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# Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject

Bill Nichols

“Could you do the kiss again?”

—*Lonely Boy* (dir. Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroitor, 1962)

Reenactments, the more or less authentic re-creation of prior events, provided a staple element of documentary representation until they were slain by the “vérité boys” of the 1960s (Robert Drew, Ricky Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, David and Albert Maysles, Fred Wiseman, and others), who proclaimed everything except what took place in front of the camera without rehearsal or prompting to be a fabrication, inauthentic. Observational or direct cinema generated an honest record of what would have happened had the camera not been there or what does happen as a result of the camera recording people who know they are being filmed. Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* might be admired for the evidence it provides of Flaherty’s patience, exquisite eye, and apparent lack of preconceptions, but his entire salvage anthropology model of coaxing Allakariallak to do what “Nanook” would have done some thirty years earlier, without motorized vehicles, rifles, canned food, wood-frame homes, or filmmakers along for the ride, amounted to one colossal, unacknowledged reenactment and, therefore, fraud.

Times have changed. Reenactments once again play a vital role in documentary, be they of the Solidarity movement that cannot be filmed in *Far from Poland* or of a murder for which radically disparate accounts exist in *The Thin Blue Line*, the schematic simulation of a harrowing escape in *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* or of events during the final days of Salvador Allende’s socialist government in *Chile, Obstinate Memory*. Apart from the occasional charges of deceit that surround the use of reenactments indistinguishable from actual footage of an historical event, reenactments are

once again taken for granted. They pose, however, a number of fascinating questions about the experience of temporality and the presence of fantasy in documentary. Although all aspects of documentary representation possess fantasmatic elements, it is the distinctive quality of these elements in reenacted scenes that provides the primary focus of this discussion.

Reenactments occupy a strange status in which it is crucial that they be recognized as a representation of a prior event while also signaling that they are not a representation of a contemporaneous event. Gregory Bateson argued that when representations take on a meaning that is not their usual meaning, it may signify a shift from one discursive frame to another rather than the simple addition of connotations. Such shifts occur when, as he put it in a discussion of how animals distinguish play from fighting, “These actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote.”<sup>1</sup> A shift in signification changes the name of the game. The reenacted event introduces a fantasmatic element that an initial representation of the same event lacks. Put simply, history does not repeat itself, except in mediated transformations such as memory, representation, reenactment, fantasy—categories that coil around each other in complex patterns.

When the distinction between reenactment and enactment goes unnoticed or unrecognized, the question of deceit arises. The controversy surrounding the 2004 Best Documentary Short Subject Academy Award winner, *Mighty Times: The Children’s March*, involved charges that reenactments blended imperceptibly with authentic footage of civil rights activity in the 1960s South. Archival footage of visually similar but very different events such as the Watts riot in Los Angeles added to the deception. Viewers must recognize a reenactment as a reenactment even if this recognition also dooms the reenactment to its status as a fictionalized

1. Bateson’s insightful essay on the difference between play and fighting among animals where a nip no longer means exactly what a bite, to which it refers, would mean insists that such distinctions amount to categorical shifts in comprehension. As Bateson puts it, “The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (Gregory Bateson, “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* [1972; Chicago, 2000], p. 180). This distinction is akin to Gilbert Ryle’s discussion of the difference between an unintended blink and a fully intended wink in Gilbert Ryle, “The Thinking of Thoughts: What Is *Le Penseur* Doing?” *University of Saskatchewan Lectures*, no. 18 (1968).

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repetition of something that has already occurred. Unlike the contemporaneous representation of an event—the classic documentary image, where an indexical link between image and historical occurrence exists—the reenactment forfeits its indexical bond to the original event. It draws its fantasmatic power from this very fact. The shift of levels engenders an impossible task for the reenactment: to retrieve a lost object in its original form even as the very act of retrieval generates a new object and a new pleasure. The viewer experiences the uncanny sense of a repetition of what remains historically unique. A specter haunts the text.

This specter is a variation on the ghost of the absent subject. Numerous documentaries, outside the observational mode, attempt to resurrect people and lives no longer available to the camera. The person may be unavailable or in hiding (*Waiting for Fidel* and *Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie*) or, more often, deceased (*Salvador Allende, Ryan*—on Canadian animator Ryan Larkin—*Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, and *An Injury to One*—on Wobbly organizer Frank Little). In some cases, the person is deceased, but their trace remains in the form of previously shot images (*Grizzly Man*, *Capturing the Friedmans*, *The Maelstrom*, and *Free Fall*, for example, where what we see is home movie footage of someone who had died prior to the making of a film about them), or in examples like *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* and *From the Journals of Jean Seberg* what we see are the feature film roles and images of stars whose private lives are deciphered from these images.

In each case, the subject must be reconstituted from available resources. A lost object haunts the film. The attempt to conjure that specter, to make good that loss, signals the mark of desire. What constitutes a lost object is as various as all the objects toward which desire may flow. Such efforts encompass attempts to make good a trauma, perhaps a death or catastrophe, which Michael Renov sees as the “work of mourning” that documentary can perform for the viewer.<sup>2</sup> But attempts to come to terms with death, catastrophe, and trauma are extreme or limit cases of the more general desire to come to terms with loss. In other cases, the working-through of loss need not entail mourning; it can also, via what we might call the fantasmatic project, offer gratification, of a highly distinct kind.

A stunning example of this process unfolds in *Capturing the Friedmans* (dir. Andrew Jarecki, 2003). The film explores the complex web of family relations and submerged desires that lie behind the criminal charges of pedophilia brought against the father, Arnold Friedman, and his teenage

2. Michael Renov, “Filling up the Hole in the Real: Death and Mourning in Contemporary Documentary Film and Video,” *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis, 2004), p. 121.

son Jesse. They are alleged to have fondled, seduced, abused, raped, and sodomized dozens of young boys who took computer classes in the family's home. Andrew Jarecki draws on home movies—shot over the course of the family's lifetime—and video diaries—shot mainly during the period of tumult precipitated by Arnold and Jesse's arrest—plus television news reports and Jarecki's own interviews with most of the involved parties. If the trial of Arnold and Jesse sought to achieve the either/or clarity of guilt or innocence, Jarecki is far more concerned with capturing the ambiguity, confusion, and anger that this very process produces within this one family.

A fantasmatic power radiates from some of the family's video diaries. These are scenes shot by Jesse or David, two of the sons, as they attempt, with their father, to reenact the form of spontaneous family togetherness that has become the lost object captured in old 8mm home movies. This film footage shows the boys and their father in moments of carefree bliss, dancing, singing, and generally cavorting together with a casual acceptance of the camera as both documenting device and prosthetic extension of another family member. The video or digital footage—distinguishable from the home movies by the absence of film grain, lack of color fading, higher degree of contrast, the presence of sync sound, and a clear awareness of the recording process as a form of confession or testimonial—however, demonstrates the impossibility of stepping into a temporal river for the first time twice. The boys and their father are markedly older, their dancing and clowning slightly forced, the father visibly burdened by the weight of his arrest and trial, and their mother emphatically excluded rather than simply absent.

The video footage represents the sons' attempt to reenact their own past. They are clearly aware their attempt is a reenactment rather than a genuine return to a lost object and irretrievable moment; the video footage stands as a sign that describes both the lost object (the unqualified pleasure of physical cavorting that once was theirs) and its absence (the effort that must now be made to reenact what was once spontaneous exuberance). This is nowhere more evident than in the refusal of Arnold's sons to recognize the depressed, inexpressive, nearly stunned expression that haunts him, an expression that, if acknowledged, would thwart their own desire to go through the motions that will generate the compensatory pleasures they desire.

These extraordinary moments, in which the participants attempt to will themselves back to the past and yet know very well that the effort must fail, border on the work of mourning that cinema, and video, make possible. They compound that semiacknowledged work with the production of a

fantasmatic pleasure, for the sons at least, that lessens the sting of that which is lost and cannot be retrieved. They go through the motions that locate them within a *mise-en-scène* of desire, a *fantasmatique* their mother can no longer share. (She feels profoundly betrayed by Arnold's deceptions, stemming back to the time of the original home movie footage but never fully admitted before the trial.) The sons and father do, once again, now, what they once did, then, and derive from this act not the original satisfaction of a need but the gratification of a desire that stems from the sequence of images, or signifiers, they fabricate for themselves.

Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis stress the importance of the temporal convolution that weaves past and present together. Fantasy is not the mere retrieval of something past, not the recovery of a real object—or, as in the example they adopt, not the milk a baby may have ingested, but “the breast as a *signifier*.”<sup>3</sup> What was once an external object transforms into an image or signifier. The signifier bears an emotional weight. What fantasy restores in this example is not the act of actually obtaining the mother's milk, “not the act of sucking, but the enjoyment of going through the motions of sucking” (“FOS,” p. 26). Such motions, separated from the substance they once yielded (milk), but coupled to the object as signifier (“breast”), produce, when successful, their own pleasure.

This enjoyment or pleasure is real. It derives from the corporeal activity of going through the necessary motions, but is also entirely psychic. Like the reenactment, it involves a pleasure associated with a past event that is transposed into a distinctly different, fantasmatic domain. Pleasure flows from an act of imaginary engagement in which the subject knows that this act stands for a prior act, or event, with which it is not one. A separation that entails a shift from physical needs and their pacification to psychical desires and their gratification, from before to after, from then to now, from object to subject, is as integral to the fantasmatic experience as it is to the efficacy of ideology.

A telling moment of this sort occurs in *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (dir. Patricio Guzmán, 1997) when four of the personal bodyguards for President Allende reenact their role in a presidential motorcade prior to the military coup d'état that toppled his government on 11 September 1973. Guzmán cuts between the footage of the men reenacting what they used to do and shots of them actually guarding Allende some thirty-five years ago. Then, Allende and others sit inside a large, black, convertible limousine,

3. Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality,” in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin (New York, 1986), p. 34 n. 58; emphasis mine; hereafter abbreviated “FOS.”

crowds line the way, and the four men trot alongside, eyes scanning the surrounding scene, as each keeps a hand in contact with one of the four fenders of the car. Now, the men walk alongside an economy-size, red, hard-top sedan, on a deserted country road, with no crowd in sight, but each with a hand in contact with the car and their eyes once again scanning the surroundings.

At one point Guzmán freezes the image of the motorcade “then” as the guards identify themselves and their compatriots from the still image. The authentic image becomes remote, an instigation for memory and identification, whereas the reenacted image allows the men to go through the motions of guarding the (absent) president one more time. It clearly does not fulfill an official state need this time; instead it gratifies a personal desire, it makes possible the enjoyment of going through the motions of guarding, as it were, when guarding itself remains squarely lodged in the past. Nothing captures this temporal knotting of past and present better than a close-up image of the hand of one of the guards slowly fluttering up and down on one of the half-open car windows; the rhythm follows from the cadence of his gait beside the car, but the camera’s close-up view of his delicate grip, the rise and fall of his fingers, and the overt absence of an engulfing crowd attest to the psychically real but fantasmatic linkage of now and then.

Despite the gulf between now and then and as a precondition for the gratification reenactment can provide, the subject becomes “caught up himself in the sequence of images,” which, as Laplanche and Pontalis put it, populate the *mise-en-scène* of desire (“FOS,” p. 26). This holds for the bodyguards in this striking scene from *Chile, Obstinate Memory*, just as it does for the Friedman boys in their video reenactments, but it is also true of the viewer, immersed in an experience in which he or she knows very well that the reenactment is not that which it represents and yet, all the same, allows it to function as if it were. Above all, however, the filmmaker is the one caught up in the sequence of images; it is his or her fantasy that these images embody. The filmmaker need not be physically present in the image, as she or he is in many participatory or interactive documentaries. “The subject, although always present in the fantasy, may be so in a de-subjectivized form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question” (“FOS,” p. 26).

This account of desubjectivization is acutely true of the video recordings by David and Jesse in *Capturing the Friedmans*. Their former selves haunt the footage in the desubjectivized form of syntactical parallelisms their present selves construct in keeping with the home movies of a decade or more before. The camera does not function as an omniscient observer

or third-person narrator but rather reiterates the function of the home movie camera generally as familial participant and active instigator in scenes, in this case, of camaraderie and high jinks. These same images subsequently double up to become part of the fantasmatic structured by Jarecki. In his case, psychic pleasure seems to stem from the construction of ambiguity about what happened in the past, what these social actors have said and done, how they understand the actions, and how they wish others to understand them. Jarecki complicates the literal, linear, and binary logic of the judicial system that sets out to determine what really happened and who is guilty and who innocent. He reinscribes the ambiguity of perspective, and voice, that separates such judicial determinations from the plain of fantasy.

Guzmán, too, in his reenactment of guarding the presidential car, inhabits the syntax of a sequence that he causes to flutter between past and present. He restores specificity (names, relationships) to the past and brings fantasmatic gratification to the present as he goes through the motions of reenacting the past to new ends. This makes the subject's presence in reenactments—and documentaries more generally—a function of what I have described as the documentary voice of the filmmaker rather than his or her corporeal appearance before the camera.<sup>4</sup> The documentary voice speaks through the body of the film: through editing—through subtle and strange juxtapositions, through music, lighting, composition, and *mise-en-scène*, through dialogue overheard and commentary delivered, through silence as well as speech, and through sounds and images as well as words. This dispersed and polymorphous voice possesses an intrinsically desubjectivized form. The workings of a fantasmatic arise through it.

The voice of an orator, or documentarian, enlists and reveals desires, lacks, and longings. It charts a path through the stuff of the world that gives body to dreams and substance to principles. Speaking, giving voice to a view of the world, makes possible the necessary conditions of visibility to see things anew, to see, as if for the first time, what had, until now, escaped notice. This is not objective sight but seeing in that precarious, fleeting moment of insight when a gestalt clicks into place and meaning arises from what had seemed to lack it or to be already filled to capacity with all the meaning it could bear.<sup>5</sup> Such insight does not occur, however, until given

4. See Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 36 (Spring 1983): 17–30. See also Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), p. 128.

5. "In great moments of cinema you are hit and struck by some sort of enlightenment, by something that illuminates you, that's a deep form of truth, and I call it ecstatic truth, the ecstasy of truth, and that's what I'm after in documentaries and feature films" (Werner Herzog,



external shape: the shape provided by the film's voice as it addresses others.<sup>6</sup>

Voicelessness or speechlessness, as the opposite of voice or speech, is hardly equivalent to objectivity. Just as, according to Laplanche and Pontalis, the distinction between subject and object dissolves in fantasy, so voice, like fantasy, dissolves the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. In this sense, voicelessness is the absence of an I that speaks, an I that sets out to encounter a you, in Martin Buber's famous formulation. Voicelessness is an I stripped of the desire that brings a fantasmatic into being. Speechlessness is a condition of the disembodied I, which may well make use of language but which speaks in and from a place where instrumentality overwhelms the force of desire.

The documentary voice is the embodied speech of a historical person—the filmmaker, caught up in the syntax of enacted or reenacted images through which the past rejoins the present. Voice, given in reenactments partially as an awareness of the gap between that which was and the effort to return to it, also affirms the presence of a gap between the objectivity/subjectivity binary and the workings of the fantasmatic. Subjectivity suggests it is added to something and could also be subtracted. Objectivity implies the suppression of subjectivity. Voice is the means and “grain” with which we speak and can never be added to or subtracted from what is said by the embodied self.

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“Filmmaker Herzog's ‘Grizzly’ Tale of Life and Death,” interview by Dave Davies, National Public Radio, 28 July 2005, [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4774946](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4774946).

6. Some speak of subjectivity in documentary. This, to me, represents something of a slippery slope, slipperier than the use of subjectivity in narrative fiction, which is usually related to the perspective of characters and the voice of the narrator. Both concepts differ from documentary subjectivity, which sets out to admit that documentaries represent situated, emotionally and politically informed views of the world. Though true, they become inevitably contrasted with an alternative idea, a different way of representing or engaging with the world: objectivity. The issue of objectivity enters, like a Trojan horse, in ways it does not in fiction, and it causes endless trouble.

Objectivity in relation to a fictional world might seem a peculiar notion because fiction is a subjectively endowed creation by definition, or it may seem like a way to identify a scrupulously neutral, detached mode of representing it, in the spirit of *écriture blanche*, a zero degree of style. In documentary, objectivity implies a lack or subtraction of subjectivity as if subjectivity could be put on, taken off, or stepped beyond, as if it were a bias. Unlike a fiction the actual world, it is argued, can be viewed objectively, unless the decision is made to add subjectivity. In some instances, like scientific investigation, subjectivity can be subtracted to a great extent, but these instances are not the instances in which an I stands before a you; they are instances of an I embedded within institutional procedures and discourses that objectify or analyze, that have instrumental effects—for good or ill—but that cloak the I or you in ways the voices of these films refuse to do. Voice affirms the presence of an embodied subject who is necessarily and inescapably in possession of a subjectivity. Objectivity catapults us into another realm entirely.

Objectivity desires a fixed relation to a determinate past, the type of relation that permits guilty/not guilty verdicts or other definitive answers to the question of what really happened. Voice, in the form of reenactments that embody the I-know-very-well-but-all-the-same formulation at the heart of psychic reality, imposes recognition of the relentless march of a temporality that makes the dream of both a pure repetition and an omniscient perspective impossible. The very syntax of reenactments affirms the having-been-thereness of what can never, quite, be here again. Facts remain facts, their verification possible, but the iterative effort of going through the motions of reenacting them imbues such facts with the lived stuff of immediate and situated experience.

Reenactments also foil the desire to preserve the past in the amber of an omniscient wholeness, the comprehensive view we like to think we have that accounts for what has come to pass. The partialness and constructed quality of the reenactment can be the source of a sense of dissatisfaction; the view is too incomplete or too cluttered (it may contain a body too few or too many as contemporary figures fill in for their historical counterparts). Reenactments are clearly *a* view rather than *the* view from which the past yields up its truth. Reenactments produce an iterability for that which belongs to the singularity of historical occurrence. They reconcile this apparent contradiction by acknowledging the adoption of a distinct perspective, point of view, or voice. Such perspectives can proliferate indefinitely, but each of them can also intensify an awareness of the separation between the lost object and its reenactment. Reenactments belong to a situated fantasmatic that nullifies the status of that other fantasmatic of objectivity, omniscience, and finality that haunts the documentary film and its kindred discourses of sobriety.<sup>7</sup>

In his extraordinary autobiographical testament and portrait of black gay culture, *Tongues Untied*, Marlon Riggs recounts an incident from his youth. He is attacked by a gang of white youths who beat him and leave him lying in the street. Riggs relies on a reenactment to represent the incident, but, unlike other scenes in the film, Riggs does not play himself. We encounter a body too many, the body of another black male who plays the Marlon Riggs who was attacked on this fateful occasion—fateful be-

7. See Nichols, *Representing Reality* for an extended discussion of the discourse of sobriety. The tendency in many contemporary documentaries is to emphasize their distance from discourses rather than their kinship, largely through the pronounced sense of voice that characterizes so many recent films. This, in turn, locates them closer to the realm of narrative fiction film although voice, unlike style, carries with it the strong implication of address: the film sets out to address the viewer as a social subject and potential actor. The increased proximity of documentary to fiction, though, is one reason for the striking popularity of many recent documentaries.

cause, as Riggs tells us, he was rescued by a young white man. "What a blessing," Riggs exclaims; "What a curse," he adds.

The incident invokes not only racism in its rawest form but also a dynamic of identification and desire that Riggs understands as his own internal burden: to revile his own blackness and to be drawn to those whites who, like his rescuer, offer some respite from the crude brutality of racism. As such, the incident is an iteration of the complex patterns of identification and disavowal that Frantz Fanon described in greater detail.<sup>8</sup> The absence of Riggs's own body from the reenactment strengthens the sense in which this representation of the past is a citation, an iteration, a link in a much longer chain of racist acts in which the doer gains his power from the power of iteration itself.<sup>9</sup> Riggs addresses this event and this history in his own voice, from his own perspective, one in which his story and the reenactment that embodies it open onto a larger pattern that can be understood neither in the abstract—seen from an omniscient point of view—nor purely in the concrete—represented as simply one man's experience. The body-too-many of the reenactment displaces Riggs's presence and the racism visited upon him from the polarity of subject/object relations into the very syntax of the sequence. Still situated, still embodied, still spoken through the voice of the film, the reenacted incident folds past over present in those fantasmatic terms that make the psychic reverberations of racism not only a conceptual problem but a "curse," as Riggs so aptly puts it, as well. Here, too, a specter haunts the text, and it is the reenactment that brings it to a condition of visibility.

This reenactment of a traumatic event in *Tongues Untied* functions less to carry out the work of mourning that follows trauma than to register an apprehension of the power of a past event, a power Riggs contests. In a striking contrast, Irene Lusztig's film *Reconstruction* cites the Romanian government's reenactment of a crime, in which her grandmother was one of four individuals who robbed a state bank. The robbers, once caught, are compelled to reenact their planning, the robbery, their confessions, trial, and sentencing. They must once again go through the motions of their defiance of the state but, this time, with no hope of success; the motions are choreographed by others. This reenactment reaffirms the power of what was at that time a Communist state to write and control the past. In this case the fantasmatic quality of the reenactment pursues what is more

8. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York, 1967).

9. Judith Butler discusses the iterative power that lies behind any one instance of hate speech or "fighting words" in her *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York, 1997).

clearly than usual an ideological issue: the at least temporarily lost object of state power. It seeks the gratification of going through the motions of staging a *mise-en-scène* within which that power can reconstitute itself.

The state-made film, also entitled *Reconstruction*, had apparently been intended to demonstrate the folly of breaking the law, but it was never shown publicly for reasons that remain unclear. Lusztig, however, found the film and includes significant portions of it in her own. In it the suspects exhibit a decidedly despondent manner, a sign that they know the pleasure of this reenactment will not be theirs. It is a look akin to that of the older Arnold Friedman in his sons' videos as they go through the motions associated with their earlier home movies—eyes vacant, gaze unfocused, words slow in coming and stilted in tone. In one scene, a prosecutor attempts to pry a confession from one of the men (Lusztig's grandmother was the only woman involved). The suspect resists; he knows nothing of the crime. Then the prosecutor produces a rifle and two pistols. "Do you recognize these?" "You have those, too? I see we've been discovered. Until now I've been hiding the truth." The game is up and the suspect, in the same hopeless tone, promptly admits his guilt and confesses his crime.

As in the racist incident in *Tongues Untied*, the reenactment introduces a sense of the ritualistic quality that often characterizes reenactments of past events. In this ritual the robbery must be represented as an exception and the power of the state affirmed in another iteration of the eternal ritual of justice fulfilled. The culprits' own bodies serve as the surface for a textual rewriting in which agency reverts entirely to the state. The triumph of judicial invulnerability, however, betrays the very condition of its being in the barely animated bodies of the criminals who must go through the motions of a past event in a context where need and pleasure, desire and gratification accrue only to the state. A "curse" continues to haunt the text in the form of a repressive act that Lusztig, by recontextualizing the original reenactment from a distinct perspective or voice of her own, exposes. Whereas reenactment for Riggs allows for owning or owning up to the past, in *Reconstruction* the owning of the past takes the more literal form of the state coming into physical control, or ownership, of the bodies and minds of those who defied it.

Reenactment takes another fascinating turn in Werner Herzog's *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*. Shot down on a bombing run over Laos and captured, Dieter Dengler, after a series of extraordinary adventures, escapes his captors and returns to the United States. This is the story he tells to Herzog, but in the course of doing so he decides to reenact what he first recounts. Dengler and Herzog return to Laos where local villagers play his captors and Dieter plays his former self.

Unlike the bank robbery reenactment in *Reconstruction*, the walrus hunt in *Nanook of the North*, the reenactments of detention at Guantánamo in *The Road to Guantánamo*, or the “preenactments” of what might happen in the event of nuclear attack in Peter Watkins’s *The War Game*—all of which adopt the performative qualities of suspenseful, dramatic intensity—the reenacted scenes in *Little Dieter* exhibit a Brechtian sense of distanciation. In one scene, for example, recruited Laotian villagers stand listlessly around Dengler as they go through the motions of guarding him by wearing uniforms or displaying weapons. Their half-hearted, good-natured performance clearly conjures what Dengler went through without compelling prisoner or guards to reenter the psychic and emotional space of the original event. Neither Dieter nor Herzog seek to render suspense dramatically or verisimilitude perfectly. The necessary awareness of a gap between past event and present reenactment remains altogether vivid, as it gradually becomes in *The Thin Blue Line* in which the series of reenactments of the original murder of a policeman constructs an Escher-like impossible space of conflicting narratives.

Dieter transports himself back to that which now functions as a lost object through the social gests he puts into motion.<sup>10</sup> It allows him to own his past in a corporeal but fantasmatic form that does not require the presumably therapeutic dramaturgy that Charcot inaugurated in his treatment of hysterics and that so many reenactments imitate. The sense of mastery that arises from this iteration in which the outcome is now known allows him to go through the motions of a triumphant passage that he has, in fact, already completed. It is this passage that the film-within-a-film in *Reconstruction* denies to those whose bank robbery attempt failed. Dieter Dengler, the one who survived what once put survival in question, now occupies a fantasmatic *mise-en-scène* that affirms his very survival. Going through the motions takes on a formal, ritualistic quality that nonetheless spans the moment between before, when need prevailed, and after, when these social gests function as signifiers of what was but is now, at the moment of signification, past. The gests or signifiers both embody the lost object of a former experience and gratify the force of desire. That they can do both is a function of the fact that they no longer signify what the experience to which they refer signified.

10. Brecht regarded social gests as physical actions that revealed social relations or, as Roland Barthes put it, “a gesture or set of gestures (but never a gesticulation) in which a whole social situation can be read. Not every gest is social: there is nothing social in the movements a man makes in order to brush off a fly; but if this same man, poorly dressed, is struggling against guard-dogs, the gest becomes social” (Roland Barthes, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein,” *Image, Music, Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath [New York, 1977], pp. 73–74).

These various reenactments begin to suggest some ways in which reenactments tend to cluster into different types. Some are highly affective, some far less so. Some make their status as reenactment obvious, some do not. These differences do not establish hard and fast divisions but do suggest different nodal points within a diffuse and overlapping universe of possibilities. Some particularly common variations include the following.

1. Realist Dramatization. The suspenseful, dramatic reenactment in a realist style is the most contentious because it is the least distinguishable from both that which it reenacts and the conventional representation of past events in fiction, be it in the form of a historical drama, “true story,” docudrama, or flashback. Such dramatizations have become a staple of reality TV shows that follow in the mold of *Cops* or *Unsolved Mysteries*, but their lineage can be traced back to *In the Land of the War Canoes*, Edward Curtis’s fascinating attempt to mix ethnographic detail with melodrama among the Kwakiutl in the Pacific Northwest of 1914, *Nanook of the North*, and many early newsreels or *actualités*. An important model for many of the recent uses of this type of reenactment occurs in the powerful documentary about those who disappeared during Argentina’s “dirty war,” *Las Madres de la Playa de Mayo*. As one of the mothers who meet every day at La Casa Rosada, the Argentine White House, recounts how armed men abducted her son in the dead of night, the film cuts to a reenactment of this event. The reenactment possesses the surreal tones of a nightmare, with its grainy, high-contrast and slow-motion imagery in which individual figures are unrecognizable. The distortions work to impede realist transparency. These formal devices shift the reenactment toward the fourth category here, stylized reenactment, but Portillo and Muñoz’s expressive rendering of what happened stresses the emotional impact on the mother as something that was not part of the event itself but part of its affective reverberation ever since.

2. Typifications. In this case there is no specific event to which the reenactment refers, and the sense of separation between event and reenactment fades as a sense of typifying past patterns, rituals, and routines increases. Such reenactments characterized many early documentaries, including *Nanook of the North*, where the suspenseful dramatization of events, presented as if they were present-day, reenacted the typical processes of the Inuit’s precontact past. The walrus hunt, seal hunt, fur trapping, and igloo building did not reenact specific historical occurrences as much as characteristic ones. To the extent that the viewer recognizes that these scenes’ claim to authenticity resides not in their depiction of present-day activity, carried out despite the presence of the camera, but in their reenactment of precontact activity, staged for the sake of the camera, this

very claim of authenticity undergoes erosion. The indexical quality of the image anchors it in the *mise-en-scène* of the filmmaker's desire, as it does in fiction, but without reference to any specific historical occurrence.

John Grierson adopted this technique wholesale for the British documentary movement of the 1930s. Reenactments, as typifications, proliferated. *Coal Face* has several sequences of coal miners mining, or taking their lunch break, that possess a similar aura of present-day reality simply observed when they are, in fact, staged. *Night Mail* is the most famous example, with its scenes of postal workers sorting mail on the Postal Express as it makes its overnight journey from London to Glasgow. These scenes took place on a sound stage. They reenact, cite, or reiterate the typical, and quotidian, quality of this labor and clearly exhibit a desire to idealize the common workingman as a vital part of a larger social whole despite the less fully acknowledged tensions stemming from class hierarchy.

Such scenes in *Coal Face*, *Night Mail*, *Listen to Britain*, *Fires Were Started*, and other films function as *typical particulars* in precisely the way Vivian Sobchack applies this term to film. The specific actions and objects viewed in a fiction may be highly concrete as relayed by indexical images, but they are not usually understood to have a concrete historical referent "unless something happens to *specifically* particularize these existential entities as in some way singular. . . . [Instead] they will be engaged as what philosophers call *typical particulars*—a form of generalization in which a single entity is taken as exemplary of an entire class."<sup>11</sup> This displacement from the singular to the exemplary, if recognized as such, forfeits some of the distinctive peculiarities of the documentary reenactment, perhaps most specifically the heightened sense of viewer responsibility that attends to the historical instead of a fictive world.<sup>12</sup>

3. Brechtian Distantiation. The reenactment of social gest (such as those in the pioneering *Far from Poland* but also abundantly evident in *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*) greatly increases the separation of the reenactment from the specific historical moment that it reenacts, giving greater likelihood that the fantasmatic effect will come into play. Actions reenacted may possess the qualities of a typification, but, shorn of their realist dimension, they simultaneously stand out more boldly as social gests in Brecht's

11. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, 2004), p. 281.

12. Sobchack develops this point in relation to fiction film and moments when the image ceases to function as a typical particular and takes on the full force of a singular moment, such as the image of a real rabbit shot during the fictional hunting scene in *The Rules of the Game*; see Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, p. 283. This attitude seems a default value for documentary film in general.

sense of the term. The deflection away from realist representation allows, paradoxically, a stronger link to historical specificity to come into play through the filmmaker's choice to go through the motions of gesturing to the historical rather than illusionistically representing it. This quality is also true of the remaining categories.

4. Stylization. Highly stylized reenactments such as those in *The Thin Blue Line* of Randall Adams's interrogation or of the Dallas police officer's murder, in which, most memorably, a perfectly lit container of malted milkshake tumbles through the night air in slow motion as if to blatantly overdramatize one subject's account, also achieve a sense of separation. This need not be in the ironic key so prevalent in Errol Morris's work. For example, *His Mother's Voice*, an animated documentary from Australia, couples the radio interview of a bereaved mother as she is asked how she learned of her son's shooting with two different animated versions of the event. In one case, the images convey her journey to the house where her son had just been shot, and, in the other, they render her now-altered perception of her own family's home. These animated sequences sever any indexical linkage to the actual event but give voice to the acutely selective and pained perspective from which she experienced it. They function in a manner not unlike the abduction or disappearance reenacted in *Las Madres de la Playa de Mayo*, but they carry the elements of stylization much further and diminish the elements of realist dramatization. The viewer remains vividly suspended in that moment between before and after embodied in signifiers that possess an iconic rather than indexical relation to what has already happened.

5. Parody and Irony. Other reenactments adopt a parodic tone that may call the convention of the reenactment itself into question or treat a past occurrence in a comic light. Morris skirts the edges of this characteristic, but his ironic perspective takes aim more at the subjectivity of his interview subjects than at the capacity of the reenactment to capture the authenticity of past events. In *Cane Toads* Mark Lewis parodies the nature documentary's typical representation of other species—in this case of the large, ugly toads that threaten to run rampant across Australia—through multiple reenactments that are more melodramatic and humorous than sober. Caveh Zahedi also adopts the parodic reenactment wholeheartedly in *I Am a Sex Addict*, a semiserious account of his struggles with sex addiction and the confusion it wreaks on his longer-term relationships and attempts at marriage. At one point, speaking to the camera, he tells the viewer that he lacked money to go back to Paris to reenact his first encounters with prostitutes, and so "this street" in San Francisco (the street on which he stands) will have to stand for a Parisian street. The film cuts to another view and an



evenly spaced line of about eight young prostitutes in front of a red brick wall as Caveh walks past, asking each of them the same questions about what she will do and how much she will charge before hesitating, almost ready to take up the offer, but then deciding against it and going on to the next woman.

*Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, an underground cult favorite that cannot circulate legally because director Todd Haynes failed to secure permission for the soundtrack of Carpenter songs, tells the story of Carpenter's eating disorders, dysfunctional family dynamics, addictions, and death by reenacting with Ken and Barbie dolls key scenes from her short life. For the most part these scenes have the quality of typical particulars, exemplifying pivotal moments without reference to historically singular events. The posed shots of dolls, however, add a powerfully ironic edge to the representations; as with *His Mother's Voice*, this choice forfeits the impression of indexical authenticity in the image. At the same time it compels the viewer to assess this tragedy both as something beyond the reach of any reenactment and as something typically reduced to a cautionary tale about the perils of anorexia and bulimia. The parodic edge puts the mass media's penchant for the realist dramatization of tragedy on display as a potentially exploitative trope. The doll figures, by maintaining a clear separation between reenactment and prior event, may actually mobilize a more complex form of understanding what this tragedy actually entails than more straightforward representations that confuse the boundary between the two.

Similar points might be made about *The Eternal Frame*, the Ant Farm Collective's parodic reenactment of the Kennedy assassination. This video documents the reenactment process, including the behind-the-scenes preparations, far more than it purports to be a documentary about the assassination itself. Unlike *JFK*, *The Eternal Frame* calls the very act of reenactment into question. By exaggerating the separation between then and now, before and after, the video functions to bare the device of reenactment itself rather than rely upon this peculiar form to present any final answer to the question of what really happened or generate a *mise-en-scène* in which the desire for a lost object might find gratification.

Reenactments within these overlapping and fuzzy categories do not do what archival footage and other images of illustration do.<sup>13</sup> They do not provide evidentiary images of situations and events in the historical

13. Images of illustration comprise those images utilized to support a typically verbal argument or perspective. They offer particular instantiations of points that may imply broader application or offer what appears to be evidence in support of a specific assertion.

world. If they allow viewers to think that they do, they lay the groundwork for feelings of deception. The indexical bond, which can guarantee evidentiary status—but not the meaning or interpretation of images taken as evidence—no longer joins the reenactment to that for which it stands. Instead this indexical bond joins the image to the production of the reenactment; it is evidence of an iterative gesture but not evidence of that for which the reenactment stands. It is, in fact, not historical evidence but an artistic interpretation, always offered from a distinct perspective and carrying, embedded within it, further evidence of the voice of the filmmaker.

Although it is possible, especially with realist dramatizations and typifications, to think that reenactments contribute historical evidence, what they more commonly contribute is persuasiveness. They fulfill an affective function. For documentaries belonging to the rhetorical tradition, reenactments intensify the degree to which a given argument or perspective appears compelling, contributing to the work's emotional appeal, or convincing, contributing to its rational appeal by means of real or apparent proof.

As pathos or logos, reenactments enhance or amplify affective engagement. Reenactments contribute to a vivification of that for which they stand. They make what it feels like to occupy a certain situation, to perform a certain action, to adopt a particular perspective visible and more vivid. Vivification is neither evidence nor explanation. It is, though, a form of interpretation, an inflection that resurrects the past to reanimate it with the force of a desire.

Inasmuch as reenactments do not stand for that for which they stand would stand, they effect a fold in time. Reenactments vivify the sense of the lived experience, the *vécu*, of others. They take past time and make it present. They take present time and fold it over onto what has already come to pass. They resurrect a sense of a previous moment that is now seen through a fold that incorporates the embodied perspective of the filmmaker and the emotional investment of the viewer. In this way reenactments effect a temporal vivification in which past and present coexist in the impossible space of a fantasmatic. This form of coexistence revolves around a lost object and the signifiers that serve as resurrected ghosts that both haunt and endow the present with psychic intensity. Reenactments, like other poetic and rhetorical tropes, bring desire itself into being and with it the fantasmatic domain wherein the temporality of lived experience and the efficacy of ideology find embodiment.

**Filmography**

- Capturing the Friedmans* (dir. Andrew Jarecki, 2003)  
*Chile, Obstinate Memory* (dir. Patricio Guzmán, 1997)  
*Coal Face* (dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, 1935)  
*Danube Exodus* (dir. Peter Forgács, 1999)  
*The Eternal Frame* (dir. T. R. Uthco and Ant Farm Collective: Doug Hall, Chip Lord, Doug Michels, and Jody Proctor, 1975)  
*Far from Poland* (dir. Jill Godmilow, 1984)  
*Fires Were Started* (dir. Humphrey Jennings, 1943)  
*Free Fall* (dir. Peter Forgács, 1997)  
*From the Journals of Jean Seberg* (dir. Mark Rappaport, 1995)  
*Grizzly Man* (dir. Werner Herzog, 2005)  
*His Mother's Voice* (dir. Denis Tupicoff, 1997)  
*Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie* (dir. Marcel Ophuls, 1988)  
*I Am a Sex Addict* (dir. Caveh Zahedi, 2005)  
*An Injury to One* (dir. Travis Wilkerson, 2002)  
*In the Land of the War Canoes* (dir. Edward Curtis, 1914)  
*JFK* (dir. Oliver Stone, 1991)  
*Las Madres de la Playa de Mayo* (dir. Susanna Blaustein Muñoz, Lourdes Portillo, 1985)  
*Listen to Britain* (dir. Humphrey Jennings, Stewart McAllister, 1942)  
*Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (dir. Werner Herzog, 1997)  
*Lonely Boy* (dir. Wolf Koenig, Roman Kroitor, 1962)  
*The Maelstrom* (dir. Peter Forgács, 1997)  
*Mighty Times: The Children's March* (dir. Robert Houston, 2004)  
*Nanook of the North* (dir. Robert Flaherty, 1922)  
*Night Mail* (dir. Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936)  
*Reconstruction* (dir. Irene Lusztig, 2002)  
*The Road to Guantánamo* (dir. Michael Winterbottom, Mat Whitecross, 2006)  
*Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (dir. Mark Rappaport, 1992)  
*Ryan* (dir. Chris Landreth, 2004)  
*Salvador Allende* (dir. Patricio Guzmán, 2004)  
*Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (dir. Todd Haynes, 1987)  
*The Thin Blue Line* (dir. Errol Morris, 1988)  
*Tongues Untied* (dir. Marlon Riggs, 1989)  
*Waiting for Fidel* (dir. Michael Rubbo, 1974)  
*The War Game* (dir. Peter Watkins, 1965)