim McBride 1967

Is fact stranger than fiction? Can we tell the difference between the two? The boundaries between fact and fiction seem to be less distinct by the day. Life and art imitate each other, and filmmakers seem to take great pleasure in exacerbating the ensuing confusion. From the Great Train Robbery to the neo-realism of the Bicycle Thief to Oliver Stone's JFK, fictional filmmaking has been eager to simulate an intimate sense of real life. Today more than ever, narrative filmmaking employs the tropes and techniques of the documentary to capture a sense of spontaneity, realism and "actuality." It's not difficult to pick out the hand held camera work, and grainy stock of Forest Gump's history, the simulated viewfinder of a home video camera in the Philadelphia Story, the "newsy edge" of recreated TV reporting and the appearance of improvisation in contemporary fictional film. But insofar as these devices have been incorporated in fiction, I believe that their reliability as markers of nonfiction has been weakened. And just as fiction has borrowed the look of documentaries, documentary filmmakers are using what has been traditionally the province of Hollywood filmmakers in a most provocative way.

Among the most challenging documentaries are those films, which explicitly choose to blur the boundaries between the techniques of fiction and nonfiction. A film like The Thin Blue Line Errol Morris (1988) positions itself within a well established tradition of vigilant, justice seeking, redressing-of-wrongs, defender-of-the-underdog documentary work. The film tells the story of Randall Adams, an innocent man wrongly convicted of a murder he did not commit. Within this news-driven tradition there is usually little respect for docudrama or re-enactments. Thin Blue Line is unusual in choosing to use highly stylized re-enactments and slow motion, focusing on symbolic objects --- a gun, a spilling milkshake, headlight beams, and a silhouette in the window. For me these devices tend towards a risky self-indulgence, and a kind of formalism, which is, I believe, inherently dangerous. To the extent that documentaries appropriate the most emotionally compelling devices of fictional filmmaking--- in this case stylized lighting, special effects, expressionistic camera angles, actors and overly dramatic music---they tend to upend the documentary's traditional balance between argument and persuasion on the one hand and emotional manipulation on the other. If we think that film art is a continuum, nonfiction tends to emphasize ideas and argument more than fiction does. And fiction relies upon emotion more than nonfiction. Obviously it's a question of balance not absolutes

NONFICTION	FICTION
ARGUMENT	EMOTION

Morris's over-reliance on fictional technique may be rationalized by the filmmaker as necessary to engage the audience's sympathies in order to free an innocent man. The question here is whether Morris is more interested in testing his ability to manipulate audiences, than he is in provoking a consideration of the facts of the case. There is an additional risk that by appropriating the techniques of fictional filmmaking, boundaries are eroded and in the long run the credibility of the documentary is called into question. If the grammar of documentary becomes indistinguishable from the conventions of fiction film, the documentary may cease to exist as a distinct form. A debased documentary vocabulary may result in even serious work being reduced to just another form of consumer entertainment. (Compare how Dead Man Walking uses the same techniques of re-enacting the crime in a fictional work about a justly accused killer.) If the Thin Blue Line is among the more recent works challenging us to consider the boundaries between fact and fiction,

David Holzman's Diary by Jim McBride twenty-one years earlier (1967) marked out the territory. This film is

included in the Library of Congress's National Film Registry recognizing its significance in the development of American film. It was McBride's first film. He's gone on to direct *The Big Easy* and *Breathless*. David Holzman's *Diary* was shot on weekends using borrowed equipment. Similar to *Sherman's March*, it's a first person account of the filmmaker's obsessive love life. The film is constructed in the form of diary. Its premise is based on Godard's notion that "cinema is truth 24 times a second." We can see it as an attempt by the director to "bring his life into focus." The social environment of the film is restricted to the filmmaker's immediate acquaintances. The process of making the film seems to take over the filmmaker's life. As Ross McElwee puts it in *Sherman's March*, "It seems I'm filming my life in order to have a life to film." The apparent dramatic tension in the film has to do with David's desire to photograph his girlfriend, a professional model, against her wishes. She wants to preserve a private space outside of photography. So the film also investigates the contradictions of sexual politics. Here we have a woman quite content to exploit herself ---using her body image to sell and advertise consumer goods. Yet on the other hand, she complains about being objectified in her boyfriend's film. From her point of view it's an argument about limits, that she can decide when to pose and when not to. But to David it may seem odd that she's willing to appear for pay in commercial photography and unwilling to cooperate for love in his personal search for meaning ---his filmed diary. Elaborating on the stylistic conventions of direct cinema and personal experimental filmmaking, the filmmaker "just records life."

As you watch the film, notice the black and white stock, the end of roll flashes, the improvised and spontaneous affect of the participants, the emphasis on "process" and mirrors. All these techniques acknowledge and incorporate the filmmaking apparatus into the structure of the film's story. A sense of immediacy is heightened by the soundtrack, which is marked by radio reports of rioting in Newark, and escalation in Vietnam. Note that you are aware that David has received his draft classification of 1-A ---suitable for induction. David is living on the edge. He's liable to be shipped off to fight and die in an unpopular and little understood war. His girl friend moves out on him. And he's increasingly paranoid. This is, on one level, a youth culture film of the late 60s. It's less a *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and more *Filmmaker on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*.

#### After You Watch This Film

As perhaps you suspected, this film is not a documentary. It is in fact a scripted fiction. It pretends to be a personal and private film. It mimics the style of underground filmmaking of the 60s. These were often student films, sometimes shown in festivals, rarely screened in theaters, most often projected on basement walls in college dorms or dingy apartments. But in fact this film is intended as a satire of those films. It's an attempt to capitalize on the low budget, low-production values of the films it parodies. It is actually designed to compete for an audience in the theatrical marketplace, not the usual venue for student films. The film is a parody of self-absorbed student work of the period. Not only does it include many of the tropes and markers of Direct Cinema which we've discussed previously, it also incorporates slow motion, a fish-eye lens, gratuitous (if unerotic) nudity, as well as pseudo-profundities, profanity and the requisite dosage of angst, alienation and voyeurism. This was a 60s version of "film with an attitude." It was part of the larger cultural revolution of the 60s, which rejected the conformity of the 50s. This was the era when sex, drugs and rock 'n roll met the "hell no, we won't go" draft refusals of the anti-war movement.

McBride (and McElwee) use the "filmmaker as protagonist" as a powerful device for capturing our attention and engaging our sympathies. But despite the filmmaker's (i.e. David the fictional filmmaker's) protestations -- or even because of them -- we can no longer accept professed sincerity as a guarantee of credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness. We've been duped. Led to believe that we can tell fact from fiction, by the form and structure ---the look and feel--- of a film we're set-up for dramatic effect at our own expense. One more ironic tidbit--- David is played by the screenwriter of the film, L.M. Kit Carson. So whose story, whose fiction is this? Does it matter? This film illustrates that no set of techniques can guarantee the authenticity of any film. This is especially galling to those of us intent on preserving the role of documentaries as the form, which is uniquely suited for considering the realities

of the human predicament. (In 1968 an audience of professional documentarians at the Flaherty Film Seminar found themselves first fooled by David and then outraged.)

### Discussion Questions

Did you realize this film was not actually a documentary while watching it, and if so, at what point? What clues gave this away? If you did not realize it was not a documentary? Identify situations in this "diary film" where the filmmaker is using technical devices to try and convince you that the film is spontaneous, unrehearsed actuality. Find examples where the film is less successful in maintaining this pose. How did you feel when you found out that the filmmaker used the devices and power of direct cinema to betray you, the viewer? Were you angry? If so, why? What is the role of the filmmaker -- to play with the audience, or to present a series of truths to be digested? What do you think Jim McBride's goals were in making this film? Must we conclude that no film is worthy of our trust? If not, why not? If so, why?

### Wrap-up Lecture A Summary

At this point let me try and summarize what we've learned about the nature of the documentary. Traditionally much of the power of the documentary has come from an agreement between filmmaker and audience regarding the authenticity of the events portrayed. Audiences ordinarily expect there to be a high degree of correspondence between the filmed record and events which have actually occurred in the real world. The first naive response from the earliest days of film is that "seeing is believing" (The Lumiere brothers). The second development was that of authority -- "Trust me I'll show you how things are, and tell you what to make of them." (Grierson and the British Documentary Movement).

Direct Cinema was a return to the notion that "Seeing is believing" re-enforced by the technological innovations of the 60s. Today for better or worse, we're in a time of blurred boundaries. We know more about the limits of the documentary, and trust less in its potential to objectively reveal the truth. Ours is an era of competing visions and versions of reality. What we can assert with certainty is limited. We recognize that all films are constructions -- not windows on an unmediated world. Just as the mechanics of perception are outside viewer consciousness, so too, most of us have generally been unaware of the process of mediation that all filmmaking requires and craves. We now understand that to truly appreciate and enjoy films, we must do more than follow the narrative, responding to the emotional power of storytelling. We are more aware than ever of the processes involved in the creation of documentary realities.

This course has demonstrated the variety of techniques documentary filmmakers use to convince viewers of the truthfulness of their films. These techniques range from voice-of-god commentary to eye-witness testimony and self-reflexive confession. We appreciate that no set of techniques or conventions in themselves will necessarily guarantee a truthful vision of reality. We are forced to rely on our trust in the filmmaker and our own experience and critical skills. We have examined the techniques of filmmaking and recognize that even when a filmmaker exposes "his process," he or (all too infrequently she) is just enticing us further into the simulated world --- a hall of mirrors. Now that we are more aware of the process of creating documentary stories, we can better recognize the opportunities and dangers, which confront filmmakers trying to edit the complexities and nuances of human existence into the shape of a 30, 60 or 90-minute nonfiction motion picture.

Fiction and Nonfiction ---the documentary in the next century "All great fiction films tend toward documentary, just as all great documentaries tend toward fiction.... each word implies part of the other. And he who opts wholeheartedly of one necessarily finds the other at the end of his journey." Godard on Godard

If you are familiar with the work of the great experimental stylist, Jean Luc Godard, you're not surprised by his comments. I tend to agree with him that the best of both fiction and nonfiction are, at their heart, human stories attempting to grapple with truth-telling. The greatest fiction comes from life. It works if it rings true---if it captures the essence of human feelings and experience. Nonfiction takes the rawness of the material world and uses the art and craft, the magic of filmmaking, to create and shape a story. Essentially all the greatest filmmaking is about capturing the story of human experience. Documentarians are challenged to be formally inventive while not subverting their uniquely important role of capturing and interpreting the complexities of real life. The point is not that fiction and nonfiction are incapable of imitating one another stylistically, but rather that they ought not to without weighing the risks to the ongoing credibility of the documentary art form.

Even as we recognize the apparent similarities of nonfiction and fictional filmmaking, I believe that it is essential that filmmakers and audiences continue to make the effort to distinguish between these forms. For each has a unique contribution to make to our developing consciousness. It seems to me that we impoverish our world if we retreat to the solipsistic view that we all create our own truths, that truth is only relative and that truth is unknowable. It is worth making the effort to identify the invented and imagined world and to distinguish it from our impulse to capture the fleeting images of the real world as they unfurl in all their immediacy and unpredictability. I believe that today the role of the documentary filmmaker is that of clear-eyed person trying her best to make a subjective search for objective reality.

Edgar Morin, a French filmmaker says that it's not that the documentary, "told the whole truth, but that it posed the whole problem of truth." The question is not whether perfect objectivity can exist in a documentary, but rather what are the maker's intentions? How well does she succeed? Are her intentions made reasonably clear to an audience? Documentaries have had a privileged position of respect because of a contract between the filmmaker and the audience. This contract is based on the audience's implicit trust in the filmmaker's integrity. To say that neither the filmmaker nor the audience needs to or is able to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction is a dangerous notion. Let me give you a small example of the kind of muddy and wrong-headed thinking that results from failing to recognize the difference between fact based filmmaking and fiction filmmaking. As reported in the New York Times, Jack Fisher, director of the fictional feature *Torn Apart* proclaims, "I'm still a documentary filmmaker, and I will always be one--even when I make my \$500 million musical slasher film. I'll still be documenting what is happening on the set. We're always shooting a documentary of what happens on the set."

The unwillingness or inability of filmmakers and audiences to make clearheaded distinctions between fiction and nonfiction removes meaning from the world and impoverishes us. To my mind it consigns us to exist in a universe of absurdity. I'm still enough of an (old-fashioned) existentialist to insist that our best strategy in the face of the absurdities of the universe is to act as if we believe in reason and truth and perhaps the search for beauty. So what does this have to do with documentaries? It goes back to my claim in our first discussion that documentaries are included among the "sober discourses" of philosophy, politics and science. Yes indeed it is absolutely correct to realize and appreciate that documentary films achieve their wonderful power to move and inform us by means of art and artifice. And yes, it is accurate to insist that it's only the integrity of the filmmaker that can offer any assurance of authenticity and veracity. But, despite human frailties, limitations of talent, time and resources, the ironies and contradictions inherent to making art from life, documentaries still offer us an experience of the human condition not possible in any other way. This is why regardless of the lack of funding, ignoring the difficulties of arranging distribution, heedless of all the reasons it's probably impossible, passionate realists still make documentaries and risk-taking viewers still seek them out.

Suggestions for Additional Viewing



I've mentioned and recommended a number of films throughout this course. Let me suggest a few more films that celebrate and challenge the idea of the documentary. You should be well equipped to appreciate these films, so rather than embark on lengthy explanations and rationales, I'll just list them alphabetically.

Always for Pleasure Les Blank  
Berkeley in the 60s Mark Kitchell  
Burden of Dreams Les Blank  
Chronicle of a Summer Jean Rouch  
Grey Gardens The Maysles  
Hearts and Minds Peter Davis  
The Panama Deception Barbara Trent  
The Times of Harvey Milk Epstein and Schmeichen  
Tongues Untied Marlon Riggs  
Waiting for Fidel Michael Rubbo  
The War Game Peter Watkins

Copyright Mark Freeman 1997