

Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction

Michael Renov

In the realm of the cinema, all nonnarrative genres—the documentary, the technical film, etc.—have become marginal provinces, border regions so to speak, while the *feature-length film of novelistic fiction*, which is simply called a “film,”—the usage is significant—has traced more and more clearly the king’s highway of filmic expression.

Christian Metz

“Some Points in the Semiotics of the Cinema”¹

Once one has distinguished, as does the entire philosophical tradition, between truth and reality, it immediately follows that the truth “declares itself in a structure of fiction.” Lacan insists a great deal on the opposition truth/reality, which he advances as a paradox. This opposition, which is as orthodox as can be, facilitates the passage of the truth through fiction: common sense always will have made the division between reality and fiction.

Jacques Derrida

“Le Facteur de la Vérité”²

The detour signs are up on the king’s highway of filmic expression. In critical circles, royalism has been deposed anyway; the assumption that dominant cultural forms or theoretical approaches should enjoy the intellectual right of way has been challenged. A new consensus is building. Attention is being directed toward reality-driven representations from an ever-wider array of sources: journalistic, literary, anthropological. It may well be that the marginalization of the documentary film as a subject of serious inquiry is at an end. After all, the key questions which arise in the study of nonfiction film and video—the ontological status of the image, the epistemological stakes of representation, the potentialities of historical

discourse on film—are just as pressing for an understanding of fictional representation.

As we are reminded by Ana M. López in her essay in this volume (Chapter 8), one crucial gesture of postcolonial discourse has been its radicalizing of notions of core and periphery, frequently resulting in the discovery of the margin at the center's core. Taking at face value Metz's pronouncement that the documentary is a "marginal province," this collection makes a contribution toward a new valuation of the core and periphery of film and television studies—or, better yet, offers a deconstructive appraisal in which the terms of the hierarchy, fiction/nonfiction, are first reversed then displaced.

For, in a number of ways, fictional and nonfictional forms are enmeshed in one another—particularly regarding semiotics, narrativity, and questions of performance. At the level of the sign, it is the differing historical status of the referent that distinguishes documentary from its fictional counterpart not the formal relations among signifier, signified, and referent.³ Is the referent a piece of the world, drawn from the domain of lived experience, or, instead, do the people and objects placed before the camera yield to the demands of a creative vision?⁴ Narrativity, sometimes assumed to be the sole province of fictional forms, is an expository option for the documentary film that has at times been forcefully exercised: the suspense-inducing structure of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*; the day-in-the-life framework of the city symphonies such as *Man With a Movie Camera*, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, and *A Propos de Nice*; the "crisis structure" of the Drew Associates' films. How do we begin to distinguish the documentary performance-for-the-camera of a musician, actor, or politician (*Don't Look Back*, *Jane*, *Primary*) from that of a fictional counterpart (*The Doors*, *On Golden Pond*, *The Candidate*)?⁵ The ironies and cross-identifications these examples invoke ought to suggest the extent to which fictional and nonfictional categories share key conceptual and discursive characteristics.⁶

Indeed, nonfiction contains any number of "fictive" elements, moments at which a presumably objective representation of the world encounters the necessity of creative intervention. Among these fictive ingredients we may include the construction of character (with *Nanook* as a first example) emerging through recourse to ideal and imagined categories of hero or genius, the use of poetic language, narration, or musical accompaniment to heighten emotional impact or the creation of suspense via the agency of embedded narratives (e.g., tales told by interview subjects) or various dramatic arcs (here, the "crisis structure" comes to mind). Many more examples could be offered: the use of high or low camera angles (whose effects have been conventionalized in fiction film and television), close-

ups which trade emotional resonance for spatial integrity, the use of telephoto or wide-angle lenses which squeeze or distort space, the use of editing to make time contract, expand, or become rhythmic. In every case, elements of style, structure, and expository strategy draw upon preexistent constructs, or schemas, to establish meanings and effects for audiences. What I am arguing is that documentary shares the status of all discursive forms with regard to its tropic or figurative character and that it employs many of the methods and devices of its fictional counterpart. The label of "nonfiction," while a meaningful categorization, may, in fact, lead us to discount its (necessarily) fictive elements. It would be unwise to assume that only fiction films appeal to the viewer's Imaginary, that psychic domain of idealized forms, fantasy, identification, reversible time, and alternative logics. A view of documentary which assumes too great a sobriety for nonfiction discourse will fail to comprehend the sources of nonfiction's deep-seated appeal.⁷

With regard to the complex relations between fiction and documentary, it might be said that the two domains *inhabit* one another. Philip Rosen examines that co-habitation (described by him as "a generally undiscussed kinship between mainstream cinema and the original documentary tradition") in his essay, "Document and Documentary: On the Persistence of Historical Concepts." Rosen argues that meaning arises through a process of sequentiation which is constitutive of historical discourse; it is also a key ingredient of documentary theory and practice since Grierson. For Rosen, narrativity emerges as a fundamental condition that binds together all three representational practices—history, documentary, and the fiction film.

Ana M. López writes about a Brazilian television mini-series, "America," which offers a view of the United States that eschews the authoritative, constructing its object from "a distinctly in-between position: in between cultures and nations, the political and the poetic, the past and the present, the documentary and the fictional." López's focus on the deployment of specific aesthetic strategies within "America" places the series within the context of postmodernist discourse. Scholars have rarely enlisted such art-based paradigms for their discussions of work derived from the historical world, regardless of the degree of artfulness. Susan Scheibler's discussion of Wim Wenders' *Lightning Over Water* draws on ordinary language philosophy to describe the film's complex weave of constative and performative elements as Wenders tracks the actions and pronouncements of filmmaker Nicholas Ray during his final days. That analysis helps to explain the border status that the film cultivates for itself—between life and death, documentary and fiction, homage and exploitation. The work of Rosen, López, and Scheibler demonstrates that

the common bonds between fiction and nonfiction may be illuminated with concepts drawn from historiography, postmodernist theory, and philosophy.

Brian Winston finds that the discourse of science has repeatedly been called upon to legitimate the documentary film and to set a standard for the fiction film. According to Winston, the early and public claims for photography's status as scientific evidence were based on the sense that the photochemically produced image was a fully indexical sign, one that bore the indelible imprint of the real. Photography's social utility followed from its ability to take the measure of things with verifiable fidelity; it could thus be likened to other scientific instruments such as the thermometer or hygrometer.⁸ A comparable claim, now more metaphysical than scientific, was made by Andre Bazin more than a century later: "Photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption."⁹

Paul Arthur's "Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)" takes as given a "tangled reciprocity" between documentary practice and the Hollywood-narrative, then focuses on the special status of the documentary achieved through its claims to discursive authority. Such claims, triumphantly mounted at particular moments (the late thirties, the late sixties, the late eighties), are, to be sure, historically conditioned and responsive to particular situations. Yet, all of these peak moments of the American documentary film share a defining oppositional relation to Hollywood that shapes the very contours of documentary authenticity. Bill Horrigan's commentary on various AIDS-related documentary practices offers a mix of meditation and historical insight, most specifically toward the ways in which the field of independent media has been challenged and transformed by the AIDS crisis. Horrigan finds in the artists' response to the epidemic a "renewed credibility . . . [for] the importance of people owning and being able to determine the terms of how they are visually represented," with the legacy of feminist film practices figuring strongly. As a curator and critic, Horrigan has helped to organize and make public the richly variable outpouring of AIDS-related work since the mid-1980s; here, he offers a measure of tribute to that work while reflecting upon the discursive and political contingencies that have shaped it.

This focus on historical matters in a book entitled *Theorizing Documentary* should come as no surprise; an historical consciousness is essential for an analysis of the conceptual foundations of documentary film and video.¹⁰ Such an analysis must place the domain of nonfiction texts and practices within a century of cinematic forms as well as their photographic precursors. Indeed, the roots of cinema are co-terminus with documentary's own: Muybridge, Marey, the Lumieres. In the commercial cinema, however, the camera's preservational powers soon were devoted largely

to the recording of dramatic performances, then star turns, and their infinite reduplication for the entertainment of mass audiences.¹¹ This by-now shopworn account of the development of the narrative film's hegemony demands to be reframed, given the increasingly dominant position of nonfiction television in the current marketplace.¹² It is all the more ironic that, even while televised nonfiction forms multiply exponentially, the documentary film continues to struggle for its public identity and financial viability. PBS's summertime series "P.O.V.," one of the few existing outlets for independent work, continues to be the target of conservative reaction; it has been termed "provocative with a liberal tilt," due in no small measure to its broadcast of such work as Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* and ACT-UP's activist video, *Stop the Church*.¹³

Struggles over documentary have taken many forms; I have already alluded to those of the academy (e.g., the critical marginalization qua Metz) and the marketplace. An economically rooted aversion to the documentary form finds expression in some unexpected discursive arenas. To wit: controversy has surrounded the documentary nominations from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in recent years, the claim being that the most popular or ground-breaking documentary films such as *The Thin Blue Line*, *Roger and Me*, *Truth or Dare*, and *Paris is Burning* have failed to receive Academy recognition. Some have suggested that a kind of double standard for documentary remains in effect whereby success by any measure, financial or aesthetic, goes unrewarded. One suggested solution, issuing from Miramax Films (distributors of several of the films in question), addresses the very name "documentary." In an open letter to the Academy's executive director, Miramax suggested that the category become "best nonfiction film" so that the "negative connotations" of "documentary" could be jettisoned.¹⁴ This stigma demands to be read symptomatically.

While Brecht's call for "pleasurable learning" would seem to resonate with documentary's etymological roots (the Latin *docere* meaning "to teach"), for many, Brecht's concept remains an oxymoron. In psychoanalytic terms, one component of the spectator's cinematic pleasure involves the play of projection and identification with idealized others who inhabit the filmed world. Can expository forms designed to foreground issues and to propose solutions (with varying degrees of self-consciousness) ever hope to mobilize the forces of desire available through exclusively story forms? The notion of an explicit "documentary desire," a desire-to-know aligned with the drive for an enabling mastery of the lived environs, is one which is explored in my essay, "Toward a Poetics of Documentary." As I am at pains to demonstrate, however, the cognitive requirements to which documentary discourse responds in no way exhausts its functional domain. The expressive capabilities of nonfiction forms, too frequently

overlooked, account for an aesthetic dimension which is—on historical as well as conceptual grounds—constitutive.

One of the chief concerns of recent film scholarship has been that of psychoanalysis. Only rarely has nonfiction been the subject of psychoanalytic criticism, due, perhaps, to assumptions of a baseline of rationality and conscious inquiry which govern the making and reception of documentary film in contradistinction to the unconscious (Imaginary) substrate which cuts across and enlivens fictions.¹⁵ I cannot offer here any more than a preliminary indication of documentary's claims to the turf of psychoanalytic criticism.¹⁶ It is important to note, nonetheless, that the pleasures of nonfiction are every bit as complex as those which have been attributed to fictional forms and far less understood. And, historically, it has been psychoanalysis which has addressed itself most decisively to questions of pleasure. Recent work such as that undertaken by Judith Butler has begun to suggest, however, that, with regard to the body and its representations, psychoanalytic approaches have installed a kind of cerebral detour from the corporeal.¹⁷ Documentations of the body, as performative, analytic, or meditative vehicles, have been one sector of nonfiction practice since Muybridge. Bill Nichols' essay in this book (Chapter 10) suggests that recent documentary films have begun to activate new conceptions of the body as the subject of cinematic representation. His attention to the inscription of an embodied, corporeal history in this work points to a lively current of resistance against the Griersonian model "in which the corporeal I who speaks dissolves itself into a disembodied, depersonalized, institutional discourse of power and knowledge."

Of course, it is unwise to generalize any uniform laws of construction for nonfiction film and video and the essays contained in these pages have refrained from doing so. The recourse to history demonstrates that the documentary has availed itself of nearly every constructive device known to fiction (of course, the reverse is equally true) and has employed virtually every register of cinematic syntax in the process.¹⁸ Documentary filmmakers since the days of Flaherty's *Nanook* have frequently chosen to build stories around the heroics of larger-than-life figures plucked from their "real" environs—in short, to narrativize the real. To return to the Derrida quotation with which we began, there is the sense that truth, as understood within the Western philosophical tradition, demands the detour through fictive constructs. The truth of aesthetic forms in the classical mode has been rendered through a kind of "crucible effect" in which reality is subjected to the heat and pressure of the creative imagination—the passage of truth through fiction. According to Derrida, Lacanian psychoanalysis—and the philosophical tradition which it supports—represents truth through two indissociable paradigms: as adequation or as

veiling/unveiling. In either case, truth is co-implicated with speech ("present," "full," and "authentic" speech).¹⁹ Derrida, for his part, disengages "truth" from "reality": "What is neither true nor false is reality." For if "truth" entails speech, it also implies a speaking subject. Derrida, in his critique of "truth's" logocentric roots, thus draws attention to its constructed (and propositional) character and in so doing is able to distinguish it from "reality," which, though cognitively constructed, entails no necessary assertion or claim. Reality simply "is." (The distinction between the "true" and the "real" is not foreign to Lacan either; note his description of the Real as "beyond discourse."²⁰)

I have argued, then, that all discursive forms—documentary included—are, if not fictional, at least *fictive*, this by virtue of their tropic character (their recourse to tropes or rhetorical figures). As Hayden White has so brilliantly described, "every mimesis can be shown to be distorted and can serve, therefore, as an occasion for yet another description of the same phenomenon." This is because "all discourse *constitutes* the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively."²¹ Every documentary representation depends upon its own detour from the real, through the defiles of the audio-visual signifier (via choices of language, lens, proximity, and sound environment). The itinerary of a truth's passage (with "truth" understood as propositional and provisional) for the documentary is, thus, qualitatively akin to that of fiction.²² This is only another way of saying that there is nothing inherently less creative about nonfictional representations, both may create a "truth" of the text.

What differs is the extent to which the referent of the documentary sign may be considered as a piece of the world plucked from its everyday context rather than fabricated for the screen. Of course, the very act of plucking and recontextualizing profilmic elements is a kind of violence, particularly when cultural specificity is at issue as it is with ethnographic texts. There the question of the adequacy of a representational system as a stand-in for lived experience arises most forcefully. The question, seemingly epistemological in character, is, in fact, a deeply charged political issue within postcolonial discourse. Trinh T. Minh-ha's contribution to this book (Chapter 5), "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning," takes up the consideration of this matter with some cogency. "Truth is produced, induced, and extended according to the regime in power," she writes, with meaning understood as truth's textual corollary. Trinh argues for the documentary film as an historically privileged domain of truth, a cinematic tradition endowed with the power to capture reality "out there" for us "in here," one whose claims for authority demands to be rigorously questioned on political and philosophical grounds. Trinh's skepticism toward the traditional claims made for documentary's powers to see and to know is

echoed throughout this book. These reservations grow out of an awareness of the exploitation of "the real" as currency in an all-devouring image culture.

With regard to the moving image—used for purposes of entertainment, evidence, or sales—indexicality and commodification remain historically linked. In case after case, the value of the image depends upon its ability to inspire belief in its "real" provenance: camcorder footage of disasters, an MTV series about the "Real World" of seven young people sharing a SoHo loft, time-lapsed proof of a cleanser's stain-removing power, a Presidential candidate's encounter with a "live," in-studio audience.²³ Stylistic elements drawn from the documentary past—the grittier and grainier the better—are now routinely added to television commercials selling shoes, motorcycles, or telephone services as an antidote to their implicit fraudulence. If independent documentary filmmaking finds itself all but excluded from the nation's airwaves, its low-tech look (a historical by-product of the work) has been massively appropriated by Madison Avenue—another super-added, special ingredient for a saturated marketplace.

There is another crucial note to sound in this discussion. The violence that followed the 29 April 1992 verdict in the trial of the four police officers accused of beating motorist Rodney G. King suggests an important linkage between visual documentation and value. For despite the very real loss of life and destruction, the furor that has enveloped Los Angeles since the original King arrest in March 1991 has been largely fueled by images and their interpretation: of King's beating; of the shooting of an African American teenager, Latasha Harlins, by a Korean American merchant; of the attack of white truck driver Reginald O. Denny during the postverdict unrest. It is darkly ironic that the original videotape of the King beating—casually shot by a camcorder-wielding bystander, George Holliday, and sold to a Los Angeles television station for \$500—has been so repeatedly linked to the events that resulted in \$700 million worth of property damage in the big-budget media capital of the world.²⁴ But the value of the King tape lay elsewhere, far from the sound stages and the star-studded back lots. The trial verdict, arson, and insurrection that rocked Los Angeles and the world issued from rival interpretations of images that were collectively assumed to have an unambiguous historical status. These images were understood to be inviolably "real" even while their meanings came to be vehemently contested. In many quarters, it was assumed that these images "spoke for themselves." We have learned the contrary only through much tragedy.

No longer ought we as a culture to assume that the preservation and subsequent re-presentation of historical events on film or tape can serve to stabilize or ensure meaning. One could imagine that the attorneys who

defended the four Los Angeles police officers had perfected their tactics through a careful reading of contemporary film theory, so well did they manage to place the 12 jurors (none of them African American) "in the shoes" of the four defendants. The Holliday footage—viewed by at least a billion people worldwide—was made to support the preferred reading of the defense despite the apparently universal assumption of its status as undeniably "damning" evidence. The meaning of every tortured movement of King's body during the 81 seconds of tape was interpreted by the defense through a variety of analytic techniques (reframing; repetition; reversed, slowed, or arrested movement). These techniques proved capable of "defamiliarizing" the tape's subject matter which, in this case, amounts to dehumanizing the victim. The "human" responses elicited from most viewers (e.g., an identification with the pain of the beating victim) could be wrung out of the "legal" spectator through multiple exposure and through constant recourse to a rationalized and reconstructed version of the event (a process which many a film scholar has experienced in teaching or analyzing an emotionally charged film sequence). In the end, the footage itself, its evidentiary status as "real," could guarantee nothing. Everything hinged on interpretation which was, in turn, dependent on the context established through careful argumentation. One aspect of context—as in all film-viewing situations—existed well outside the visible evidence: the psychological and ideological predispositions of the spectators/jurors.

The framing strategy for the Holliday images depended on appeals to certain preexistent emotions shared by jury members, particularly to fears that mixed the rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, in equal parts: the growing and altogether rational fear of personal attack in an increasingly violent society commingled with fantasies of larger-than-life black belligerents, crazed with unknown substances, against whom one might understandably lash out again and again. Given such a nightmare scenario, it is not surprising that the jurors succumbed to a kind of shared delirium of the sort described by Julia Kristeva in her essay "Psychoanalysis and the Polis." Kristeva's account begins to explain the ways in which the meanings of so-called objective realities—experienced first hand or through representation—are conditioned by desire or repressed fears. For all of us who believe that documentary images or accounts can simply deliver meanings—intact and in their place—the following passage should issue an unequivocal warning:

Delirium is a discourse which has supposedly strayed from a presumed reality. The speaking subject is presumed to have known an object, a relationship, an experience that he is henceforth incapable of reconstituting accurately. Why? Because the knowing subject is also a *desiring*

subject, and the paths of desire ensnarl the paths of knowledge. . . . [W]e normally assume the opposite of delirium to be an objective reality, objectively perceptible and objectively knowable, as if the speaking subject were only a simple knowing subject. Yet we must admit that, given the cleavage of the subject (conscious/unconscious) and given that the subject is also a subject of desire, perceptual and knowing apprehension of the original object is only a theoretical, albeit undoubtedly indispensable, hypothesis.²⁵

The desiring subject is also a fearful one. In the hands of skillful attorneys, the Simi Valley jury was made to share a delirious reading of the King beating footage that enabled them to find the LAPD defendants not guilty (while deadlocking on one count against one of the four defendants). If we are to theorize documentary or even survive in a media environment which trades so heavily in "real" images, we must certainly be mindful of the psychoanalytic dimensions.

There are numerous other considerations, pertinent to an inquiry into the theoretical problems raised by documentary discourse, worthy of greater attention than can be given them in these few pages. As the epigraph from Derrida suggests, there is a deeply rooted philosophical tradition which discourages the privileging of nonfiction forms as objects of analysis insofar as truth and fiction have been ironically but definitively aligned. Truth, it has been supposed, depends on fiction, finding its shape and substance through the agency of human invention. But, as I have argued, Hayden White's speculations as to the "tropical" character of all discourse, the extent to which "discourse tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them," are deeply pertinent to the documentary instance.²⁶ No discourse is ever able to say precisely what it wishes to say insofar as the very saying is dependent on language forms which are necessarily figurative and connotatively enmeshed. And furthermore, the "very saying" of what is to be said is itself premised on another "saying" which is left unsaid. Language is ultimately a regress which cannot be followed to its end. As for the statement Derrida attributes to philosophical tradition—"truth declares itself in a structure of fiction"—it may well be that any presumption of documentary's relative exclusion from the critical ranks is simply ill-advised. If we substitute "nonfiction" for "truth" in that prescription but give due emphasis to the efficacy of "structure" within the equation, we are left with only an apparently paradoxical formulation, albeit one requiring some qualification. For, it is not that the documentary *consists* of the structures of filmic fiction (and is, thus, parasitic of its cinematic "other") as it is that "fictive" elements *insist* in documentary as in all film forms.²⁷

The documentary form—the more or less artful reshaping of the historical world—has struggled to find its place within the supposed conflict between truth and beauty.²⁸ But perhaps, as Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests in her essay, it is toward the "interval" between terms ("a break without which meaning would be fixed and truth congealed") rather than to their identity or dichotomization that our fullest attention should be given. For the reciprocal interrogation of the terms of the inherited hierarchy—fiction/nonfiction—can clarify our understanding of both. And, in the process, documentary's status of dependency can be effectively overturned.

It is, in fact, my belief that this volume constitutes a fruitful reflection upon a whole series of intervals—between truth and beauty, truth and reality, science and art, fiction and nonfiction, constative and performative, self-representation and media coverage, history and theory—in a manner which will significantly advance current thinking about documentary film and video. The king's highway may never be same.

2

Toward a Poetics of Documentary

Michael Renov

Poetics will have to study not the already existing literary forms but, starting from them, a sum of possible forms: what literature *can* be rather than what it *is*.

Tzvetan Todorov
"Poetics and Criticism"¹

I don't have aesthetic objectives. I have aesthetic *means* at my disposal, which are necessary for me to be able to say what I want to say about the things I see. And the thing I see is something *outside* of myself—always.

Paul Strand
"Look to the Things Around You"²

The notion of poetics has been a contested one from the beginning. Indeed, Aristotle's founding treatise, the starting point for all subsequent studies in the West, has long been understood as a defense against Plato's banishment of the poets from his *Republic*. With a rigor and systematicity that has tended to characterize the myriad efforts that followed, Aristotle's *Poetics* set out to show "what poetry is and what it can do"; its opening lines set forth as the field of inquiry "[t]he art of poetic composition in general and its various species, the function and effect of each of them."³ According to Lubomír Doležal, Occidental poetics has since evolved through several stages: the *logical* (inaugurated by Aristotle's divination of the universal "essences" of poetic art), the *morphological* (the Romantic/organic model issuing from Goethe's analytical focus on "the structure, the formation and the transformations of organic bodies"⁴), and the *semi-otic* (from the Prague School through the structuralism of Barthes and

Todorov, the study of literary communication within a general science of signs).⁵

Before any attempt can be made to outline the contours of what might be a poetics of documentary film and video, it is essential to work through some of the conflicting positions which have arisen within the history of poetics, a history that is far from unified. For if the intent of a poetics is, in the words of Paul Valery, to comprehend "everything that bears on the creation or composition of works having language at once as their substance and as their instrument," it would be useful to deploy the analytical rigor of a poetics, now applied to cinematic language, to learn something of the general laws or specific properties of documentary discourse.⁶ The attitude of inquiry provided by a poetics is particularly apropos for the documentary insofar as poetics has, as we shall see, occupied an unstable position at the juncture of science and aesthetics, structure and value, truth and beauty. Documentary film is itself the site of much equivocation around similar axes given nonfiction's too-frequently-presumed debt to the signified at the expense of the signifier's play. It is the "film of fact," "nonfiction," the realm of information and exposition rather than diegetic employment or imagination—in short, at a remove from the creative core of the cinematic art. I shall be at pains to contradict these inherited strictures by way of an analysis of documentary's constitutive modalities—its conditions of existence—to more fully articulate a sense of documentary's discursive field and function, aesthetic as well as expository. I will argue that four modalities are constitutive of documentary.

It is an analysis that must be speculative. For if, as Tzvetan Todorov has claimed, poetics is still "in its early stages," even after 2500 years, these initial efforts toward a poetics of the documentary can be little more than first steps. It will be necessary first to trace a preliminary genealogy of poetics to situate its most recent, hybrid manifestations in the social and human sciences, then to attend, in broad strokes, to an elaboration of the discursive modalities of the documentary in film and video.⁷

The Question of Science

Since Aristotle, poetics have been intent on minimizing the mingling of normative or even interpretive aims with descriptive considerations.⁸ The most ambitious projects for a "scientific criticism" have sought to banish interpretation outright, a task not so easily accomplished. Todorov has argued that pure description—the hallmark of science as objective discourse—can only be what Derrida has called a "theoretical fiction": "One of the dreams of positivism in the human sciences is the distinction, even the opposition, between interpretation—subjective, vulnerable, ultimately arbitrary—and description, a certain and definitive activity."⁹ It is

important to recognize the limits of a method borrowed from the natural sciences applied to aesthetic forms. It is equally essential that a new poetics acknowledges the historical effects of the valorization of science within the humanities.

In Roland Barthes's "The Return of the Poetician," a 1972 paean to the work of Gerard Genette, a description/interpretation dichotomy (and implicit hierarchy) is assumed: "When he [sic] sits down in front of the literary work, the poetician does not ask himself: What does this mean? Where does this come from? What does it connect to? But, more simply and more arduously: *How is this made?*"¹⁰ This heuristic angle to the study of aesthetic forms—the attention to the "simple" and "arduous"—bears a much-remarked upon resemblance to the inductive methods of science.¹¹ Poetics, frequently understood to be the "science of literature," might, thus, be seen as an intrinsically chiasmatic site of inquiry. Coleridge's organicist formulation of the poem as "that species of composition which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth" would suggest poetics as the science of anti-science.¹² To risk a poetics of documentary is to up the stakes yet again, since it is commonly supposed that the aim and effect of documentary practices must be (to return to the Coleridgean opposition) truth and only secondarily, if at all, pleasure. A documentary poetics would, thus, be the science of a scientific anti-science! Such involutions of thought may be of little consequence in themselves but they do testify to the particularly vexed character of any systematic investigation of documentary qua aesthetic form. As we shall see, the foundations of a documentary poetics turn on the question of science just as surely as does a history of documentary forms.¹³

Some recent attempts to theorize a poetics have chosen to distance themselves from the debate around science which, in the realm of aesthetics, depends on a clear-cut art/science dichotomy. This is, however, a relatively recent development and should not obscure the epistemological *desire* which has underwritten centuries of rigorous investigation: the longing for aesthetic criticism that approaches the status of science, that "culture-free peek at the universe enabled by a mythical objectivity."¹⁴ We need not look further for evidence of the "science wish" than to the crucial writings of Tzvetan Todorov whose several books in this field include *Introduction to Poetics* (1981) and *The Poetics of Prose* (1977). In the latter work, Todorov characterizes the shared concerns of the several schools whose efforts resulted in a renaissance of studies in poetics in this century—the Russian Formalists, the Prague School, the German morphological school, Anglo-American New Criticism, and the French structuralists.

These critical schools (whatever the divergences among them) are situated on a level qualitatively different from that of any other critical tendency, insofar as they do not seek to name the meaning of the text, but to describe its constitutive elements. Thereby, the procedure of poetics is related to what we may one day call "the science of literature."¹⁵

Todorov's statement, in its longing for a scientific foundation for the study of literature, speaks a desire for a general theory of aesthetic practices at issue since Aristotle.

Barthes's "The Return of the Poetician" traces a genealogy for poetics that culminated in the work of Gerard Genette by way of three patrons—Aristotle, Valery, and Jakobson. As in the case of Todorov, Barthes's notion of a return to poetics is predicated on the increasing attention being accorded semiotic research: "Poetics is therefore at once very old (linked to the whole rhetorical culture of our civilization) and very new, insofar as it can today benefit from the important renewal of the sciences of language."¹⁶ Curiously (or perhaps not, as Barthes's critical value must surely be linked to his constant "doubling back" upon himself), an earlier Barthes—in his 1967 essay "From Science to Literature"—could write that structuralism's highest purpose could be, through positing literature not as an object of analysis but as an activity of writing, "to abolish the distinction, born of logic, which makes the work into a language-object and science into a meta-language, and thereby to risk the illusory privilege attached by science to the ownership of a slave language."¹⁷ Others working within the tradition of Western poetics have been less inclined to disavow the investiture of status or intellectual satisfaction afforded by (para-)scientific inquiry. In the field of film studies, no one has taken up the mantle of poetics so forcefully as has David Bordwell.

In his brief for a historical poetics of the cinema appearing toward the end of his *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Bordwell writes that "poetics aims at *comprehensive* explanation of causes and uses of films . . . [s]uch work . . . puts interpretation at the service of more *global* investigations of conventions of filmic structure and function."¹⁸ [emphasis added] For Bordwell, poetics becomes a kind of "metacriticism," capable of explaining not only the "regulated efforts" which produce texts but also the effects generated by interpretive practices. "Poetics is thus not another critical 'approach,' like myth criticism or deconstruction," writes Bordwell. "Nor is it a 'theory' like psychoanalysis or Marxism. In its broadest compass, it is a conceptual framework within which particular questions about films' composition and effects can be posed."¹⁹

But Bordwell's totalizing claims for poetics' utility and intellectual rigor are equally a rebuff to reigning interpretive approaches; they are certainly wielded as a polemical instrument in his book. Furthermore, Bordwell's concern to import the insights of the "harder" sciences—among them, cognitive psychology—to construct a more systematic and verifiable analytical approach for film scholarship are by now well-known. It is helpful, therefore, to situate Bordwell's or Todorov's claims for poetics within a broader network of ideas, namely, the debates around the discursive status of science.

A. J. Greimas, in an analysis of social scientific discourse, points to a shift engendered by semiotics, from an understanding of science as a *system* to its representation as a *process*, a "scientific doing." As such, science becomes perceptibly linked with poesis at its etymological roots (the Greek "poesis" meaning "active making"). "This doing, which will always be incomplete and will often lead to mistakes, is manifested in the discourses it produces, discourses that are at first sight recognizable only because of their sociolinguistic connotations of 'scientificity.'" ²⁰ Poetics, couched in the active mood of scientific inquiry, can thus be said to address the aesthetic domain with an epistemological urgency usually reserved for the natural sciences: "Semiotics now counts as one of its urgent tasks the study of the discursive organizations of signification." ²¹

In an altogether different tone, one that (perhaps unintentionally) calls to mind the recent and important critiques of postcolonial discourse, Helen Vendler has described the particular pleasure afforded by the systematic study of aesthetic texts:

The pleasure here lies in discovering the laws of being of a work of literature. This pleasure of poetics is not different from the pleasure of the scientist who advances, at first timidly and then with increasing confidence, a hypothesis that makes order out of the rubble of data. The rubble seems to arise and arrange itself into a form as soon as it is looked at from the right angle. . . . If discovering Neptune or the Pacific Ocean has a social function, so does discovering (to the public gaze) the poetry of a new poet; or new aspects to the poetry of an old poet. Texts are part of reality, and are as available to exploration as any terrain. ²²

This will to science, the desire to produce accounts of aesthetic practices whose internal coherence and descriptive adequacy edge them toward the status of science, would seem vulnerable to charges of positivism or ideological naiveté. It is Michel Foucault who has most forcefully alerted us to the "inhibiting effect of global, *totalitarian theories*." ²³ Speaking specifically against the functionalist and systematizing theory engendered

in the name of Marxism, psychoanalysis or the semiology of literary texts—theory meant to ensure for itself the status of science—Foucault argued that "the attempt to think in terms of a totality has in fact proved a hindrance to research." Foucault's own preference was for the construction of genealogies, defined as "anti-sciences," and for an attention to "local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchize and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects." ²⁴

But more than championing a particular attitude toward scholarly inquiry—its scale, field of objects, or methods—Foucault raised questions that must surely be addressed to any study, such as that of a poetics, which has historically aspired to "elevate" literary criticism to the status of science. It is precisely the question of power within the domain of critical inquiry, the power radiating from a presumption surrounding certain categories of discursivity, that Foucault raises. ²⁵

In more detailed terms, I would say that even before we can know the extent to which something such as Marxism or psychoanalysis can be compared to a scientific practice in its everyday functioning, its rules of construction, its working concepts, that even before we can pose the question of a formal and structural analogy between Marxist or psychoanalytic discourse, it is surely necessary to question ourselves about our aspirations to the kind of power that is presumed to accompany such a science. It is surely the following kinds of question that would need to be posed: What types of knowledge do you want to disqualify in the very instant of your demand: "Is it a science"? Which speaking, discoursing subjects—which subjects of experience and knowledge—do you then want to "diminish" when you say: "I who conduct this discourse am conducting a scientific discourse, and I am a scientist"? Which theoretical-political *avant garde* do you want to enthrone in order to isolate it from all the discontinuous forms of knowledge that circulate about it? When I see you straining to establish the scientificity of Marxism I do not really think that you are demonstrating once and for all that Marxism has a rational structure and that therefore its propositions are the outcome of verifiable procedures; for me you are doing something altogether different, you are investing Marxist discourses and those who uphold them with the effects of a power which the West since Medieval times has attributed to science and has reserved for those engaged in scientific discourse. ²⁶

Certainly, in the case of the several high-water marks of poetics' study to which Todorov refers in his "Poetics and Criticism," among them New Criticism and structuralism, the attentiveness to the synchronic dimension

of the textual object (what Roman Jakobson has called the “continuous, enduring, static factors” of the text²⁷) and to the general principles which govern meaning has been widely attacked as ahistorical, falsely scientific, blind to the free play of the signifier or the heterogeneity of spectatorial positions.²⁸ The critique of structuralism’s relative inattention to the dynamics of historical transformation was articulated as early as 1966 in Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in which the limits of Claude Levi-Strauss’s structuralist approach were outlined:

More concretely, in the work of Levi-Strauss it must be recognized that the respect for structurality, for the internal originality of the structure, compels a neutralization of time and history. For example, the appearance of a new structure, of an original system, always comes about—and this is the very condition of its structural specificity—by a rupture with its past, its origin, and its cause. One can therefore describe what is peculiar to the structural organization only by not taking into account, in the very moment of this description, its past conditions: by failing to pose the problem of the passage from one structure to another, by putting history into parentheses.²⁹

Poetics and Politics

But some recent applications of the poetics model suggest that discursive analyses cognizant of textual structuration, function, and effect can attend with equal cogency to the local and political: for example, James Clifford and George E. Marcus’s *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Ivan Brady’s *Anthropological Poetics*, Nancy K. Miller’s *The Poetics of Gender*, and Susan Rubin Suleiman’s *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, particularly her chapter on “The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism.”³⁰ James Clifford sees ethnography’s poesis as complex, plural, and politically charged. If culture is contested, temporal, and emergent, its adequate representation and explanation can be realized only through “an open-ended series of contingent, power-laden encounters.”³¹ And yet, the provisional character of the contemporary ethnographer’s findings [“garrulous, overdetermined cross-cultural encounter(s) shot through with power relations and personal cross-purposes”³²] intensifies rather than invalidates the necessity for the kind of discursive self-scrutiny that poetics entails. Suleiman argues that “a genuine theory of the avant-garde must include a poetics of gender, and . . . a genuine poetics of gender is indissociable from a feminist poetics.”³³ She argues for a critical practice which, alert though it may be to the deployment of signifying elements (the domain of formal concerns), remains ever vigilant of the (en)gendered relations of power and privilege.

Crucial to both Clifford’s and Suleiman’s work cited above is the sense that the analysis of cultural/aesthetic practices must take into account the dynamics of the social space that its object occupies. In a very real sense, poetics must also confront the problematics of power. If, as Foucault has argued, the individual is “an effect of power” exercised through subtle mechanisms which “evolve, organize and put into circulation . . . knowledge, or rather apparatuses of knowledge,” critical inquiries into the species, functions, and effects of discursive forms must attend to the pressures and limits of social determination—the principles of authority and legitimacy as well as the historical repressions which shape and confine aesthetic forms.³⁴ It becomes very clear in the examination of the documentary film that the formal characteristics that define the cycles or styles of this filmic form (the actualité, cinépoem, or cinema vérité) are historically and ideologically contingent. The film “movements” that have so frequently functioned as the motor force in the development of the documentary (from the Grierson group in Britain to the direct cinema practitioners of Drew Associates to the countercultural radicals of Newsreel) have been, in every case, deeply politicized—as one might expect for such a capital-intensive (and frequently state-sponsored) cultural practice.³⁵

This attention to the necessary yoking of the political and aesthetic in the current return to poetics is pushed even farther in another recent study. Smadar Lavie’s *The Poetics of Military Occupation: Mzeina Allegories of Bedouin Identity Under Israeli and Egyptian Rule* suggests that the very polarization of poetics and politics may be culturally specific. Lavie’s purpose is to show how variations of ritualized storytelling performances, through the richness of their allegorical layering, achieve a kind of indigenous cultural resistance blending poetic and political effects. “While First-World cultures differentiate between the private and public, and between the poetic and the political,” she writes, “the Mzeina culture, being under the continual threat of effacement, tells itself in an allegorical way that it exists, metonymizing private experience for the history of the collectivity, and conjoining the local poetics of storytelling with the global political realities of neocolonialism.”³⁶

What emerges from this overview of recent efforts toward a poetics—of literature, ethnography, and film—is the sense of a shared ambition for the building and testing of general theories of textuality which focus on concrete processes of composition, function, and effect. Whereas the attention to rhetorical device or formal strategy is pronounced, no intrinsic disregard for historical or ideological determinants (including those intrinsic to the critic’s own enterprise) can be assumed. Indeed, quite the contrary can be demonstrated. These works, though they aim for an intellectual rigor and a precision of formulation, cannot fairly be pigeon-

holed as formalist or unself-consciously scientific. Indeed, as regards the current conjoining of "poetics" and "politics," a logic of supplementarity prevails: Each term functions reciprocally as "an addition that comes to make up for a deficiency" without surrender to an absolute exteriority. ("The supplement is neither a presence nor an absence. No ontology can think its operation."³⁷) The recent turn to poetics, then, is marked by a concurrent activation of history ("historical poetics") and of politics ("poetics and politics"). Lavie's challenge to Eurocentric assumptions of a poetics/politics binarism and her analysis of the highly charged syncretist practices she describes reinforce my own sense that rigorous attention to texts can facilitate political understanding.

This extended discussion of poetics is meant to articulate the precise historical context within which a poetics of the documentary may be judged. For any such undertaking necessarily invokes a rich and various tradition of inquiry in the West whose several manifestations in the twentieth century have been instrumental in the shaping of current thought about cultural practices. Given the fundamental aim of poetics—to submit aesthetic forms to rigorous investigation as to their composition, function, and effect—this field of study has become a kind of proving ground for the relations between science and art.³⁸ While many commentators have lamented the apparent hardening of the "truth & beauty" schism since the Enlightenment and others have analyzed the ideological implications of that presumed split, the work of poetics continues to redefine these contested boundaries. Most recently, some studies in literature and ethnography have demonstrated that contingencies of a political and historical character have their place within a poetics framework. It is in this context that my own enterprise demands to be understood.

In what follows I shall attempt to outline some fundamental principles governing function and effect for documentary work in film and video within an historical frame through an examination of discursive modality. This effort, though preliminary, will essay the parameters and potentialities of documentary discourse with the ultimate goal the enrichment of the documentary film, that least discussed and explored of cinematic realms. A stunted popular awareness of the breadth and dynamism of the documentary past, the scarcity of distribution outlets for the independent documentarist and the relative critical neglect of nonfiction forms have combined to hamper the growth and development of the documentary.³⁹

All of which contributes to the relative impoverishment of a *documentary film culture*, an energized climate of ideas and creative activities fueled by debate and public participation. Such an environment may once have existed in the Soviet Union in the twenties or in this country during the late thirties or early sixties. But, with the consolidation and economic streamlining of commercial television networks (with their preference for

"reality programming" over even in-house documentary) and the virtual lockout of the independent from public television series formats such as "Frontline," such an environment exists no more. While recent Congressional action creating an Independent Television Service to support and showcase the work of independent producers resulted from the concerted lobbying efforts of a coalition of independent producers, educators, and concerned citizenry, those gains are being seriously threatened by conservative forces in the Congress. Indeed, the very survival of independently produced, state-supported art in the United States remains in question, a circumstance best illustrated by the continuing drama surrounding the National Endowment of the Arts.⁴⁰ If political activism is to remain possible in the early nineties, then it behooves us to remain equally attentive to the sharpening of the conceptual tools required to enhance the development of a viable film culture for the documentary.

The Four Fundamental Tendencies of Documentary

What I wish to consider here in the context of a nascent poetics of the documentary—those principles of construction, function, and effect specific to nonfiction film and video—concerns what I take to be the four fundamental tendencies or rhetorical/aesthetic functions attributable to documentary practice.⁴¹ These categories are not intended to be exclusive or airtight; the friction, overlaps—even mutual determination—discernible among them testify to the richness and historical variability of nonfiction forms in the visual arts. At some moments and in the work of certain practitioners, one or another of these characteristics has frequently been over- or under-favored. I state the four tendencies in the active voice appropriate to their role in a "poesis," an "active making":

1. to record, reveal, or preserve
2. to persuade or promote
3. to analyze or interrogate
4. to express.

I do not intend to suggest that the most meritorious work necessarily strikes an ideal balance among these tendencies or even integrates them in a particular way. Rather I hope to show the constitutive character of each, the creative and rhetorical possibilities engendered by these several modalities. My not-so-hidden agenda is to point to and perhaps valorize certain of the less-frequently explored documentary tendencies in the hopes of furthering the kind of "basic research" in the arts that makes for better culture just as surely as it does better science. This notion of "basic research" is fundamental to a poetics of any sort. In the case of

documentary, however, there has been little research of any sort which can shed light on the governing discursive conditions which give rise to what is branded “nonfiction.” It is to be hoped that the interrogation of these several documentary modalities can begin to dislodge the sense of historical inevitability attached to whatever (im)balance may obtain within the field of current practices (e.g., the rhetorical function overshadowing the analytical) in order to engage with the wider potential, repressed but available.

The Four Functions as Modalities of Desire

These four functions operate as modalities of desire, impulsions which fuel documentary discourse. As such, the record/reveal/preserve mode might be understood as the mimetic drive common to all of cinema, intensified by the documentary signifier’s ontological status—its presumed power to capture “the imponderable movement of the real.” Writing in the late 1930s, Hans Richter described the historical demand for filmic preservation with great eloquence: “Our age demands the documented fact. . . . The modern reproductive technology of the cinematograph was uniquely responsive to the need for factual sustenance. . . . The camera created a reservoir of human observation in the simplest possible way.”⁴² As early as 1901, the cinema was recruited to the service of cultural preservation with Baldwin Spencer’s filming of aboriginal ceremonies.⁴³ Anthropology, in its zeal for the salvaging of “endangered authenticities” [a trope which has drawn fire from many quarters of late—see, in this regard, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s essay (Chapter 5)], has seized upon the camera eye as a faithful ally.

One of the crucial texts for a discussion of the desire underpinning the documentary impulse must surely be Andre Bazin’s classic “The Ontology of the Photographic Image.” As the essay reaches its affective crescendo, any notion of the image’s asymptotic relationship to the real is discarded in favor of an account by which the indexical sign becomes identical to the referent. In the following pronouncement, one feels the force of desire (historical? authorial?) as it transforms a discussion about the ontological status of the photographic image into a statement about semiosis itself.

Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its

becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.⁴⁴

Bazin’s position moves beyond the construction of a scene of absolute self-presence for the documentary sign, suggesting instead an outright immateriality arising from its utter absorption by the historical referent.⁴⁵

There are, to be sure, historical contingencies which temper any claims for “modalities of desire” as eternal or innate. The documentative drive may be transhistorical, but it is far from being untouched by history. While Bazin may have alerted us to such categorical matters as a photographic ontology, he was also attentive to the variable effects which history exercises over audiences and their responses to filmic expression. In his “Cinema and Exploration,” Bazin discusses the relative merits of some films which take up the visual reconstruction of scientific expeditions. His preference is for a film such as *Kon Tiki* (Thor Heyerdahl’s documentation of a 4500-mile sea voyage) in which only a very little footage—poorly shot, frequently underexposed 16mm blown up to 35mm—provides an authoritative rendering of experience: “For it remains true that this film is not made up only of what we see—its faults are equally witness to its authenticity. The missing documents are the negative imprints of the expedition—its inscription chiselled deep.”⁴⁶ This predilection for the real at any cost is rendered historical in Bazin’s account: “Since World War II we have witnessed a definite return to documentary authenticity. . . . Today the public demands that what it sees shall be believable, a faith that can be tested by the other media of information, namely, radio, books, and the daily press. . . . the prevalence of objective reporting following World War II defined once and for all what it is that we require from such reports.”⁴⁷ Four decades later—in the wake of countless TV ads which trade on their documentary “look” (shaky camera, grainy black-and-white)—the technically flawed depiction of a purported reality no longer suffices as visual guarantee of authenticity. It is simply understood as yet another artifice. I would thus argue that while the instinct for cultural self-preservation remains constant, the markers of documentary authenticity are historically variable.

As for the category of promotion and persuasion, one might understand the rhetorical function of film as a facilitator of desire in its most rationalist aspect. Given Aristotle’s fundamental insight on the necessity of rhetorical proofs to effect change (“Before some audiences not even the possession of the exactest knowledge will make it easy for what we say to produce conviction”⁴⁸), persuasive techniques are a prerequisite for achieving personal or social goals. We may advisedly associate certain historical personages with this tendency of the documentary film (e.g., John Grierson’s camera hammering rather than mirroring society). But the promotional

impulse—selling products or values, rallying support for social movements, or solidifying subcultural identities—is a crucial documentative instinct to which nonfiction film and video continue to respond.

We might say that the “analyze or interrogate” mode is a response to cognitive requirements, an extension of the psychological activities which, according to Constructivist psychologists, allow humans to organize sensory data, make inferences, and construct schemata.⁴⁹ While much attention has been given the role of perceptual and cognitive processes in story comprehension, relatively little has been written on a documentary-based heuristics of cognition or analytics. As Bill Nichols has argued, Frederick Wiseman’s films (to name a notable example) deploy “the codes of actions and enigmas that usually pose and subsequently resolve puzzles or mysteries by means of the characters’ activities.”⁵⁰ Moreover, these documentary presentations “imply a theory of the events they describe” by virtue of a sophisticated structuring of the profilmic into an overall ensemble Nichols describes as “mosaic” (each sequence, a semiautonomous, temporally explicit unit in itself, contributing to an overall but non-narrative depiction of the filmed institution). In this instance, the organizational strategy bears with it an epistemological agenda, for such a schema of filmed segments “assumes that social events have multiple causes and must be analyzed as webs of interconnecting influences and patterns.”⁵¹ This parameter of documentary discourse is thus tied up with deep-seated cognitive functions as well as a strictly informational imperative; the documentary film addresses issues of seeing and knowing in a manner quite apart from its more frequently discussed fictional counterpart.

The last of the four documentary tendencies encompasses the aesthetic function. It has frequently been presumed that the creation of beautiful forms and documentary’s task of historical representation are altogether irreconcilable. Near the beginning of *Of Great Events and Ordinary People* (1979), Raoul Ruiz quotes Grierson to that effect. “Grierson says: ‘The trouble with realism is that it deals not in beauty but in truth.’” It then becomes the work of the film to confound that pronouncement, to produce a “pleasure of the text” capable of merging intellectual inquiry and aesthetic value.

The pitting of “truth” against “beauty” is the product of a regrettable (Western) dualism that accounts for the rift between science and art, mind and body. Raymond Williams traces the hardening of the art/science distinction to the 18th century, the moment at which *experience* (i.e., “feeling” and “inner life”) began to be defined against *experiment*.⁵² Hans Richter’s account of cinematic development offers an illustration of the effects of this presumed binarism and its contribution to a kind of documentary anti-aesthetic: “It became clear that a fact did not really remain a ‘fact’ if it appeared in too beautiful a light. The accent shifted, for a

‘beautiful’ image could not normally be obtained *except at the expense of its closeness to reality*. Something essential had to be suppressed in order to provide a beautiful appearance.”⁵³ [emphasis added] And yet, despite the limitations of these presumptions, it will become clear that the aesthetic function has maintained an historically specific relationship with the documentary since the Lumières.

It now remains to work through each of the four modalities of the documentary in some detail and through recourse to specific texts in order to trace the contours of a poetics of documentary. What becomes immediately clear is the extent to which individual works slip the traces of any circumscribed taxonomy. Indeed, any poetics of value, despite the explanatory power it might mobilize through an elaboration of conceptually discrete modalities, must be willing to acknowledge transgressiveness as the very *condition* of textual potency. As desire is put into play, documentary discourse may realize historical discursivity *through and against* pleasurable surface, may engage in self-reflection *in the service of* moral suasion. As metacritical paradigms, the four functions of the documentary text may be provisionally discrete; as specific textual operations, they rarely are.

I. To Record, Reveal, or Preserve

This is perhaps the most elemental of documentary functions, familiar since the Lumières’ “actualités,” traceable to the photographic antecedent. The emphasis here is on the replication of the historical real, the creation of a second-order reality cut to the measure of our desire—to cheat death, stop time, restore loss. Here, ethnography and the home movie meet insofar as both seek what Roland Barthes has termed “that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.”⁵⁴

Documentary has most often been motivated by the wish to exploit the camera’s revelatory powers, an impulse only rarely coupled with an acknowledgment of the processes through which the real is transfigured. At times, as with Flaherty, the desire to retain the trace of the fleeting or already absent phenomenon has led the nonfiction artist to supplement behavior or event-in-history with its imagined counterpart—the traditional walrus hunt of the Inuit which was restaged for the camera, for example.⁵⁵

An interesting format to consider in this regard is the electronic or filmed diary (e.g., the work of Jonas Mekas, George Kuchar, Lynn Hershman, or Vanalyne Green) which reflects on the lived experience of the artist. In the case of these four artists, the interest lies not so much in recovering time past or in simply chronicling daily life—there is little illusion of a pristine retrieval—as in seizing the opportunity to *rework* experience at the level of sound and image. Whether it is Mekas’s street

scenes of New York with his world-weary narration voiced-over from many years' remove or Hershman's image overlays which couple self-portraiture with archival footage of concentration camp survivors, these diary efforts exceed the bounds of self-preservation.

The duplication of the world, even of what we know most intimately—ourselves—can never be unproblematic. We know as much from the writings of Michel de Montaigne, 16th-century man of letters, who writes of his attempt to portray not *being* but *passing*. Throughout three volumes of *Essays*, Montaigne remains vigilant to the flux which constitutes us all. He writes near the beginning of his "Of Repentance" (III:2, 610): "The world is but a perennial movement. All things in it are in constant motion—the earth, the rock of the Caucasus, the pyramids of Egypt—both with the common motion and with their own. Stability itself is nothing but a more languid motion." It does not take a poststructuralist to divine the inadequacy of reflection theories of art, those positions which would have us believe that mimesis (even as photographic representation) means producing simulacra which are the equivalent of their historical counterparts. Signifying systems bear with them the weight of their own history and materiality; Freud reminds us that even language, the most insubstantial of signifying systems, has a material existence in the unconscious. When watching the most "verité" of films, we should recall, with Magritte, that this too is not a pipe. Given the truth claim which persists within documentary discourse as a defining condition ("what you see and hear is of the world"), the collapse of sign and historical referent is a matter of particular concern.

Our attempts to "fix" on celluloid what lies before the camera—ourselves or members of other cultures—are fragile if not altogether insincere efforts. Always issues of selection intrude (which angle, take, camera stock will best serve); the results are indeed *mediated*, the result of multiple interventions that necessarily *come between* the cinematic sign (what we see on the screen) and its referent (what existed in the world).⁵⁶

It is not only the ethnographic film that depends so crucially on this fabled ability of the moving image form to preserve the fleeting moment. Think only of the myriad history films so popular in the seventies and eighties that offered revisionist versions of the Wobblies or riveting Rosies. These pieces were predicated on the necessity of offering corrective visions, alternatives to the dominant historical discourse which had scanted the struggles of labor, women, the underclasses, and the marginalized. All too frequently, however, the interest in the visual document—interview footage intercut with archival material—outpaced the historian's obligation to interrogate rather than simply serve up the visible evidence. These were honest, warm, sometimes charismatic people much like ourselves or (even more troubling) as we wished we could be.⁵⁷ The kinds of emotional

investments and narrative enticements which keep us riveted to our seats during the melodramas of the silver screen were thus mobilized. Problems arose when historical analysis, mindful of contradiction and complexity within and across documents (e.g., competing versions of texts or social phenomena as well as questions raised by translation from one language or vernacular usage to another), was displaced by anecdote and personal memory.

But public history cannot simply be an aggregate of private histories strung together or nimbly intercut. These oral histories remain valuable for their ability to bring to public notice the submerged accounts of people and social movements. But their favoring of preservation over interrogation detracts from their power as vehicles of understanding. Delegating the enunciative function to a series of interview subjects cannot, in the end, bolster a truth claim for historical discourse; the enunciator, the one who "voices" the text, is the film or videomaker functioning as historiographer. Although a thorough discussion of the self-reflexive gesture cannot be undertaken here, it is worth citing Roland Barthes's incisive pronouncements on the discursive status of all documentative utterances:

At the level of discourse, objectivity, or the absence of any clues to the narrator, turns out to be a particular form of fiction, the result of what might be called the referential illusion, where the historian tries to give the impression that the referent is speaking for itself. This illusion is not confined to historical discourse: novelists galore, in the days of realism, considered themselves "objective" because they had suppressed all traces of the *I* in their text. Nowadays linguistics and psychoanalysis unite to make us much more lucid towards such ascetic modes of utterance: we know that the absence of a sign can be significant too. . . . Historical discourse does not follow reality, it only signifies it; it asserts at every moment: *this happened*, but the meaning conveyed is only that someone is making that assertion.⁵⁸

Art historian John Tagg has written what may be the definitive account of the historically contingent character of documentary representation as evidence (the preservational condition, *par excellence*) in his introductory essay to *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Taking as his starting point a critique of Barthes's blissfully personal treatment of the documentary image in *Camera Lucida*, Tagg argues that the indexical character of the photograph can guarantee nothing.

At every stage, chance effects, purposeful interventions, choices and variations produce meaning, whatever skill is applied and whatever

division of labour the process is subject to. This is not the inflection of a prior (though irretrievable) reality, as Barthes would have us believe, but the production of a new and specific reality. . . . The photograph is not a magical "emanation" but a material product of a material apparatus set to work in specific contexts, by specific forces, for more or less defined purposes. It requires, therefore, not an alchemy but a history. . . . That a photograph can come to stand as *evidence*, for example, rests not on a natural or existential fact, but on a social, semiotic process. . . . It will be a central argument of this book that what Barthes calls "evidential force" is a complex historical outcome and is exercised by photographs only within certain institutional practices and within particular historical relations. . . . The very idea of what constitutes evidence has a history. . . . The problem is historical, not existential.⁵⁹

II. *To Persuade or Promote*

We would do well at this stage of the argument to review a crucial condition of this study, namely, the paradoxical mutuality of the four documentary functions. For although I am attempting to distinguish among the several modalities of the documentary, the better to understand their effectivity, such an effort must fail if a discrete separability is posed. Over the years, efforts have been made to map the nonfiction firmament through recourse to generic labeling (e.g., "the social documentary"), the determination of documentary types whose exemplars are meant to embody particular attributes (e.g., a social change orientation).

In such instances, one soon runs head-on into the logical paradox of all genre designations best described by Derrida in his "The Law of Genre": "In the code of set theories, if I may use it at least figuratively, I would speak of a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set." Derrida further challenges the stability of boundaries erected in the name of genre.

And suppose for a moment that it were impossible not to mix genres. What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination? And suppose the condition for the possibility of the law were the a priori of a counterlaw, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order, and reason?⁶⁰

How can we account for a sluice gate of nomination capable of exclusion (the setting of limits) yet infinitely susceptible to expansion? How are we to understand a designation of difference that remains viable only on condition of its potentiality for the violation of its closure (the genre as

"dynamic" or transformational)? What is the precise principle of difference that thus obtains? Such, at least, are Derrida's musings on the simultaneous purity and impurity of genre's status. In the present instance, the positing of the efficacy of a nominal isolation of *functional* difference exists concurrently with an equally insistent claim for the mutual interpenetration of regimes at the level of the textual instance. For, of course, one crucial parameter of persuasion in documentary could not occur were it not for the veridical stamp of documentary's indexical sign-status, itself a condition of the record/preserve mode understood as the first documentary function. Nor can we reasonably suppose that the expressive domain is altogether separable from a discussion of persuasive powers. So, in fact, these paradigms of a documentary poetics, though capable of mobilizing explanatory power—at the level of metacriticism—along a vertical axis of historically precise meaning, are never, in fact, encountered vertically. There is no ontological purity at stake.

Persuasion is the dominant trope for nonfiction films in the tradition of John Grierson, the man alleged to have first coined the term "documentary." Polemicist and social activist, Grierson left his mark on the film cultures of Britain, Canada, the United States, indeed the world. For this son of a Calvinist minister, the screen was a pulpit, the film a hammer to be used in shaping the destiny of nations. The promotional urgency which characterized the work of Britain's Empire Marketing Board under Grierson's tutelage in the thirties [e.g., *Night Mail* (1936), *Housing Problems* (1935)] has been equaled both before and since in many state-supported contexts, ranging from Dziga Vertov's exuberant *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) in the Soviet Union to Cuban Santiago Alvarez's formal as well as political radicalism in such works as *Now!* (1965) and *79 Springtimes of Ho Chi Minh* (1969).

As was the case with the preservational modality, documentary persuasion must be understood as an effect of history within precise discursive conditions. Tagg has written that the effectiveness of much New Deal photography as a tool for mobilizing popular support for governmental policy can only be accounted for within a broadly drawn context of historical forces.

The very years in which the liberal, statist measures of the New Deal were being enacted and fought for, witnessed a crucial historical "rendezvous" of means, rhetoric and social strategy. Only in this conjuncture could the documentary mode take on its particular force, command identification, and exert a power, not as the evocation of a pristine truth but as a politically mobilized rhetoric of Truth, a strategy of signification, a cultural intervention aimed at resealing social unity and structures of belief at a time of far-reaching crisis and conflict.⁶¹

While persuasion is most frequently identified with projects exhibiting a singularity of purpose and tone—the stridency of Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series from the World War II years or Leni Riefenstahl’s infamous paean to National Socialism, *Triumph of the Will*—we would do well to consider the greater diversity of the promotional impetus and the complexity of its presentational forms. Do we not, after all, in the instance of Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog*, find ourselves persuaded (moved toward a certain comprehension of the incommensurable) through the starkness of Resnais’s iconic choices (a mountain of eyeglasses), the poetic character of Jean Cayrol’s writing, or the stateliness of the camera’s inexorable tracking across and through time and space? Expressivity—the modulated play of the documentary signifier here isolated as the fourth documentary function—can give rise to persuasion as the concrete instantiation of the signified (rhetorical figures, logical proofs, the structuration of argument at the level of sound and image).

In his *Ideology and the Image*, Bill Nichols recalls for us the Aristotelian triad of proofs operative in the documentary: ethical, emotional, and demonstrative. We can be persuaded by the ethical status of the filmmaker or interview subject, by the tug of heartstrings, or by a barrage of bar graphs. Edward R. Murrow’s very presence accounted for much of the social impact of *Harvest of Shame* just as the handicapped veteran interviewed in *Hearts and Minds* moves us more deeply than could all the bona fide experts. The documentary “truth claim” (which says, at the very least: “Believe me, I’m of the world”) is the baseline of persuasion for all of nonfiction, from propaganda to rock doc.

One could argue for the relative merits of, say, emotional versus demonstrative proofs—photographs of the suffering versus expert witnesses. Certainly ethical considerations arise within the context of such a discussion; yet I am not concerned here to weigh the value or appropriateness of any particular persuasive approach. More to the point for me is the claim that the persuasive or promotional modality is intrinsic to all documentary forms and demands to be considered in relation to the other rhetorical/aesthetic functions.

III. To Analyze or Interrogate

Analysis, in this context, can be considered as the cerebral reflex of the record/reveal/preserve modality; it is revelation interrogated. Too few documentarists share the critical attitude held by anthropologist Clifford Geertz when he writes: “I have never gotten anywhere near to the bottom of anything I have ever written about. . . . Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is.”⁶² If this is true for the scholar able to devote years to field

work, how much truer might this be for the media artist whose in-depth explorations of topics must be contoured to the requirements of the cultural marketplace and a capital-intensive mode of production?

This documentary impetus transforms the unacknowledged questions that lie beneath all nonfictional forms into potential subject matter: that is, on what basis does the spectator invest belief in the representation, what are the codes which ensure that belief, what material processes are involved in the production of this “spectacle of the real” and to what extent are these processes to be rendered visible or knowable to the spectator?⁶³ While many of these questions are familiar from the debates around reflexivity and the so-called Brechtian cinema, applicable to fiction and nonfiction alike (the films of Vertov, Godard, and Straub/Huillet have most frequently inspired these debates), their urgency is particularly great for documentary works, which can be said to bear a direct, ontological tie to the real. That is, every documentary claims for itself an anchorage in history; the referent of the nonfiction sign is meant to be a piece of the world (albeit a privileged because a visible and/or audible one) and, thus, was once available to experience in the everyday.

The analytical documentary is likely to acknowledge that mediational structures are formative rather than mere embellishments. In *Man With A Movie Camera*, the flow of images is repeatedly arrested or reframed as the filmic fact is revealed to be a labor-intensive social process which engages cameramen, editors, projectionists, musicians, and audience members. Motion pictures are represented as photographic images in motion, variable as to their projected speed, duration, or screen direction: galloping horses are capable of being halted mid-stride, water can run upstream, smiling children can be transformed into bits of celluloid to be inspected at the editor Svilova’s work bench. This is not to say that every documentary must reinvent the wheel or leave in the occasional slate to remind the audience that this is, after all, only a film. What is being suggested here is that presentation is not automatically interrogation and that the latter can be a valuable ingredient for any nonfiction piece. Brecht polemicized that art’s real success could be measured by its ability to activate its audience. The flow of communication always ought to be reversible; the teacher ever willing to become the pupil.

Much has been said about empowerment in recent years. The bottom line is that the artwork should encourage inquiry, offer space for judgment, and provide the tools for evaluation and further action—in short, encourage an active response. The film or videotape that considers its own processes rather than seals over every gap of a never-seamless discourse is more likely to engender the healthy skepticism that begets knowledge, offering itself as a model.

Allow me to offer a few exemplary instances of the analytical impulse

in the documentary film. In the sound era, the breach between image and its audio counterpart has rarely been acknowledged; synchronized sound, narration, or music is meant to reinforce or fuse with the image rather than question its status. Such is not the case with *Night and Fog* with its airy pizzicatti accompanying the most oppressive imagery of Holocaust atrocities; affective counterpoint underscores the horror. Chris Marker's *Letter From Siberia* (1958) is another departure from the norm. The connotative power of nonlinguistic audial elements (music, vocal inflection) is confirmed by the repetition of an otherwise banal sequence; the sequencing of images and the narration remain unchanged while the accompanying music and tonal values of the narrating voice create differing semantic effects. Every viewer is forced to confront the malleability of meaning and the ideological impact of authorial or stylistic choices that typically go unnoticed. In Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet's *Introduction to "An Accompaniment for a Cinematographic Scene"* (1972), a musical composition, Arnold Schoenberg's Opus 34, is "illustrated" by the recitation of Schoenberg's correspondence as well as by his drawings, photographs (of the composer and of slain Paris Communards), archival footage of American bombing runs over Vietnam, and the imaging of a newspaper clipping about the release of accused Nazi concentration camp architects. A process of interrogation is thus undertaken through the layering and resonance of heterogeneous elements. Schoenberg's music, the work of a self-professed apolitical artist, becomes the expressive vehicle for an outrage whose moral and intellectual dimensions exceed the parochial bounds of politics proper. Yet the collective coherence of the filmic elements remains to be constructed by a thinking audience. The analytical impulse is not so much enacted by the filmmakers as encouraged for the viewer.

In a culture that valorizes consumption—and the disposable culture responsive to that imperative—it may well be crucial for documentarists to consider the stakes of an intervention: to challenge and activate audiences even in the process of instruction or entertainment. In this regard, analysis remains the documentarist's most crucial support.

IV. *To Express*

The expressive is the aesthetic function that has consistently been undervalued within the nonfiction domain; it is, nevertheless, amply represented in the history of the documentary enterprise. While the Lumières's actualities may have set the stage for nonfiction film's emphasis on the signified, an historically conditioned taste for dynamic if not pictorialist photographic composition accounts for the diagonal verve of the train station's rendering at la Ciotat. Most sources agree that Robert Flaherty

was the documentary film's first poet as well as itinerant ethnographer. Flaherty's expressivity was verbal as well as imagistic in origin; to the compositions in depth of trackless snowscapes in *Nanook of the North* (1922), one must consider as well the flare for poetic language ("the sun a brass ball in the sky"). The cycle of "city symphony" films of the 1920s [*Man With a Movie Camera*, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), *A Propos de Nice* (1930)] declared their allegiance in varying degrees to the powers of expressivity in the service of historical representation. The artfulness of the work as a function of its purely photographic properties was now allied with the possibilities of editing to create explosive effects—cerebral as well as visceral. The early films of the documentary polemicist Joris Ivens [*The Bridge* (1928), *Rain* (1929)] evidence the attraction felt for the cinema's aesthetic potential, even for those motivated by strong political beliefs.

And yet, the historical fact of a repression of the formal or expressive domain within the documentary tradition is inescapable. Such a circumstance arises, however, more from an institutionalization of the art/science opposition than from an inherent limitation. By way of visible proof and case study, we might consider the photographic work of Paul Strand in whom a dual emphasis, perhaps along the very lines of the "experience/experiment" division posed by Williams, was always distinguishable. Attention was paid to the inexhaustible subject matter of the world around him ("What exists outside the artist is much more important than his imagination. The world outside is inexhaustible."⁶⁴), but equally to its organization by the artist. A palpable tension can thus be said to animate Strand's work in both film and photography, arising from seemingly irreconcilable requirements: for objectivity—an attitude toward his subject matter which his one-time mentor Alfred Stieglitz termed "brutally direct"—and, with an equal level of insistence, for the free play of the subjective self.

The work of Paul Strand reminds us that the documenting eye is necessarily transformational in a thousand ways; Strand's mutations of the visible world simply foreground the singularity of his vision as against the familiarity of his object source. Under scrutiny, the Griersonian definition of documentary—the creative treatment of actuality—appears to be a kind of oxymoron, the site of an irreconcilable union between invention on the one hand and mechanical reproduction on the other. And, as with the figure of the oxymoron in its literary context, this collision can be the occasion of an explosive, often poetic effect. So much can be said, at least, for the work of Paul Strand.

Take, for example, certain of Strand's early photographs from 1915 or 1916 ("Abstraction—Bowls," Connecticut, 1915 and "White Fence," 1916) in which everyday objects or landscapes are naturally lit and com-

posed for the camera in such a way as to urge their reception as wholly constructed artifacts, sculptural or collaged. Strand here enforces a kind of retinal tension between the two-dimensional image surface (forcefully restated by the aggressive frontality of the white picket fence) and the three-dimensionality implied by chiaroscuro or deep-focus photography. There is, at the same moment, a tension of another sort that arises in our apperception of such compositions—that which is occasioned by a clash between a perceived sense of the everyday (objects or vistas that one might encounter casually) and of the wholly formal ensemble (that which has been taken causally, fabricated, for its aesthetic value).

Consider further in this regard Strand's treatment of architectural motifs, tightly framed or nestled in a landscape of competing geometrical and tonal motifs. Is it simply a special case that allows what might be termed the "competent reader" of the photograph to see "Mondrian" with and against the documentary image in one instance ("Basque Facade," Arbonnes in the Pyrennes, 1951) or, in another, a dazzling white arrow pointed heavenward rather than a simple frame structure in a cluster of other dwellings ("White Shed," the Gaspé, 1929)? One of Strand's truly emblematic images, his rendering of Wall Street shot from the steps of the Subtreasury Building, transforms the fact of scale—the monumentality of the Morgan Building and its darkened windows looming over insect-sized humans—into a moral statement. The close-up of the latch of a door in Vermont, made in 1944, performs an inverse operation; distance is replaced by proximity. An unexpected display of scale here alters a realist detail into a textural field intensified by the play between the natural (the swirl of grain) and the man-made (the horizontals and verticals of carpentry). It is, in fact, the photographic artist's discovery of the unanticipated—his ability to unleash the visual epiphany—that wrenches the image free of its purely preservational moorings. As a study of Strand's work and that of other accomplished documentary artists reveals, there need be no exclusionary relations between documentation and artfulness.

It is important to expand the received boundaries of the documentary form to consider work traditionally regarded as of the avant-garde. Films such as Stan Brakhage's "Pittsburgh Trilogy" (three films made in the early seventies—one shot in a morgue, another in a hospital, the third from the back seat of a police car) or Peter Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikareise* share with mainstream documentary a commitment to the representation of the historical real. Significantly, the focus of pieces such as these typically remains the impression of the world on the artist's sensorium and his or her interpretation of that datum (Brakhage's tremulous handheld camera as he witnesses open-heart surgery in *Deus Ex*) or the radical reworking of the documentary material to create sound/image relationships unavailable in nature (Kubelka's "synch event"). For indeed, the realm of

filmic nonfiction is a continuum along which can be ranged work of great expressive variability—from that which attends little to the vehicle of expression (the not-so-distant apotheosis of cinema vérité—surveillance technology—might serve as the limit case) to that which emphasizes the filtering of the represented object through the eye and mind of the artist. Manny Karchkeimer's *Stations of the Elevated*, for instance, is a film about New York subways and the graffiti that covers them that includes not a single spoken word. It is the composition of images and their orchestration in relation to a dynamic jazz score that accounts for the film's effectiveness.

That a work undertaking some manner of historical documentation renders that representation in a challenging or innovative manner should in no way disqualify it as nonfiction because the question of expressivity is, in all events, a matter of degree. All such renderings require a series of authorial choices, none neutral, some of which may appear more "artful" or purely expressive than others. There can be little doubt that our critical valuations and categories ("artful documentary" or "documentary art") depend on various protocols of reading which are historically conditioned. Moreover, the ability to evoke emotional response or induce pleasure in the spectator by formal means, to generate lyric power through shadings of sound and image in a manner exclusive of verbalization, or to engage with the musical or poetic qualities of language itself must not be seen as mere distractions from the main event. Documentary culture is clearly the worse for such aesthetic straitjacketing. Indeed, the communicative aim is frequently enhanced by attention to the expressive dimension; the artful film or tape can be said to utilize more effectively the potentialities of its chosen medium to convey ideas and feelings. In the end, the aesthetic function can never be wholly divorced from the didactic one insofar as the aim remains "pleasurable learning."

Conclusion

I have, in these remarks, attempted to sketch out the epistemological, rhetorical, and aesthetic terrain within which the documentary enterprise has historically arisen. My purpose has been to clarify and enrich—to clarify certain key issues implicit to our shared pursuits in order to enrich the critical and creative activities that arise out of that commitment. By invoking the model of a poetics for the documentary through the elaboration of four discursive functions—those of preservation, persuasion, analysis, and expressivity—I have hoped to introduce into these considerations a measure of critical stringency capable of encompassing historical and political determinations. By a progressive focus on first one then another of what I take to be the most fundamental functions of documentary

discourse, I have attempted to judge their historical contingency, textual efficacy, and mutually defining character. Such a study is necessarily open-ended and demands extension in several directions, not the least of which might be the evaluation of the specific effects of video rather than film practices within each of the functional categories.

As a writer and teacher, I benefit from work which challenges my critical preconceptions and takes the occasional risk. It is my hope that the practitioner can likewise draw upon my research as a basis for an ongoing process of self-examination and boundary-testing. For in the cultural context in which lively debate gives way entirely to survival techniques or business as usual, all pay a price. If a vital, self-sustaining documentary film culture is, indeed, our shared goal, we cannot afford to fail.

3

The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription

Brian Winston

1

Contemporary positioning of photography as an art does not detract from the camera's status as a scientific instrument. There are two main reasons for this; first, the long history of pictorial representation as mode of scientific evidence, a history which conditions, in part, the research agenda that produces the modern camera; and second (to be dealt with in the next section of this essay), the tendency of modern science to produce data via instruments of inscription whose operations are analogous to the camera.

On July 3, 1839, M. François Arago, the radical representative for the East Pyrenees, rose in the Chamber of Deputies to persuade the French government to purchase Daguerre's patents for the world. In his arguments, he stressed the scientific uses of the apparatus; for instance, to make accurate copies of hieroglyphics and, more generally, for physicists and meteorologists. In short, the camera was to join, as Arago listed them, "the thermometer, barometer, hygrometer," telescope, and microscope as nothing so much as the latest of scientific instruments.¹

Arago was able to mount this argument because the entire enterprise of modern science, an experimental and, therefore, observational enterprise, had already produced the instruments he mentioned, thus creating a class into which the camera could be inserted. The camera would certainly affect some sorts of artistic production; but as Arago explained it, these were of a kind that had long gone on in the service of science. Hence, his offering the example of the laborious business of hand-copying Egyptian hieroglyphs as a specific case of what photography might best replace.

Images in the service of science are, Elizabeth Eisenstein argues, a