



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'Age 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Péter Forgács's remarkable reworkings of amateur movies into historical documents stresses poetic, associative qualities over transferring information or winning us over to a particular point of view.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



Yosemite: The Fate of Heaven (Jon Else, 1988). Photo courtesy of Jon Else.

The tension between public access and conservation is the focus of this film. Robert Redford's commentary falls into the category of voice-of-God address inasmuch as we never see Mr. Redford. To the extent that Mr. Redford's long-time advocacy for environmental issues makes him a more informed speaker than an anonymous commentator would be, he also fulfills the function of a voice of authority.

less polished voices precisely for the credibility gained by avoiding too much polish. Joris Ivens's great film urging support for the Republican defenders of Spanish democracy, *The Spanish Earth* (1937), for example, exists in at least three versions. None has a professional commentator. All three have identical image tracks, but the French version uses an ad-libbed commentary by the famous French film director Jean Renoir while the English versions rely on Orson Welles and Ernest Hemingway. Ivens chose Welles first, but his delivery proved a bit too elegant; it bestowed a humanistic compassion on the events where Ivens hoped for a tougher sense of visceral engagement. Hemingway, who had written the commentary, proved the more effective voice. He brought a matter-of-fact but clearly committed tone to a film that wanted to galvanize support more than compassion. (Some

prints still credit the voice-over to Welles even though the voice we hear is Hemingway's.)

Expository documentaries rely heavily on an informing logic carried by the spoken word. In a reversal of the traditional emphasis in film, images serve a supporting role. They illustrate, illuminate, evoke, or act in counterpoint to what is said. The commentary is typically presented as distinct from the images of the historical world that accompany it. It serves to organize these images and make sense of them just as a written caption guides our attention and emphasizes some of the many meanings and interpretations of a still image. The commentary is therefore presumed to be of a higher order than the accompanying images. It comes from some place that remains unspecified but associated with objectivity or omniscience. The commentary, in fact, represents the perspective or argument of the film. We take our cue from the commentary and understand the images as evidence or demonstration for what is said. Television news descriptions of famine in Ethiopia as "biblical," for example, seemed proved by wide-angle shots of great masses of starving people clustered together on an open plain.

Editing in the expository mode generally serves less to establish a rhythm or formal pattern, as it does in the poetic mode, than to maintain the continuity of the spoken argument or perspective. We can call this evidentiary editing. Such editing may sacrifice spatial and temporal continuity to rope in images from far-flung places if they help advance the argument. The expository filmmaker often has greater freedom in the selection and arrangement of images than the fiction filmmaker. In *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) shots of arid prairie landscapes came from all over the Midwest, for example, to support the claim of widespread damage to the land.

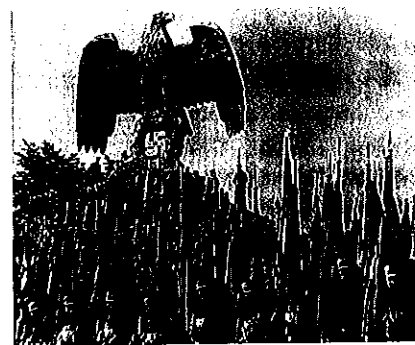
The expository mode emphasizes the impression of objectivity and well-supported argument. The voice-over commentary seems literally "above" the fray; it has the capacity to judge actions in the historical world without being caught up in them. The professional commentator's official tone, like the authoritative manner of news anchors and reporters, strives to build a sense of credibility from qualities such as distance, neutrality, disinterestedness, or omniscience. These qualities can be adapted to an ironic point of view such as we find in Charles Kuralt's commentary for *16 in Webster Groves* or subverted even more thoroughly in a film such as *Land without Bread*, with its implicit attack on the very notion of objectivity.

Expository documentary facilitates generalization and large-scale argumentation. The images can support the basic claims of a general argument



Triumph of the Will (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935)

The physical gap and hierarchical distinction between leader and followers again comes across clearly in this scene of Hitler's parade through the streets of Nuremberg.



Triumph of the Will

The soldier's salute, above, parallels this low-angle view of the German eagle and Nazi swastika. Like Hitler, the eagle serves as a symbol of German power. It presides over the stream of marching troops that pass below it, galvanizing their movement into a tribute to national unity.



The Spanish Earth (Joris Ivens, 1937)

Ivens supported the Republican cause against the Nazi-backed rebellion of General Franco. He stresses the centrality, and valor, of ordinary citizens. This photograph, shot on location, contrasts sharply with Riefenstahl's stress on setting leaders apart from the people.



The Spanish Earth

In contrast to the pageantry of Riefenstahl's endless parades and speeches, Ivens captures the modest quality of everyday rural life in 1930s Spain. This image of the town, Fuenteduena, situated near the shifting battlefield, suggests how ordinary lives are jeopardized, not galvanized, by the fascist rebellion.

rather than construct a vivid sense of the particularities to a given corner of the world. The mode also affords an economy of analysis since points can be made succinctly and pointedly in words. Expository documentary is an ideal mode for conveying information or mobilizing support within a framework that pre-exists the film. In this case, a film will add to our stockpile of knowledge but not challenge or subvert the categories by which such knowledge gets organized. Common sense makes a perfect basis for this type of representation about the world since common sense, like rhetoric, is less subject to logic than to belief.

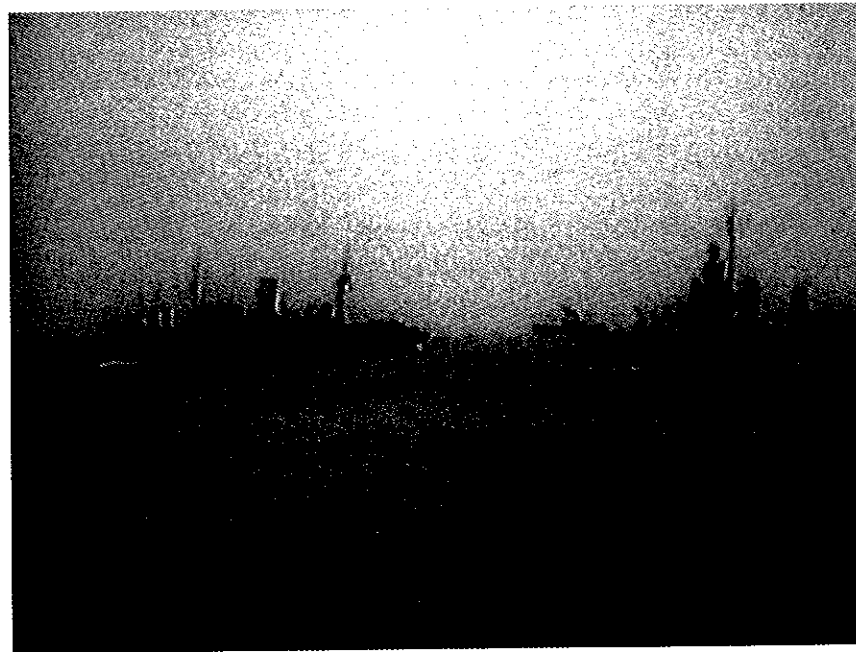
Frank Capra could organize much of his argument for why young American men should willingly join the battle during World War II in the *Why We Fight* series, for example, by appealing to a mix of native patriotism, the ideals of American democracy, the atrocities of the Axis war machine, and the malignant evil of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito. In the black and white alternatives of a "free world" versus a "slave world," who would not choose to defend a free world? Common sense made the answer simple—to the predominantly white audience thoroughly imbued with a "melting pot" belief in American values.

Some fifty years later, Capra's appeal seems remarkably naive and overblown in its treatment of patriotic virtue and democratic ideals. Common sense is less an enduring than a historically conditioned set of values and perspectives. For this reason some expository films that seem classic examples of oratorical persuasiveness at one moment will seem quite dated at another. The basic argument may still have merit, but what counts as common sense may change considerably.

THE OBSERVATIONAL MODE

Poetic and expository modes of documentary often sacrificed the specific act of filming people to construct formal patterns or persuasive arguments. The filmmaker gathered the necessary raw materials and then fashioned a meditation, perspective, or argument from them. What if the filmmaker were simply to observe what happens in front of the camera without overt intervention? Would this not be a new, compelling form of documentation?

Developments in Canada, Europe, and the United States in the years after World War II culminated around 1960 in various 16mm cameras such as the Arriflex and Auricon and tape recorders such as the Nagra that could be easily handled by one person. Speech could now be synchronized with images without the use of bulky equipment or cables that tethered recorders and camera together. The camera and tape recorder could move freely about a scene and record what happened as it happened.



Victory at Sea (Henry Solomon and Isaac Kleinerman, 1952–53)

Like *Night and Fog*, *Victory at Sea* returns to the recent past to tell the story of World War II. Made as a television series for CBS, it adopts a commemorative stance. It recalls battles and strategies, setbacks and victories from the perspective of the survivor or veteran. It celebrates naval power and its contribution, giving scant attention to the ground war or the civilian consequences that are at the heart of *Night and Fog*. Both films, however, rely on compilation of footage shot contemporaneously with the events to which the films now return. Compilation films invariably alter the meaning of the footage they incorporate. Here, both films use footage for purposes that are possible only to those who reflect on the meaning of the past rather than report the occurrences of the moment.

All of the forms of control that a poetic or expository filmmaker might exercise over the staging, arrangement, or composition of a scene became sacrificed to observing lived experience spontaneously. Honoring this spirit of observation in post-production editing as well as during shooting resulted in films with no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music or sound effects, no intertitles, no historical reenactments, no behavior repeated for the camera, and not even any interviews. What we saw was what there was, or so it seemed in *Primary* (1960), *High School* (1968), *Les Racquetteurs* (Michel Brault and Gilles Groulx, 1958), about a group of Montrealers enjoying various games in the snow, portions of *Chronicle of a Summer*, which profiles the lives of several individuals in the Paris of 1960, *The Chair* (1962),

about the last days of a man condemned to death, *Gimme Shelter* (1970), about the Rolling Stones' infamous concert at Altamont, California, where a man's death at the hands of the Hell's Angels is partially caught on camera, *Don't Look Back* (1967), about Bob Dylan's tour of England in 1965, *Monterey Pop* (1968), about a music festival featuring Otis Redding, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, the Jefferson Airplane, and others, or *Jane* (1962), profiling Jane Fonda as she prepares for a role in a Broadway play.

The resulting footage often recalled the work of the Italian neo-realists. We look in on life as it is lived. Social actors engage with one another, ignoring the filmmakers. Often the characters are caught up in pressing demands or a crisis of their own. This requires their attention and draws it away from the presence of filmmakers. The scenes tend, like fiction, to reveal aspects of character and individuality. We make inferences and come to conclusions on the basis of behavior we observe or overhear. The filmmaker's retirement to the position of observer calls on the viewer to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done.

The observational mode poses a series of ethical considerations that involve the act of observing others go about their affairs. Is such an act in and of itself voyeuristic? Does it place the viewer in a necessarily less comfortable position than in a fiction film? In fiction, scenes are contrived for us to oversee and overhear entirely, whereas documentary scenes represent the lived experience of actual people that we happen to witness. This position, "at the keyhole," can feel uncomfortable if a pleasure in looking seems to take priority over the chance to acknowledge and interact with the one seen. This discomfort can be even more acute when the person is not an actor who has willingly agreed to be observed playing a part in a fiction.

The impression that the filmmaker is not intruding on the behavior of others also raises the question of unacknowledged or indirect intrusion. Do people conduct themselves in ways that will color our perception of them, for better or worse, in order to satisfy a filmmaker who does not say what it is he wants? Does the filmmaker seek out others to represent because they possess qualities that may fascinate viewers for the wrong reasons? This question often comes up with ethnographic films that observe, in other cultures, behavior that may, without adequate contextualization, seem exotic or bizarre, more part of a "cinema of attractions" than science. Has the filmmaker sought the informed consent of participants and made it possible for such informed consent to be understood and given? To what extent can a filmmaker explain the possible consequences of allowing behavior to be observed and represented to others?

Fred Wiseman, for example, requests consent verbally when he shoots but assumes that when he shoots in public institutions he has a right to

record what happens; he never grants participants any control over the final result. Even so, many participants in *High School* found the film fair and representative even though most critics have considered it a harsh indictment of school regimentation and discipline. A radically different approach occurs in *Two Laws* (1981), about Aboriginal land rights, where the filmmakers did not film anything without both the consent and collaboration of the participants. Everything from content to camera lenses was open to discussion and mutual agreement.

Since the observational filmmaker adopts a peculiar mode of presence "on the scene" in which he or she appears to be invisible and non-participatory, the question also arises of when does the filmmaker have a responsibility to intervene? What if something happens that may jeopardize or injure one of the social actors? Should a cameraman film the immolation of a Vietnamese monk who, knowing that there are cameras present to record the event, sets himself on fire to protest the Vietnamese war, or should the cameraman refuse or try to dissuade the monk? Should a filmmaker accept a knife as a gift from a participant in the course of filming a murder trial, and then turn that gift over to the police when blood is found on it (as Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky do in their film *Paradise Lost* [1996])? This last example moves us toward an unexpected or inadvertent form of participation rather than observation as it also raises broad issues about the filmmaker's relationship with his or her subjects.

Observational films exhibit particular strength in giving a sense of the duration of actual events. They break with the dramatic pace of mainstream fiction films and the sometimes hurried assembly of images that support expository or poetic documentaries. When Fred Wiseman, for example, observes the making of a thirty-second television commercial for some twenty-five minutes of screen time in *Model* (1980), he conveys the sense of having observed everything worth noting about the shooting.

Similarly, when David MacDougall films extended discussions between his principal character, Lorang, and one of his peers about the bride price for Lorang's daughter in *Wedding Camels* (1980), he shifts our attention from what the final agreement is or what new narrative issue arises because of it to the feel and texture of the discussion itself: the body language and eye contact, the intonation and tone of the voices, the pauses and "empty" time that give the encounter the sense of concrete, lived reality.

MacDougall himself describes the fascination of lived experience as something that is most vividly experienced as a difference between rushes (the unedited footage as it was originally shot) and an edited sequence. The rushes seem to have a density and vitality that the edited film lacks. A loss occurs even as structure and perspective are added:

The sense of loss seems to identify positive values perceived in the rushes and intended by the filmmaker at the time of filming but unachieved in the completed film. It is as though the very reasons for making films are somehow contradicted by the making of them. The processes of editing a film from the rushes involve both reducing the length overall and cutting most shots to shorter lengths. Both these processes progressively center particular meanings. Sometimes filmmakers appear to recognize this when they try to preserve some of the qualities of the rushes in their films, or reintroduce those qualities through other means. ("When Less Is Less," *Transcultural Cinema*, p. 215)

The presence of the camera "on the scene" testifies to its presence in the historical world. This affirms a sense of commitment or engagement with the immediate, intimate, and personal as it occurs. This also affirms a sense of fidelity to what occurs that can pass on events to us as if they simply happened when they have, in fact, been constructed to have that very appearance. One modest example is the "masked interview." In this case the filmmaker works in a more participatory way with his subjects to establish the general subject of a scene and then films it in an observational manner. David MacDougall has done this quite effectively in several films. An example is the scene in *Kenya Boran* where, without paying heed to the camera but in accord with the general guidelines established before shooting began, two Kenyan tribesmen discuss their views of the government's introduction of birth control measures.

A more complex example is the event staged to become part of the historical record. Press conferences, for example, may be filmed in a purely observational style, but such events would not exist at all if it were not for the presence of the camera. This is the reverse of the basic premise behind observational films, that what we see is what would have occurred were the camera not there to observe it.

This reversal took on monumental proportions in one of the first "observational" documentaries, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. After an introductory set of titles that set the stage for the German National Socialist (Nazi) Party's 1934 Nuremberg rally, Riefenstahl observes events with no further commentary. Events—predominantly parades, reviews of troops, mass assemblies, images of Hitler, and speeches—occur as if the camera simply recorded what would have happened anyway. At two hours running time, the film can give the impression of having recorded historical events all too faithfully and unthinkingly.

And yet, very little would have happened as it did were it not for the express intent of the Nazi Party to make a film of this rally. Riefenstahl had enormous resources placed at her disposal, and events were carefully planned to facilitate their filming, including the repeat filming of portions of

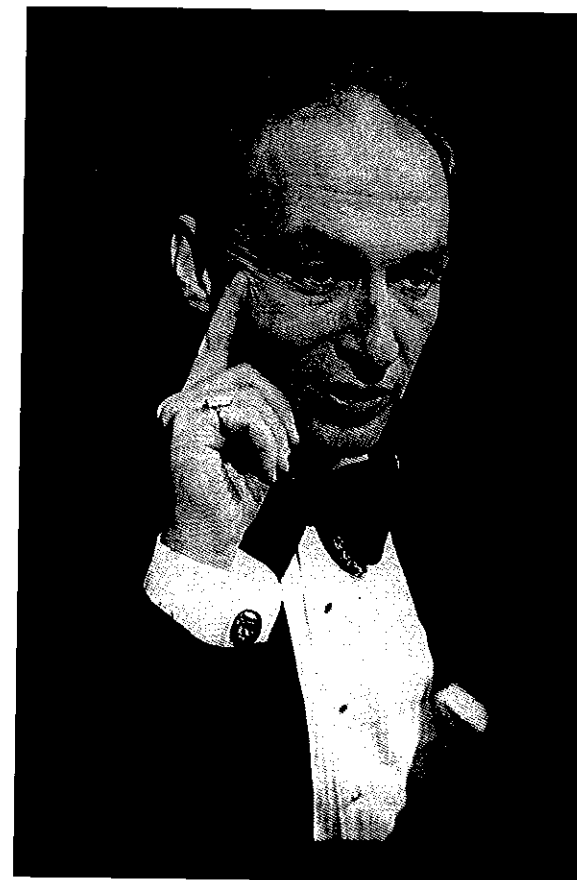
Roy Cohn/Jack Smith (Jill Godmilow, 1994).
Photo courtesy of Jill Godmilow.

Godmilow's film, like many documentaries of music concerts, observes a public performance; in this case she records two one-man plays by Ron Vawter. Given that such events are understood to be performances in the first place, they allow the filmmaker to avoid some of the accusations that the presence of the camera altered what would have happened had the camera not been there.



some speeches at another time and place when the original footage proved unusable. (The repeated portions are reenacted so that they blend in with the original speeches, hiding the collaboration that went into their making.)

Triumph of the Will demonstrates the power of the image to represent the historical world at the same moment as it participates in the construction of aspects of the historical world itself. Such participation, especially in the context of Nazi Germany, carries an aura of duplicity. This was the last thing observational filmmakers like Robert Drew, D. A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, and Fred Wiseman wanted in their own work. The integrity of their observational stance successfully avoided it, for the most part, and yet the underlying act of being present at an event but filming it as if absent, as if the filmmaker were simply a "fly on the wall," invites debate as to how much of what we see would be the same if the camera were not there or how



Roy Cohn/Jack Smith (Jill Godmilow, 1994).
Photo courtesy of Jill Godmilow.

Godmilow makes use of editing to create a distinct perspective on Ron Vawter's performance as gay underground filmmaker Jack Smith and right-wing, anti-Communist (and closeted gay) lawyer Roy Cohn. By intercutting the two separate performances she draws increased attention to the contrasting ways in which the two men dealt with their sexuality during the 1950s.

much would differ if the filmmaker's presence were more readily acknowledged. That such debate is by its very nature undecidable continues to fuel a certain sense of mystery, or disquiet, about observational cinema.

THE PARTICIPATORY MODE

The social sciences have long promoted the study of social groups. Anthropology, for example, remains heavily defined by the practice of field work, where an anthropologist lives among a people for an extended period of time and then writes up what she has learned. Such research usually calls for some form of participant-observation. The researcher goes into the field, participates in the lives of others, gains a corporeal or visceral feel for what life in a given context is like, and then reflects on this experience, using the