# DIRECTING THE DOCUMENTARY

Third Edition

Michael Rabiger

Focal Press

Boston Oxford Johannesburg Melbourne New Delhi Singapore

Focal Press is an imprint of Butterworth–Heinemann.



Recognizing the importance of preserving what has been written, Butterworth–Heinemann prints its books on acid-free paper whenever possible.

Butterworth–Heinemann supports the efforts of American Forests and the Global ReLeaf program in its campaign for the betterment of trees, forests, and our environment.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**
Rabiger, Michael.
Directing the documentary / by Michael Rabiger.—3rd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-240-80270-5 (pbk. : acid-free paper)
1. Documentary films—Production and direction. I. Title.
PN1995.9.D6R33 1997
070.1'8—dc21 97-6582
CIP

**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The publisher offers special discounts on bulk orders of this book.
For information, please contact:
Manager of Special Sales
Butterworth-Heinemann
225 Wildwood Avenue
Woburn, MA 01801-2041
Tel: 781-904-2500
Fax: 781-904-2620
For information on all Butterworth-Heinemann publications available, contact our World Wide Web home page at:
http://www.bh.com

10 9 8 7 6 5

Printed in the United States of America

CHAPTER 2

# A BRIEF AND FUNCTIONAL HISTORY OF THE DOCUMENTARY

In a book like this it is impractical to take more than a brief look at the documentary's development so I make no claim to historical or geographical balance. Instead here is an unapologetically selective account to serve as a backdrop to the rest of the book. Although the films listed are classics, they are not readily available. Many video stores carry a few documentaries, but specialized films are hard to find. If you live near a university, you may be able to view films in their library. In North America, you can try the video rental and sales specialists listed in the Bibliography and Film Sources section near the back of the book. If you live outside the United States, try your library service for an interlibrary tape loan, or call your national film institute (every country seems to have one) for advice.

## ON FILM LANGUAGE

Art enables us to vicariously experience other realities than our own and to connect emotionally with lives, situations, and issues that would otherwise remain alien. Finding ourselves reacting within a new context, we open up to other ways of seeing. For example, although the facts of something fairly distant such as World War II are unchanged, our emotional perspective can be stirred up anew. Even the monolithically evil image of Nazi Germany is undergoing change. Works such as Wolfgang Petersen's *Das Boot,* Werner Herzog's *Signs of Life,* and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* have affirmed strands of normality and even goodness within the Third Reich. Such films make it not less evil, just more dangerously human.

Because film is so recent on the scene compared with other arts, its language and effect are only coming to be understood, especially as screen language is itself still in vivid evolution. To complicate matters, filmed action, such as the "facts" of history, draws its meaning both from the perspective of the viewer's times and

from the interpretative structure imposed by the film's makers. Even at a cellular level, two film shots placed together form a suggestive juxtaposition that would be quite different if their order were reversed. Relativity and comparison are therefore the heart and soul of film language.

Film is also more a medium of experiencing than of contemplation, and one cannot become a good filmmaker without grasping the differences. Literature can easily place the reader in the past or in the future, while film holds the spectator in a constantly advancing present tense. Even a flashback quickly becomes its own ongoing present. Literature is experienced as a contemplative and intellectual activity in which the reader, moving at his own pace, shares the mental and emotional processes of the author and her characters. Film is a dynamic experience in which cause and effect are inferred by the spectator, even as the events appear to happen. Like music, its nearest relative, film grasps the spectator's heart and mind with existential insistency. Because we seldom want to stop, slow, or repeat any part of the show, we are less likely to fully appreciate the means of persuasion or the extent of our emotional subjugation. Film's verisimilitude lulls us into passively watching "events" as though they were real, so that authorship and an authorial voice appear to be absent. Nothing could be further from the truth. Documentaries are authored constructs no less than fiction films, with which they have much in common.

Documentary's history is a David and Goliath saga where subject matter has weight and substance, while authorship—a preeminently attractive aspect in all other artworks—is almost invisible. Exceptions have been the high points in the history of the genre, but now there is a movement toward films with an authorial "voice." Video and nonlinear postproduction will accelerate this evolution because they liberate filmmakers to filter, freeze, slow motion, superimpose, or interleave texts at will. This unshackles us from the tyranny of real time and realism, and permits a subjective and impressionistic treatment of original footage. The PBS series *The Great War* (1996) demonstrated how positively such a treatment can affect a historical narrative.

## AUTHORSHIP AND FACTUAL FOOTAGE

Before the documentary form was invented and named in the 1920s, nonfiction cinema had existed for more than two decades. The first moving pictures transfixed for the world's wonderment pieces of reality, such as workers leaving a factory, a baby's meal, a train arriving to disgorge its passengers, and a rowing boat going out to sea. These earliest recorded moments of daily life are deeply touching because they are the human family's first home movies.

From its beginnings as a fast-buck optical trick, the fiction cinema quickly expanded its subject matter, following contemporary audience tastes in the direction of vaudeville, the music hall, and popular theater. Early fiction cinema includes staged comedy, historic reenactment, magic illusions, farce, and melodrama. The camera never stopped gathering factual footage of all kinds for newsreels, always very popular. During World War I, vast amounts of footage covered all phases of the hostilities and film became an important medium of communication and propaganda for wartime governments and their populations. Of all the early fac-

tual footage, that of World War I must be the most familiar to us today. It is also the most obviously biased in its attitudes and omissions. At our remove in time, the footage and its intertitles seem like jingoistic and naive posturing, with "our side" as heroes and "the enemy" as a malevolent and inhuman machine.

Are newsreels also documentary films? Plainly each is documentary material, but because newsreels are episodic and disjointed, they lack the comprehensive vision of a true documentary. Instead, footage is event centered while the event's meaning and relationship to any larger dimension remains out of sight. More than sound track is missing from those early film documents of the Great War. Absent is the interpretive vision already visible in a contemporary fictional work, such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915), even though Griffith's vision was flawed with southern racist attitudes. The fiction cinema was lucky in having superb role models in literary fiction. A filmmaker looking for a treatment of war could, for instance, pick up Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. It uses the historical novel form to subvert historical attitudes that assumed the overriding influence of kings, generals, and ambassadors during the Napoleonic wars. Tolstoy's experience as a soldier at Sebastopol told him that wild rumors, inadequate equipment, or even mistaken ideas about the enemy could put an army to flight just as easily as poor leadership. He did not need to alter any of the facts of the French invasion of Russia; he simply viewed them as an ordinary Russian, instead of from an elitist historical vantage. Tolstoy's largeness of view, his compassion for the humble soldier and for the precious coherence of family life, as well as for the more abstract idea of Russia herself, help us see not just those wars, but all war, as a tragic human phenomenon to be avoided at almost any cost.

Early actuality films entirely lack any of this coherence and largeness of vision. So where in literature might nonfiction filmmakers have looked for clues? There is no obvious form or body of work. Persuasive factual reporting was previously delivered through government reports, specialized journals, or newspapers. Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (published 1851 to 1862) is much nearer the documentary form and uses interview methods that allow his subjects to speak with their own words and ideas (Figure 2-1). But in its presentation of a whole interconnecting web of injustices, the book is quite passive.

Possibly painting or caricature are the documentary's true antecedents, and its values and concerns can be found in the work of artists such as Bruegel, Hogarth, Goya, Daumier, and Toulouse-Lautrec. Goya's vision of war or Daumier's of the urban poor helped show the way for the documentary film, from an individual and emotionally committed perspective to cast an unblinking eye on the terrible beauty of the twentieth century.

Newsreels made a large contribution to the public knowledge of World War I, but the context was also set by newspaper and government reports, letters, eyewitness accounts, fiction, poetry, and photography. Historians, repossessing that silent footage, have since reworked it to reveal rather different perspectives of the Great War, a revised outlook formed with hindsight's overview, of course, but that could only come from a radically different political and social consciousness than that of the period's ruling class. How ironic that the same footage can support such different representations.

Film's mere existence may have shifted the world's notions of truth, because its self-evident plasticity dramatizes how *truth is relative rather than absolute*. As

**FIGURE 2-1**

Henry Mayhew interviewed London's poor. (Illustration from Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor.*)

more World War I information becomes available, as new researchers uncommitted to earlier viewpoints look at the complex pattern of actions and events, they propose new relationships and more broadly embracing explanations. That war, of course, is only a single example among numberless documentary subjects.

## THE INVENTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY FILM

The spirit of documentary is perhaps to be found first in Russia with the Kino-Eye of Dziga Vertov and his group. A young poet and film editor, Vertov produced educational newsreels that made a vital bid for followers during the Russian Revolution. He came to believe passionately in the value of real life captured by the camera and, in keeping with the spirit of the time, to abhor the stylized fictional life presented by bourgeois cinema. Vertov served as a leading theorist during the Soviet Union's period of great cinema inventiveness in the 1920s.

The term *documentary* is said to have been coined by John Grierson while reviewing Flaherty's *Moana* in 1926. Flaherty, an American whose earlier *Nanook of the North* (1922) is acknowledged as documentary's seminal work, began shooting his ethnographic record of an Eskimo family in 1915 (Figure 2-2). While editing his footage in Toronto, he inadvertently set fire to his 30,000 feet of negative and had to gather funds to reshoot it.

Owing to the constraints of a hand-cranked camera, insensitive film stock requiring artificial light, and appalling weather conditions, Flaherty had to ask his

subjects to do their normal activities in special ways and at special times. Because of Nanook's liking for Flaherty and because he knew they were placing on record a vanishing way of life, Nanook and his family both provided and influenced the content, enabling the filmmaker to shoot his "acted" film about a battle with the elements as if it were a fictional story (Figures 2-2 and 2-3).

Having gotten to know his "actors" for such a long time, Flaherty's relationship with them was so natural that they could quite un-self-consciously continue their lives before his camera. The film's participants and their lives were so inarguably authentic that the film transcended mere acted representation. Just as important was the fact that Flaherty's unsentimental vision of Eskimo daily life elicits the larger theme of man in a struggle for survival.

Distributors at first refused to accept that *Nanook* would interest the public, but they were proved wrong when it drew large crowds. Yet while audiences lined up to see the film, its subject died on a hunting trip in the Arctic. One cannot imagine a more ironic endorsement of the truth in Flaherty's vision.

However, with *Man of Aran* (1934) and other films made later in his career, Flaherty came under fire from Grierson, Rotha, and others for being more interested in creating lyrical archetypes than in observing the true, politically deter-

**FIGURE 2-2**

Nanook warming his son's hands from *Nanook of the North.* (The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.)

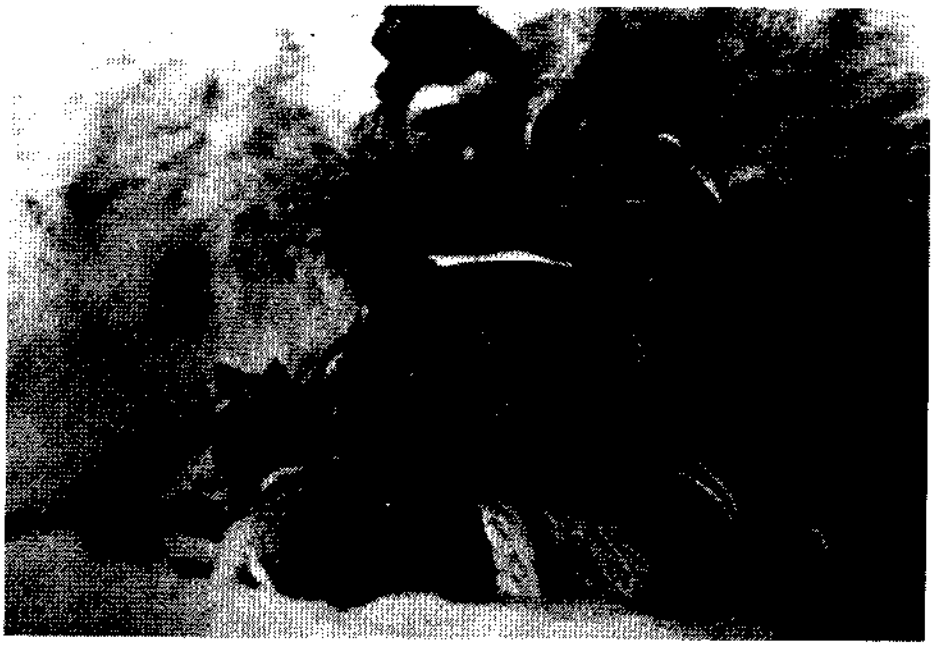

**FIGURE 2-3**

From *Nanook of the North*. A family to feed. (The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.)

mined conditions of his subjects' lives. Not only did he assemble an ideal family from assorted islanders, but he carefully avoided showing the big house of the absentee landlord—the individual largely responsible for the islanders' deprivations. George Stoney and Jim Brown's *How the Myth Was Made* (1978) goes to Aran and explores Flaherty's process with some of the film's surviving cast.

From *Nanook* onwards, factual cinema began showing real life in ways that went beyond the fragmented presentation of news footage. By turning events into a story, the documentary cinema could not avoid interpreting its subject and implying, sometimes with considerable and unconscious self-revelation, its makers' ideas about social cause and effect. Grierson, who was to pilot the British documentary movement, described the documentary form as the "creative treatment of actuality." In the development of national cinemas that was to come, American documentaries often followed Flaherty's example by showing the struggle between man and nature. Paradoxically it was Pare Lorentz's films made for the U.S. government, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937), that showed rather too explicitly the connection between government policy and ecological disaster (Figures 2-4 and 2-5). Their success as indictments ensured that American documentary makers were soon turned loose to work without government funding.

**FIGURE 2-4**

*The Plow That*

In Britai
date, as he
we had to
is—that has
endorsed Br
with which
committed
mentary sch
their work.
est artistic

**FIGURE 2-4**

*The Plow That Broke the Plains.* (The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.)

In Britain, after the ravages of World War I, Grierson's self-proclaimed mandate, as he worked for the British Government in the late 1920s, was "somehow we had to make peace exciting, if we were to prevent wars. Simple notion that it is—that has been my propaganda ever since—to make peace exciting." Grierson endorsed Brecht's statement, "art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it." The people who collected around him were socialists committed to the idea of community and communal strength. The British documentary school's achievement was revealing the dignity in ordinary people and their work. *Night Mail* (1936) and *Coal Face* (1936) recruited some of the brightest artistic talents, such as the composer Benjamin Britten and the poet W.H.

**FIGURE 2-5**

*The River.* (The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.)

Auden, to assist in producing works that have since become famous for their celebration of the rhythms and associations of humble work.

A few years later, with the onset of World War II, Humphrey Jennings emerged as the poet of the British screen. His *Listen to Britain* (1942) and *Fires Were Started* (1943) neither preach nor idealize; instead, through innumerable vignettes of ordinary people adapting to the duress of war, Jennings produced a moving and unsentimental character portrait of Britain itself.

In Russia of the 1920s, with the revolution scarcely completed, the new government found itself needing to control a huge nation of peoples who neither read nor understood each other's languages. Silent film offered a universal language with which the citizens of the new Soviet republic could confront the diversity, history, and pressing problems of their nation with optimism. Because the government wanted the cinema to be both realistic and inspirational, and to get away from what it considered the falseness and escapism of western commercial cinema, much thought in those idealistic days went into codifying the cinema's function. One outcome was a heightened awareness of the power of editing, and another was Dziga Vertov's articulation of Kino-Eye, a cinema intended to record life without imposing on it. It was the precursor of the Direct Cinema movement that is discussed later.

Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) is an exuberant record of the camera's capability to move, to capture life in the streets, and even to be reflexively aware of itself. He believed that by compiling a rapid and ever-changing montage of shots, life itself would emerge free of any point of view other than that

of the all-seeing camera. Despite his intention to produce an egoless film, the chaotic profusion of imagery, the humor, and the catalogue of events and characters could only be Vertov's.

Sergei Eisenstein, the grey eminence of the Soviet cinema, never made a documentary, but his historical reenactments, most notably *Strike* (1924) and *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), have a quality of documentary realism in their presentation of recent Russian history and are the precursors of docudrama.

European documentaries of the 1920s and 1930s, coming from societies neither recently settled, like America, nor torn by revolution, like Russia, tended more toward reflecting the onset of urban problems. In centuries-old cities bursting at their seams with dense, poverty-stricken populations, filmmakers such as Joris Ivens, Alberto Cavalcanti, and Walter Ruttmann produced experimental films that have since been labeled "city symphonies" (Figure 2-6). Films of the period made in France, Holland, Belgium, and Germany are characterized by inventive, impressionistic shooting and editing. One is struck by the romantic attitude of these films to the busy rhythms of daily life and for the stress of living in poor, cramped quarters. The paradox is that, in spite of hardship, the ordinary people in their worn and dirty surroundings show the vitality and humor of their medieval ancestors whose hands originally built the environment. It is as though Bruegel has returned with a camera.

In Spain, Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (1932) portrayed the appalling poverty and suffering in a remote village on the border with Portugal. Eloquent

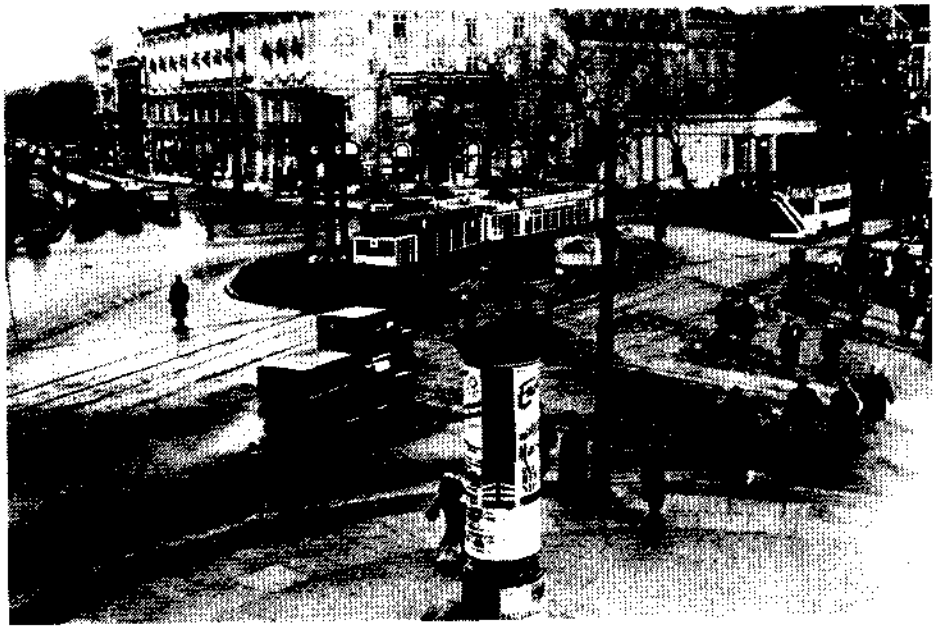

**FIGURE 2-6**

*Berlin: Symphony of a City.* (The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.)

and impassioned, the film leaves the spectator seething with anger at a social system too lethargic and wrapped in tradition to bother with such obscure citizens.

More than any other power group, the Nazis realized the potency of film in a generation addicted to the cinema. In addition to propaganda films using carefully selected actors to show Aryan supremacy and the preeminence of Hitler's policies, the regime produced two epics so accomplished in the compositional and musical elements of film that they undeniably belong with the great documentaries of all time. Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938) presented the 1936 Olympic Games as a paean to the physical being of athletes and, by association, to the supremacy of the Weimar Republic. Along with Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1937), this film is regarded as a pinnacle in the exploitation of nonfiction cinema's potential (Figure 2-7).

What is so sinister in this valuation is that *Triumph of the Will* has also been acknowledged as the greatest advertising film ever made. Its apparent subject was the 1934 Nazi Congress in Nuremberg, but its true purpose was to mythicize Hitler and show him as the god of the German people. It is an abiding discomfort that great cinema art should eulogize such a monstrous figure, but Riefenstahl's

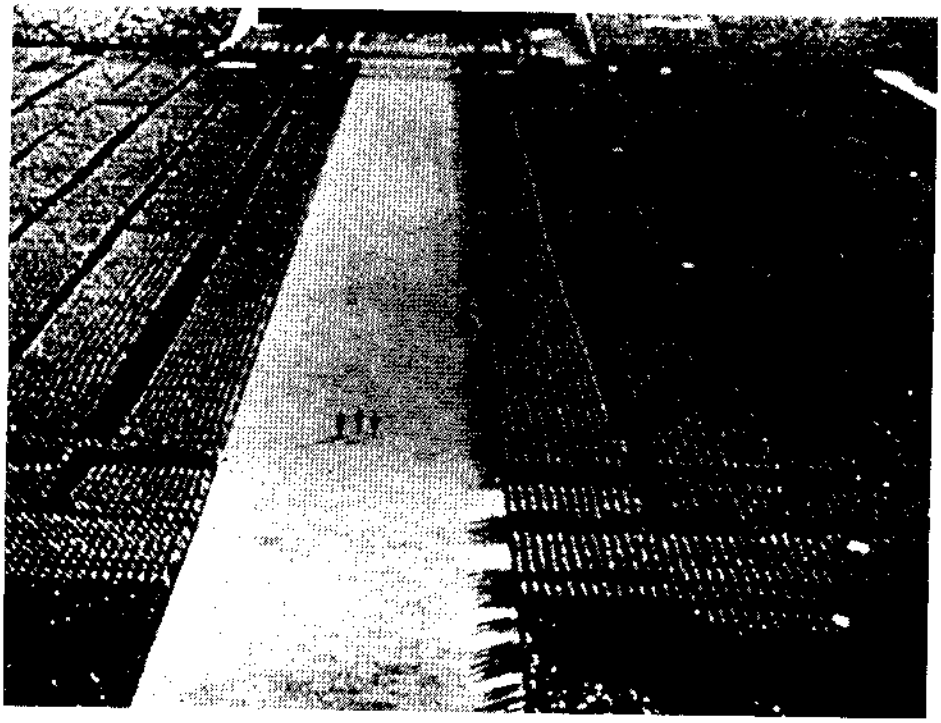

**FIGURE 2-7**

A Hitler massed rally in *Triumph of the Will*. (The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.)

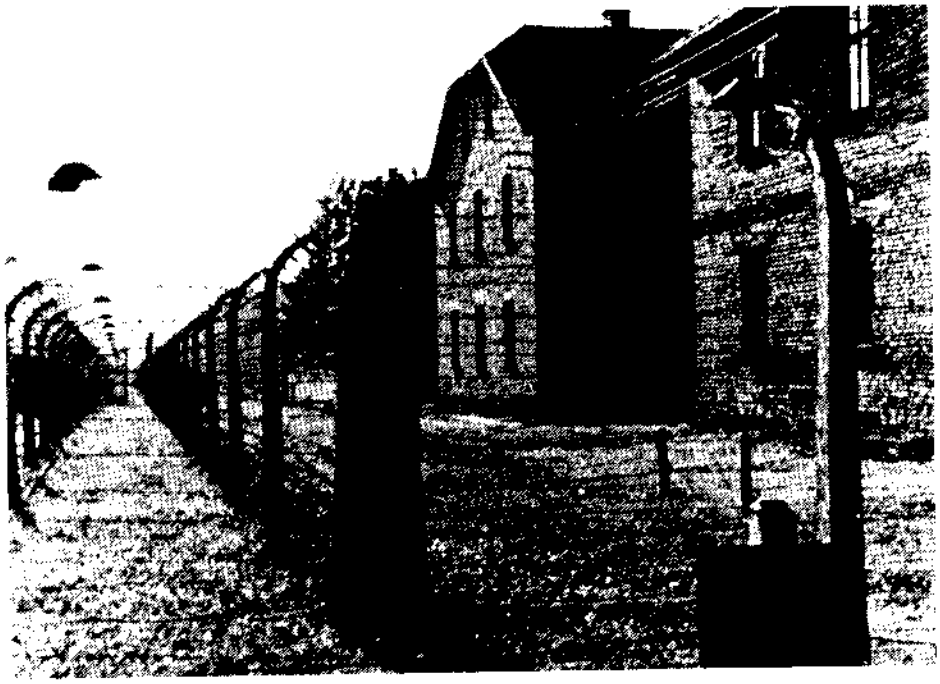

**FIGURE 2-8**

Resnais' impassioned plea for humane watchfulness in *Night and Fog*. (Films Inc.)

career stands as a reminder of how reality needs wise and responsible interpretation if art is to be on the side of the angels.

World War II, which immolated half of Europe, was a time of prodigious factual filming. Most documentaries were government sponsored and focused on the consequences of massive warfare: the destruction of cities, homelessness, the plight of the millions of refugees, as well as the lives of the soldiers, sailors, and airmen who fought for their countries. Ironically, it was the Nazis' own film records that contributed such damning evidence to Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1955), possibly the single most powerful documentary ever made about the human capacity for destroying our own kin (Figure 2-8).

## NEW TECHNOLOGY LEADS TO ADVANCES IN FORM

The documentary film remained tethered to the limitations of its clumsy technology well into the 1950s, when bulky cameras and huge, power-hungry sound recorders were all that was available. Although location sync sound was possible, equipment limitations turned documentary participants into stilted actors. One has only to see a late Flaherty film, such as *Louisiana Story* (1948), to sense the subjugation of content and form to an inflexible technology. Even Jennings' excel-

lent *Fires Were Started* (1943) is so self-consciously arranged and shot that one has to remind oneself after dialogue sequences that the people and the scenes of wartime London ablaze are actual war footage.

Life was too often staged and too seldom caught as it happened. But technological advances changed all this. One was magnetic tape sound recording, which permitted a relatively small, portable audio recorder, and another was the Eclair self-blimped (mechanically quiet) camera, which made handheld sync filming possible. Its magazine design also allowed quick reloading with only seconds of down time during magazine changes. Yet another advance came from Ricky Leacock and the Robert Drew group at Time Inc. in New York. They solved the problem of recording sync without having to link the tape recorder and camera with constricting wires.

By the beginning of the 1960s these advances transformed every phase of location filming, from news gathering and documentary to improvised dramatic production. The outcome was a revolution in the relationship between camera and subject. Now truly mobile and flexible, the camera and recorder became observers adapting to life as it unfolded. A handheld unit could be operated by two people and follow wherever the action might lead. The camera became an active observer, and this showed on the screen in the immediacy and unpredictability of the new cinema form.

**FIGURE 2-9**

Flaherty shooting silent footage for *Louisiana Story*. Sound was impractical on location. (The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.)

## DIRECT CINEMA AND *CINÉMA VÉRITÉ*

The new spontaneous mobility evoked two very different philosophies concerning what was most truthful in the relationships between the camera and its subjects. In America, the Maysles brothers, Fred Wiseman, and others favored *direct cinema*. Their observational approach intruded as little as possible in order to capture the spontaneity and uninhibited flow of live events. The emphasis was on shooting informally without special lighting or evident preparations, and waiting for events of significance to take shape.

Direct cinema proponents claim a certain purity for the method, but unless the camera is actually hidden—an ethically dubious practice at best—participants are usually aware of its presence and cannot help but modify their behavior. Certainly audience members feel like privileged observers, but the authenticity of what they think they are seeing is often questionable. The integrity of observation claimed by direct cinema proponents is more illusory than actual, because its appearance is sustained by editing out material where the illusion is broken, such as when participants glance at the camera. Direct cinema works best when events consume participants' attention; it works progressively less well as the camera gains visibility and priority.

The second approach was called *cinéma vérité* and originated with Jean Rouch in France. He had learned from his ethnographic experience in Africa that making a documentary record of a way of life was itself an important relationship. Like Flaherty with Nanook, Rouch found that authorship could usefully and legitimately be shared between participants and the filmmaker. Permitting and even encouraging interaction between the subject and director, *cinéma vérité* legitimized the camera's presence and let the director be a catalyst for what took place on the screen. Most importantly, it authorized the director to initiate characteristic events and to prospect for privileged moments rather than passively await them.

Eric Barnouw, in his excellent *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), sums up the differences as follows:

> The direct cinema documentarist took his camera to a situation of tension and waited hopefully for a crisis; the Rouch version of *cinéma vérité* tried to precipitate one. The direct cinema artist aspired to invisibility; the Rouch *cinéma vérité* artist was often an avowed participant. The direct cinema artist played the role of uninvolved bystander; the *cinéma vérité* artist espoused that of provocateur.

Direct cinema found its truth in events available to the camera. *Cinéma vérité* was committed to a paradox: that artificial circumstances could bring hidden truth to the surface.

Since both approaches capitalized on the spontaneous, neither could be scripted. Freed from the tyranny of the blueprint, film editors began inventing a film language that involved building in a freer, more intuitive form, using counterpointed voice tracks and flexuous, impressionistic cutting to abridge time and space. These poetic advances were adopted by the fiction feature film.

The *cinéma vérité* practitioner affects filmed reality willingly, and the direct cinema proponent does so unwillingly, but in practice the two approaches really have much in common. The claim of fidelity to the actual is all the more question-

able if one acknowledges that editing routinely brings together on the screen what in life is separated by time and space. Like the fiction film, the documentary is plainly channeled through a well-defined human point of view despite its appearance of objectivity and verisimilitude. In the end, it summons, as best it can, the spirit of things rather than the letter, and it is all the more exciting because of this.

How then can we judge a film's claim to fairness and truth? Only the audience and the audience's knowledge of life can determine if a film is "truthful." This is subjective and requires emotional and experiential judgments.

In the United States, actor John Cassavetes used the new portable 16mm equipment to shoot his first film, a fiction piece that capitalized on the power of Method dramatic improvisation. *Shadows* (1959) was grittily shot and difficult to hear, but undeniably powerful in its spontaneity. The intrepid Albert and David Maysles (Figure 2-10), who had cobbled their own equipment together, produced their documentary, *Salesman* (1969). It uses observational or direct cinema to follow a band of hard-nosed bible salesmen on a sales drive in Florida. With humor and sympathy, it shows how American salesmen are tormented on the rack of success, and to what limits they go in order to meet company-dictated quotas. It also proves how accurately Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* epitomizes the dilemma of the American corporate male. Few works expose the operating costs of the American dream with more deadly wit.

The Maysles brothers' *Gimme Shelter* (1970) followed the Rolling Stones to their gigantic outdoor concert at Altamont, California. Many camera crews were

**FIGURE 2-10**

Albert and David Maysles—a complete film unit ready to go. (Wolfgang Volz.)

deployed, and the film continually cuts from position to position in the swollen, restless crowd. Showing the mean, dangerous side of the 1960s counterculture, the film culminates with the murder of a troublemaker in the crowd by the Hell's Angels. The film is mainly remarkable for its omniscient view of a mass movement.

A fine French film benefitting from the new mobility was Pierre Schoendoerffer's *The Anderson Platoon* (1967) (Figure 2-11). With his crew, Schoendoerffer, who was originally a French army cameraman, risked his life following a platoon of GIs in Vietnam who were led by a black lieutenant. We accompany the Anderson platoon for many days, experiencing what it is like to grapple with an invisible enemy, to fight without real purpose or direction, and to be wounded or dying far from home. The film honors the ordinary soldier without ever romanticizing war; compassionately it watches and listens, moving on the ground and in the air with the depleted patrol. Making frequent use of music, the film achieves the eloquence of a folk ballad.

Another filmmaker whose art developed out of mobility is the American Fred Wiseman. Originally a law professor, he was moved to make a film about an institution to which he normally brought his class. *The Titicut Follies* (1967) shows life among the inmates of Bridgewater State Hospital in Massachusetts, an institution for the criminally insane. The staff, unaware of how they looked to the out-

**FIGURE 2-11**

*The Anderson Platoon*, a ballad of an unwinnable war. (Films Inc.)

side world, allowed Wiseman to shoot a huge amount of footage, which he accomplished using minimal equipment and no special lighting. The result is a violently disturbing, haunting film that shows scene after scene of institutionalized cruelty, thought by those outside the profession to have ended in the eighteenth century. The film caused a furor and was immediately banned by state legislators from being shown in Massachusetts.

A more retrospective study, Marcel Ophuls' magnificently subtle analysis of the spread of fascist collaboration in France during World War II, *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970), helped to open the discussion of an era of shame for the French. In the United States, Peter Davis' *Hearts and Minds* (1974) was a similarly excellent, hard-hitting work that examined the roots of American involvement in Vietnam.

Cinematographer Haskell Wexler has been involved with documentaries since the 1960s. He covered the 1965 March on Washington with *The Bus* (1965), filmed a personal journey through North Vietnam in *Introduction to the Enemy* (1974), and shot footage for Joseph Strick's *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* (1971). He used his experience as a camera operator to develop a fiction film, *Medium Cool* (1969), which is set among actual events that took place during the 1968 Democratic Convention riots in Chicago. The latter film portrays a news

**FIGURE 2-12**

*Harlan County, USA,* a film showing real-life violence in the making. (Krypton International Corp.)

cinematographer jerked out of the cocoon of his craft to a growing political awareness. It crystallizes the unease Americans were feeling at the violence, both inside and outside the country, being perpetrated by their government in the name of democracy.

Another fine American documentary is Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, USA* (1976), which follows the development of a Kentucky miners' strike and shows that the bad old days of company intimidation and violence are still with us (Figure 2-12). In the finest tradition of the genre, Kopple shows us the close-knit ties and stoic humor of this exploited community. Surely no film has more graphically spelled out the ugly side of capitalism or the moral right of working people to protect themselves from it. Her *American Dream* (1990) documents the divisions within another lengthy strike, this time at the Hormel meat factory. In an America that is downsizing, hostile to organized labor, and on the cusp of massive changes in the patterns of employment and consumption, the workers were destined to lose this battle.

## THE DOCUMENTARY AND TELEVISION

In the 1960s, increased camera mobility was matched by improvements in color-stock sensitivity. Shooting in color increased the price of filmmaking, and the stock budget became an increasing obstacle to documentary production. By this time, television had bitten deeply into cinema box-office figures, and the documentary had migrated from the cinemas to the home screen. Always potentially embarrassing to its patron, the documentary now had to exist by permission of giant television networks whose executives have always been susceptible to commercial, political, and moral pressure groups. Even the BBC, with its relatively liberal and independent reputation, drew the line at broadcasting *Warrendale* (1967), a Canadian film about a controversial treatment center for disturbed adolescents (Figure 2-13).

Likewise, Peter Watkins' chilling *The War Game* (1965), a BBC docudrama founded on facts known from the firebombing of Dresden and made to show the effect of a nuclear attack on London, waited 20 years to be broadcast (Figure 2-14). It is hard to see this kind of censorship as anything but blatant paternalism.

For better or for worse, the ever-insecure documentary maker now depended on the approval and good will of television companies for survival. But documentaries, even when mandated in a communications charter, are a minority interest; they tend to concentrate on problems and areas of concern. They are awkward to absorb into an entertainment system because their length and content are best determined by an individual's judgment. They are quite often slow, make demands on the audience's concentration, and are thought to be "unentertaining." They garner low ratings and from the position of an anxious television executive are dispensable.

The documentary is, however, a vitally dramatic form for surveying actuality. In a pluralistic society committed to principles of free speech, it plays a critically important role in informing public opinion. Because they make no profits from advertisers, documentary filmmakers depend on enlightened sponsorship to fund their work, or on finding ways to make documentaries more widely relevant and

FIGURE 2-13

Disturbed children on the razor's edge from *Warrendale.* (The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.)

appealing. This is, in fact, happening and documentaries are becoming more popular.

## TECHNOLOGY: MORE WALLS COME TUMBLING DOWN

The spread of cable television, the ubiquitous video rental store, and video on demand delivered via phone lines together promise some fascinating changes. The familiar network control that gives the viewer so little real choice is giving way to diversity. Cable companies such as Home Box Office are actually financing nonfiction films, while the Discovery Channel shows nothing else, and shows it worldwide.

Digital and interactive video, in which computerized operation allows the user to choose a path through the available material, offers a variety of instructional and entertainment possibilities. In addition, the video industry is getting ready to upgrade standards for picture sharpness and sound fidelity in what was to be called high definition television, but will probably turn into a merging of technologies. A relationship between music, television, the computer, the Internet, and home entertainment is evolving rapidly as all of these systems incorporate digital electronics. Because of all of these changes, the film/video industry seems

**FIGURE 2-14**

*The War Game,* a frightening view of nuclear disaster that was kept from the public. (Films Inc.)

set to follow the more flexible, venturesome publishing operation that has long been the norm in the music recording industry. All that can be said with confidence is that the electronics industry is evolving products of enormous potential for the home and workplace, and is doing it faster than the average person can even follow in newspapers and journals.

Not only are distribution cartels changing, but the tremendous cost of making videos seems likely to become a thing of the past. A new generation of digital video camcorders is appearing, with picture and sound quality in a $4,000 machine that rival those of Betacam, the previous industry state-of-the-art system. An hour of color sync recording can now be made on a 6mm tape cassette costing no more than a decent meal. Just as 16mm film superseded 35mm as the medium for television filming, so tape formats are shrinking in size and cost. The truckloads of equipment and engineers previously needed for location recording were replaced by a large camcorder, and this is being replaced by small, one-person-operated digital instruments capable of high-quality color and sound recording. Digital 6mm videorecording is producing impressive audio and video quality at modest prices from pint-sized instruments. The professional models do even better. Either can feed almost directly into a computer hard disk, and with the development of lower priced nonlinear postproduction, the day is soon arriving when desktop production will be able to produce broadcast quality output with compact disk

(CD) quality sound (Figure 2-15). What is truly revolutionary is that generations of copies can be made digitally that are every bit (no pun intended) identical to the original. The days of generational loss are at last passing, and a longer lasting archiving medium is now in sight.

Higher resolution, large screens, and high-fidelity sound will transform society's forum for ideas and entertainment, although the cinema, as a place to see a show with a large audience, will probably always endure.

Developments in technology always herald innovations in form. One-person, broadcast-quality video filmmaking is now a reality. What Ross McElwee did with difficulty and at great expense in his delightful *Sherman's March* (1989), that is, filming a series of serendipitous encounters unaided, can now be done as easily and quickly as making a tape recording. Not only can the filmmaker record with little fuss, he or she can go home and edit on a home computer as if writing on a word processor. The consequences for new forms of film authorship are exciting. Admirers of the brilliant Chris Marker, for example, can build on the diary form used in his intensely personal essay films. The BBC series *Video Diaries* does this by equipping non-filmmakers who have interesting jobs or an inherently dramatic

**FIGURE 2-15**

D-Vision OnLINE desktop postproduction screen. Using a PC with WindowsNT and a Targa 2000DTX, this system can post-produce to broadcast quality picture and CD quality sound. (Photo courtesy of D-Vision Systems, Inc.)

life situation with a miniature camera, and then providing expert help in editing. The results are often fascinating and significant, because a non-filmmaker with only a little basic training can now document a journey or reunion and reflect publicly on its impact and meaning. Thus an adoptee in search of her biological parents can record every major step in this most fundamental and moving of all journeys, and with the help of a highly skilled editing and producing team, can share the frustrations and revelations of self-discovery.

Soon high school students may begin to use the screen with the same freedom offered a writer using a computer and paper. As everyone knows, there is more to writing than paper, but undeniably the low cost of paper allows writers to experiment and evolve. Evolution for filmmakers has never been easy. The medium is hard to use competently, and previously only the lucky, the aggressive, or the privileged could even make an attempt. Just as inexpensive magnetic recording facilities unlocked the door to impoverished musicians in the 1960s, access to video facilities is democratizing the hands at the controls in the film and video world. There is no reason why original films should not reach a selective and fair-sized audience as the delivery mechanisms expand and their hunger for product grows. That, after all, is what capitalism is good at.

## THE DOCUMENTARY'S FUTURE

This brief survey of the documentary's history—little more than a personal sketch of its highlights—is meant to show that the documentary is increasingly a medium for the individual, committed voice. The required crew is small and getting smaller, and the approach is intimate, while accommodating a balance of structured preparation and existential spontaneity. A documentary is the sum of relationships during a period of shared action and living, a composition made from the sparks generated during a meeting of hearts and minds.

Documentary makers have an ardent respect for the integrity of the actual, for the primacy of the truth in the lives of real people both great and small. The documentary maker's mission is not to change or evade destiny but rather to embrace its substance, to speak passionately of the lessons of history and the choices still available for making a more humane and generous society. Experimentation with and learning about this mission is opening up because technological advances are putting new tools in ordinary people's hands.

We are also seeing an awakened public interest in actuality films, from "infotainment," cop shows, and popular shows that exploit home movie clips, all the way to the work of serious independent filmmakers. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), in its *POV* series, has begun showing the work of independents on a variety of controversial subjects. American documentaries are penetrating the cinemas. A number of documentaries, such as *Sherman's March* (1989), *The Thin Blue Line* (1989), *Roger and Me* (1989), *Brother's Keeper* (1992), *Hoop Dreams* (1994), and *Crumb* (1994), have all made it to the big screen. The audience choice of best movie for the 1989 Chicago International Film Festival was *Roger and Me,* and critics have noted two years running that in the Sundance Festival of independent filmmakers, documentaries have greater vitality than fiction.

The popularity of any film lies in finding fresh language and innovative form, which are discussed in more detail later, but there is also a movement toward what may be called the ordinary person's "voice." It is particularly strong and pertinent in re-examining history, as *Yesterday's Witness* showed in England. Said to be the world's first television oral history series, *Yesterday's Witness* started production in the late 1960s and ran to over 100 episodes. Overview histories have yet to be made by those outside the establishment, and although the man in the street has been the subject of documentary since the form's inception, only now is he (and she, of course) becoming the author.

As electronic publishing on cable, by satellite, and through the Internet becomes more extensive, and more responsive to minority interests, there will be an increased demand for personal films about actuality and for films with imaginative and committed authorship. The medium needs new products, new approaches, and new voices.

Your time has come.

IDEN

CHAPTER 3
Finding Your Creative