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For the men and women who make the films

vides the final, distinguishing element of documentary. The exhibitor of attractions, the teller of stories, and the poet of *photogénie* condense in the figure of the documentary filmmaker as orator, speaking in a voice all his own about a world we all share.

These elements first came together in the Soviet Union through the 1920s as the challenge of constructing a new society took precedence in all the arts. This particular melding of elements took root in other countries in the late 1920s and early 1930s as governments, thanks to advocates like John Grierson, saw the value of using film to promote a sense of participatory citizenship and to support the role in government in confronting the most difficult issues of the day, such as inflation, poverty, and the Depression. Answers to these problems varied widely from democratic Britain to fascist Germany and from a New Deal United States to a Communist Russia, but in each case, the voice of the documentarian contributed significantly to framing a national agenda and proposing courses of action.

Chapter 6

What Types of Documentary Are There?

GROUPING THE MANY VOICES OF DOCUMENTARY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

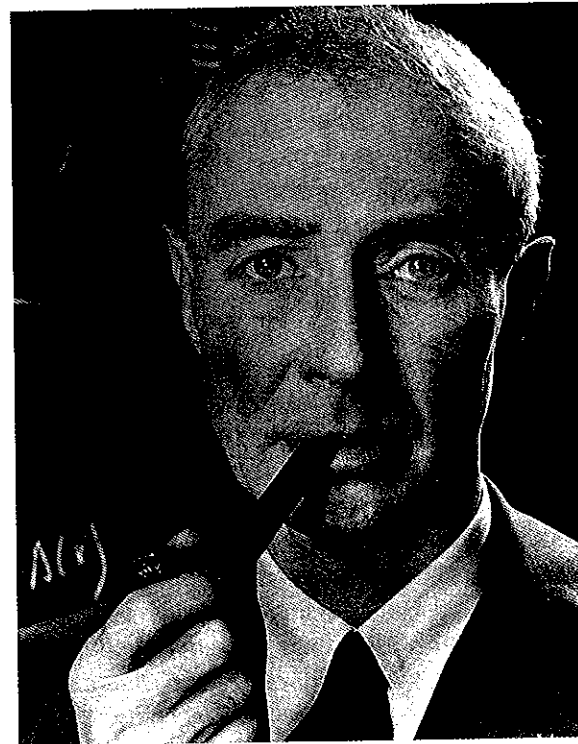
The desire to come up with different ways of representing the world contributes to the formation of each mode, as does a changing set of circumstances. New modes arise partly in response to perceived deficiencies in previous ones, but the perception of deficiency comes about partly from a sense of what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

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

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

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

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



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

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

THE POETIC MODE

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

THE EXPOSITORY MODE

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

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