

'Believe Me, I'm of the World': Documentary Representation

Documentary concerns itself with representing the observable world, and to this end works with what Grierson called the raw material of actuality. The documentarian draws on past and present actuality – the world of social and historical experience – to construct an account of lives and events. Embedded within the account of physical reality is a claim or assertion at the centre of all non-fictional representation, namely, that a documentary depiction of the socio-historical world is factual and truthful.

Of course, saying that a documentary representation makes a truth claim is not the same as saying that it presents truth. Distinctions of this kind inform the growing and increasingly sophisticated positions offered within documentary theory, pointing to the complex relationship of representation, reality and truth. The generalized truth claim of documentary representation may encompass a number of individual truth claims.¹ Furthermore, not all truth claims are beyond dispute; indeed certain claims made in a documentary may be the subject of what is at times intense debate and critique (Corner, 1996: 3). Operating within such parameters, the so-called truth claim is based on a particular orientation or stance toward subject matter which is summarizable in the position, 'Believe me, I'm of the world' (Renov, 1993a: 30). In these terms documentary can be defined, generally, as a work or text which implicitly claims to truthfully represent the world, whether it is to accurately represent events or issues or to assert that the subjects of the work are 'real people'.

This chapter begins with an analysis of one aspect of the truth claim, that which rests on a 'contract' or a bond of trust between producer and viewer. The other component of the truth claim – the documentary interpretation of reality – is examined through reference to the styles, conventions, rhetorical and narrative strategies, modes and genres of documentary representation.

'Believe me': the documentary contract

Truth claims reflect a tacit contractual agreement or bond of trust between documentary producers (whether an individual filmmaker or broadcasting institution) and an audience that the representation is based on the actual socio-historical world, not a fictional world imaginatively conceived. Documentary producers and filmmakers adhere to this long-standing mandate through detailed research of a topic and the verification of the identity of witnesses relied on in a documentary report. In certain contexts, this commitment is reinforced through guidelines and codes issued to producers by broadcasting or commissioning authorities, and in some instances contraventions of such guidelines can result in punitive censures. *The Connection* (1996), a programme produced by Carlton Television for Britain's commercial Channel 3, is a case in point. Carlton was fined £2 million for fabricating scenes using professional actors and for failing to label the scenes as reconstructions, as demanded by the Independent Television Commission code of practice (see Chapter 9).

The Connection raises various ethical issues, not the least the betrayal of good faith inherent in the documentary contract (see Winston, 2000). In most cases the 'contract' between producer and audience is undertaken informally by producers concerned with maintaining evidentiary standards (Tunstall, 1993: 32), and reinforced in handbooks and manuals written to provide instruction in the production of film and television documentaries. Exemplifying such routinized directives, one handbook states that, 'It is the implicit duty of every documentary maker to stand by the accuracy of the film's claim to truth' (Kriwaczek, 1997: 42). This commitment is extended in what have been called 'situational cues' or 'indexes' (Carroll, 1983 and 1987; Eitzen, 1995; Plantinga, 1996 and 1997). Such cues include advertisements for a film or programme, distribution releases, reviews, notes in a television

programme guide, explicit labels or written descriptions in the title sequences of a film or television programme which alert potential viewers to a work's non-fictional content. In specific situations these cues include statements such as 'the untold story' or 'a television history' which underline a producer's commitment to veracity and providing a full and accurate account of a subject.

In turn, the 'constituency of viewers' (Nichols, 1991) comes to a documentary with a set of expectations regarding the work's authenticity and veracity. This is not to suggest that viewers fail to question information contained in a documentary. Studies of reception point to the fact that viewers interpret or decode the documentary text in complex and sophisticated ways and frequently balance and validate the information and interpretations provided in a documentary against their own experiences and other sources of information (see, e.g. Corner and Richardson, 1986). Such a process of negotiation is, however, undertaken in relation to a text which is generally expected to have been produced in good faith with standards of evidentiality.

The pervasiveness and strength of viewer expectations have been demonstrated in the case of a work which purposively subverts the documentary contract. *Forgotten Silver* (TVNZ: 1997), a 'mockumentary' produced by Costa Botes and Peter Jackson (director of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy) for New Zealand television, highlights the issues raised here. Unlike most mock documentaries, in which the viewer is alerted in advance through situational cues to the fact that the work is a fabrication, the Jackson and Botes programme was intentionally screened without such warnings. The programme recounts the story of Colin McKenzie, a figure responsible for various ground-breaking inventions, including, most notably, the invention of powered flight and cinema. The programme's outlandish assertions are rendered plausible through interviews with a series of known experts and through a reliance on carefully staged footage which supports the experts' testimony. Viewer response to the faked documentary was mixed. According to letters to newspaper editors, many viewers accepted the programme as a truthful account of historical events. When the hoax was publicly exposed many viewers were, again according to a flurry of letters to editors, incensed by what they took to be the bad faith of the broadcaster and the producers in breaking the documentary contract (Roscoe and Hight, 2001). As the hoax demonstrated, viewers expect a documentary to engage

the world in ways which present real people and events, not invented ones. The process which supports this expectation involves not only situational or extratextual cues but also cues *within* the documentary text itself (Nichols, 1991: 18–23). A film or television programme deemed to be documentary is structured by intratextual conventions which mediate viewers' reception and interpretation of the work as an accurate and verifiable depiction of the world.

'Of the world': interpreting reality

The status of a representation as a legitimate depiction of the socio-historical world is informed by certain properties commonly understood to be inherent in the photographic image. The photochemical process of photography and traditions of photographic practice function to rally viewers' belief in the photographic image as an authentic and accurate representation of the object before the camera.² This position is reflected in the popular summation of the photograph's truth claim: 'the camera cannot lie'. The philosopher Charles Peirce argued that the photograph is made under circumstances in which it is 'physically forced to correspond point by point to nature' (quoted in Nichols, 1991: 149). Peirce termed this connection between image and object an indexical bond. The bond between representation and referent, that is, between the image and the real world, produces an impression of authenticity which documentary draws on as a warrant or guarantee of the accuracy and authority of its representation.³

The notion of an indexical bond – a point-by-point, unmediated relationship between image and object – suggests a definition of representation as an act of recording. However, documentary representation exceeds a recording function; a documentary representation is an interpretation of physical reality, not a mere reflection of pre-existent reality. The interpretation and manipulation of reality occurs at all stages of the documentary process. The presence of a documentary camera and sound and light equipment is likely to affect the world being filmed in multiple direct and indirect ways such as a simple rearrangement of furniture to accommodate a film crew in a cramped space, to alterations of behaviour in which subjects 'act' naturally for the camera. The raw footage shot on location is filmed according to certain codes and conventions, and the footage is further manipulated in the editing process. The final

edited film or programme is also 'reworked' in descriptions of the text used to promote the film or programme. The multiple transformations point to the various 'realities' which documentary encompasses: putative reality (the world as it is understood to exist without the intrusion of the camera), the world in front of the camera (so-called profilmic reality), and the reality screened in the film or programme (Corner, 1996: 21).⁴ Traversing these levels, the documentary manipulation and interpretation of reality is expressed through representational styles and conventions and forms of argument and narrative which together work to produce a realistic and authoritative representation of the socio-historical world.

Documentary realism and its conventions

Style refers to patterns of use, conventions or techniques in which particular meanings and effects are produced. Style in documentary is rarely used for its own sake as technical virtuosity or ornamentation; dominantly, it is deployed to develop a work's perspective and to convey information (Plantinga, 1997: 147). Stylistic features are not universal; individual filmmakers will bring their own style of filmmaking to a work, and different documentary forms are marked by different styles. These variations typically function, however, within a realistic impulse which functions to produce the effect of the filmmaker 'having been there' and, by extension, of us – the viewers – 'being there' (Nichols, 1991: 181). Realism operates in both fiction and documentary, with differing effects. Fictional realism, particularly the classic realism of Hollywood film, functions to make an invented world seem real. A 'realistic' fictional film or programme thus seeks to render its characters, actions and settings believable and plausible. This stance differs from the operation of realism in documentary, where it functions to render persuasive the arguments and claims made in a film or programme about the socio-historical world. As Corner (2001a: 126–7) points out, such claims and arguments about the world operate in documentary in two, linked, ways: first, at the indexical level of the image – 'this *is* the ship that brought survivors back, this *is* the captain of the ship' – and, second, at the level of exposition, that is, through spoken propositions and directives provided in voice-over commentary or the on-camera testimony of witnesses: 'these *are* the known facts relating to the shipwreck, this *is* the judgment it is most sensible to make as to what happened'.

Corner informs the distinction between realism in fiction and documentary realism by noting that the former essentially provides a kind of 'imaginative relationship' between the viewer and the events on the screen. 'What this means is that the narrative of the realistic fiction is designed to engage imaginatively (and selectively) with viewers' perceptions of the real world and what can happen in it. There is often a pleasing play-off here between fantasy and reality.' Documentary, in contrast, provides an *inferential* relationship between the represented events and the viewer. 'In the documentary, we are offered bits of evidence and argument and have to construct truths from them, truths of fact and perhaps truths of judgment. However, we should remember that imagination plays a part here too' (2001a: 127). Within its capacity to continually engage viewers' perceptions of reality, styles of realism have changed over the decades. The realism of one era can look hackneyed or appear unconvincing in another era. The realism of *The Bill* (ITV, 1984–present) or *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–87), for example, is a different variety of realism to that of earlier programmes such as *Dixon of Dock Green* (BBC, 1955–76) or *Kojak* (CBS, 1973–78) (Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 34). If the basis of a realistic work is a perceived 'truth to life' (O'Sullivan *et al.*, in Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 44), then changes in style constitute and reflect varying perceptions of truth. Different viewers will, however, depending on their varying expectations and experiences, carry and form different understandings of the same object (Branigan, 1992: 203). In this way, realism, 'both as a practice and a critical concept – is the subject of never-ending contestation' (O'Sullivan *et al.*, quoted in Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 44).

Within this pattern of contestation and change, Kilborn and Izod have usefully set out various aspects of realism (1997:43–52), and Corner identifies two principal stylistic approaches. In both of the forms outlined by Corner, any effect of reality is not solely achieved through the style itself; rather, the styles operate within the broader context of the documentary truth claim to produce a 'reality effect' (Corner, 2001a: 127). The first form that Corner identifies, what he calls *observational realism*, produces the effect that what we are seeing is a record of reality as it unfolds. The style strongly suggests that the events we are witnessing are beyond the intervention or control of a film crew (Corner, 2001a: 127). The impression is that the events we see on screen '*would have happened, as they happened, even if the filmmaker had not been present*'

(Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 21. Italics in original). The emphasis here is on seeing, watching and observing and the camera style is unadorned ('raw'), an effect that contributes to the idea that the events are captured as they occurred and not filtered through an authoring consciousness. This type of realism is a central component of the observational mode (discussed below).

The second kind of realism can be called *expositional realism*, a style closely aligned with commentary and the expository mode (see below). Expositional realism exceeds mere observation, and involves the organization of sound and image in support of an argument or rhetorical position. The style operates through a close fit between word and image, between what is seen and what is heard, and presents evidence in such a way that one outcome from the array of evidence appears inevitable and ineluctable. Within the style, scenes may function metonymically, serving as a typical account of more general circumstances. The combination of word and image functions here to "win the viewer" for the particular case that the documentary is making' (Corner, 2001a: 127).

The effects of both observational and expository realism are enhanced by the conventions which are routinely deployed in documentary. Conventions include profilmic practices, those relating to events which occur before the camera, and filmic techniques, stylistic features adopted within the text itself, though not all of the possible range of conventions and techniques need be apparent in a work for it to be understood as realistic. Profilmic conventions evoke immediacy and direct access to the real and include location shooting (as opposed to filming in a studio) and interviews at-the-scene with witnesses to 'real-life' events. Filmic conventions vary widely from form to form and include, for example, the eschewing of a presenter and voice-over commentary in the observational documentary, and the expositional techniques of long-form television news documentary, which typically utilize an on-screen presenter and voice-over narration. Other filmic conventions include the hand-held or shoulder-mounted shaky camera shot, a practice that has been replicated to the point of cliché as a sign of documentary authenticity. Documentary filmmaking manuals and critical assessments of documentary practice identify (and in certain cases, prescribe) various filmic conventions. For example, one manual advises the documentary filmmaker to avoid using artificial lighting and light reflectors in outdoor scenes and instead to rely on natural light which has a 'realistic feeling to it that is desirable in documentary'. The same manual

suggests that the camera should be unobtrusive in crowd scenes in order to prevent subjects looking into the lens, and insists that the camera should not be used to record incidentals, and only moved to follow action (quoted in Branigan, 1992: 206).

Despite such prescriptive regulation, conventions are not aesthetic straitjackets. The documentary tradition contains a number of examples of aesthetic innovation and experimentation. New technologies such as the invention of sound and lightweight portable cameras produced new approaches and styles. In other ways, experiments involving voice-over narration have produced remarkable results, among them the verse narration written and read by W. H. Auden for *Night Mail* (1936), the Whitmanesque lyrical narration of Pare Lorentz's *The River* (1937), Richard Wright's blues-inspired narration for *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), and the narration for the innovative *Drinking for England* (BBC2, 1998), in which subjects recount their experiences in verse. In another way, the films of Errol Morris rely on various visual and aural techniques, including, for example, the *film noir* visual components and sonic elements (supplemented by a haunting music soundtrack by Philip Glass) of his film *The Thin Blue Line* (1989). Documentaries may employ visually spectacular and aesthetically composed shots, as in the films *Kooyanisqatsi* (1983) and *Baraka* (1992), while non-fiction surf films typically rely on heightened and intensified visual spectacle for their aesthetic effect (Beattie, 2001a).

Generally, however, the conventions of documentary realism tend to impose a degree of aesthetic restraint on the text. The documentary film theorist Bill Nichols (1991) points to this effect in his description of documentary as a 'discourse of sobriety' which represents the world within formally 'sober' ways. Documentary shares this aesthetic restraint with other fields such as science, politics, economics and journalism, which like documentary, adopt a rhetorical stance designed to persuade audiences that the information presented is legitimate and important (Nichols, 1991). In these terms, aesthetic innovation is generally subservient to documentary conventions, and their contributions to the maintenance of an argument about the socio-historical world.

Argument and narrative

Documentaries are frequently organized around an argument. Documentary works construct an argument from sounds and

images which are presented as evidence of the real world. It is useful to contrast this understanding with the ways in which sounds and images are deployed in most fictional texts, where they are circulated as elements of a plot which occurs in an imaginary world. While a fictional text will focus on motivation, characterization, the plausibility of actions and events and an internal consistency of story, a documentary concentrates on a strategy that persuades viewers that the evidence it presents is a fair representation of issues (Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 119).

Arguments can be presented in a variety of forms, including essays, diaries, reports, eulogies, manifestos and exhortations (Nichols, 1991: 125). The forms appear in a variety of media, including documentary, where certain forms, particularly the journalistic report, have commonly adopted an argumentative or rhetorical stance. Within its various forms, argument produces two representational outcomes: a perspective on the world, and a commentary about the world (Nichols, 1991: 125). Perspective refers to the point of view adopted in the text to the material that is presented; it is an implicit and continuous form of argumentation, as in the case of a 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary that structures its interpretation of the observed world through indirect, though continually controlled, ways. Commentary, in contrast, is an overt form of argumentation that is routinely provided by voice-over narration or direct testimony provided by subjects in the form of 'talking heads'. Commentary is an explicit way of presenting evidence and it differs from perspective in the manner it constructs and directly presents conceptually richer aspects of an argument.

The case about the world constructed in argument is extended in other ways. The rhetorical thrust of a voice-over can be reinforced by particular vocal inflections. At one point in the documentary series *Vietnam: A Television History* (PBS, 1983), for example, the male narrator's voice announces in a deep, measured tone full of foreboding and imminent crisis, 'And then came Tet' (in 1969, Tet, the lunar new year, marked a North Vietnamese military offensive launched during the Vietnam War). The form of delivery informs the argumentative thrust of the series in which the Vietnam War is interpreted as a debilitating and, for the United States, disastrous political event. Music can also be used to advance an argument. At the end of Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1969) the stirring, patriotic strains of *The Battle Hymn of*

the Republic ironically underlines the film's thesis concerning the criminal folly of US intervention in the Vietnamese civil war (see Chapter 5).

Central to the documentary presentation of an argument or arguments about the world is the role of narrative. Narrative in documentary tends to differ from that in fictional texts, where it principally functions to emphasize the motivation of characters operating within a plausible world. Fictional narrative rests on a relationship of cause and effect: an event or action (cause) sets in train a series of actions (effect). The novelist E. M. Forster specified this particular feature of fictional narrative by contrasting two simple statements. According to Forster, the statement 'The king died' does not construct a narrative, whereas 'The king died and as a result the queen died of grief' establishes a narrative of cause and effect (in Maltby, 2003: 455). Fictional narratives inform the unfolding of a causal chain by situating the action within the boundaries of a specified time and place ('far away and long ago' would be sufficient for the fairy tale-like example of the king and queen).

Narrative in documentary operates in ways different to its function in fiction, though certain documentary forms maintain elements of fictional narrative. The simple narratives of documentary 'city symphonies', for example, order events in a 'day in the life' of the city in a sequential chain of events unfolding in time (24 hours) and place (a nominated city). In particular, narrative in documentary adopts the principles of sequencing in order to advance an argument about the socio-historical world. Documentaries often replace cause and effect with a simple problem-solution structure: a problem is posed, the historical background to the problem is examined and current dimensions of the problem are explained. A solution or solutions to the problem (or ways to find a solution) are then outlined or suggested (Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 119). This structure is popular in varieties of television current affairs journalism. In another example, Pare Lorentz's *The River* (1937) adopts this structure to analyse flooding and soil erosion along the Mississippi River. In Lorentz's film, the problems of erosion and flooding are established within a description of long-standing exploitative land use practices along the Mississippi. The solution, government intervention in the form of dam building projects, appears within the terms of the argument as the only viable ameliorative response to the situation. Though constructed primarily

on a problem-solution structure, *The River* also follows a simple narrative based on a journey from the headwaters of the Mississippi downstream to the Gulf of Mexico.

Underlining the importance of narrative to documentary strategies of argumentation, the film historian Brian Winston (1995: 113) insists that narrative is a feature of all documentary work, and objects to descriptions of documentary as a non-narrative system.⁵ In a similar way, the film theorist Bill Nichols (1991) acknowledges the place of narrative in documentary, though he argues that narrative structure is pronounced in certain documentaries and only partial in others. Following this observation, it can be noted that narrative is especially prominent in the drama-documentary, which exceeds routine narrative conventions in documentary through re-enactments of events reminiscent of fiction film (see Chapter 8). Much less prominent, but nevertheless present, are the narrative elements of 'fly-on-the-wall' documentaries, which situate subtle cause and effect relationships in a specific time and place (discussed in Chapter 6). Other forms, such as so-called docusoaps, routinely narrativize events in obvious ways, while in 'reality TV' narrative vies with a rigorous stylization that moves representation from the referential to the realms of pure aestheticization (these issues are discussed in Chapter 10).

Documentary modes

The conventions of documentary, together with forms of narrative, are extended in the codes and representational strategies of modes of documentary. Among the various topologies of documentary modes (Renov, 1993a; Corner, 1996: 28–30), the schema formulated by Nichols (1985 and 1991: 31–75) is a particularly useful interpretation of the communicative functions of the diverse modes of documentary depiction. Nichols has identified five modes of documentary representation: expository, observational, interactive, reflexive and performative. There is a certain historical progression of the modes, from the expository mode prominent in early documentaries, to the performative mode of a number of contemporary works. However, modes are not mutually exclusive, and the formal innovations of newly emergent modes coexist with established practices. At the same time, modes may overlap within a work and in this way a documentary may exhibit features of more than one mode.

The first of Nichols' modes, the expository, relies heavily on commentary in the form of intertitles or voice-over narration to anchor meaning and construct authority. The expository mode was prominent in documentaries of the 1930s produced in the United Kingdom by John Grierson and his co-workers, in which the spoken commentary was often presented in the form of a deep, authoritarian male voice-over narration by an unseen speaker (the so-called voice of God commentary).⁶ Variations of this method exist today in many television documentaries in which the voice of a commentator encodes expertise and authority translating the subject matter to a lay audience. The spoken word in the expository mode reverses the traditional emphasis in film on the image. Images function in the expository mode to complement, reinforce, or elaborate the impressions, opinions, reactions and written research articulated in the spoken commentary. Argument in this mode emphasizes broad and general features of the subject and tends to eschew particularities or incidental detail. Argument is advanced by styles of editing focused on the maintenance of rhetorical continuity and perspective, with less emphasis being placed on indications of the passage of time or the organization of space. The expository mode creates the impression of an objective and balanced approach to its material. The voice of God commentary seems to exist above and beyond the arguments being presented – an all-knowing and all-seeing viewpoint. This impression of objectivity aligns the expository mode with journalism, from which it borrows an emphasis on research, evidence and a value-free style of representation.

The observational mode, Nichols' second mode, is closely linked to developments in camera and sound recording technologies during the late 1950s. These developments culminated in portable 16 mm cameras and portable sound recording equipment synchronized to the camera. Liberated from the restraints of the studio, the camera was free to simultaneously record image and sound in almost any location. The impression of unmediated observation achieved within the mode is informed in the editing phase in which footage is assembled with respect to temporal and spatial continuities, eschewing voice-over commentary, intertitles, non-diegetic sound effects and a complementary musical track. The result of these practices is an attempt to replicate an immediate 'slice of life' which is presented in lived or real time. The feigned denial of the presence of the camera in the observational mode is summarized in

the assessment that the camera becomes a 'fly on the wall', an unobtrusive and all-seeing eye on the world. A sense of direct and unmediated access to the world characterizes the film and programme making practices of direct cinema, analysed in Chapter 6.

In contrast to direct cinema's observational claims, other practitioners accept the disruptive presence of the camera, using it as a catalyst to inspire and reveal what they insist is true and authentic behaviour. Working with this approach in the early 1960s, Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin modified observational techniques to an openly interventionist practice. The resultant film, *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), a work which the filmmakers labelled *cinéma vérité* (see Chapter 6), popularized a mode structured around the interactions between filmmaker and subject. The interactive mode stresses dialog and the verbal testimony of subjects. While in the observational mode of direct cinema there is an attempt to deny the filmmaker's presence, in the interactive mode the filmmaker may appear on camera in the role of interviewer, or be heard off camera asking questions of the subjects.⁷

Interviews include medium shot or close-up shot of the interview subject talking to the interviewer on camera, or to camera responses by an interviewee to an unseen interviewer's questions. This practice, the so-called talking head, offers a personalized basis to knowledge, and it is useful to distinguish between the use of talking heads to represent an official or authoritative point of view, and the use of talking heads as a form of testimony by people who are telling their own stories (Martineau, 1984: 259). Authoritative knowledges are represented by a person deemed to be an expert in a field, who is often interviewed framed against a backdrop that reinforces a sense of authority (standing against shelves of books, or seated at a desk with a computer, for example), or who appears on a specially constructed set, as in studio-based segments of current affairs television journalism. In contrast, people narrating their own experiences are often framed at the location of the events being described. In this way, the subjects of *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980), a film by Connie Field dealing with US women in the workforce during the Second World War, are depicted at the sites of their wartime employment. By relying on the recollections and testimony of participants elicited through interview, Field's interactive documentary functions in the manner of an oral history, providing first-hand interpretations of historical events often overlooked by more traditional forms of historical

analysis. Argument in Field's film arises from comments provided by witnesses, as opposed to the rhetorical strategies of the expository mode in which a voice-over commentary is relied upon to present and advance an argument. Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1985), a film marked by a series of interactions between the director and the women he encounters on a journey through the South, deploys the interactive mode within an autobiographical frame. In *Sherman's March* (examined in Chapter 7) the autobiographical merges with the interactive to the point that McElwee's life is revealed within and through interactive moments of conversation and interrogation.

Nichols' fourth mode, the reflexive, self-consciously draws attention to the processes of representation. While the expository mode centres on commentary, the reflexive mode engages in metacommentary, reflecting on its own constitutive practices. Reflexive documentaries are concerned with exposing objectivity by revealing the filmmaker as a subjective authorial presence willing to provoke action and to reflect on the results of that provocation, as in *Chronicle of a Summer*, or someone who actively dismantles and interprets (or reinterprets) filmed footage, as in Timothy Asch's *The Ax Fight* (1974), a film discussed in Chapter 3.

An emphasis on experimentation is extended in the performative mode in which stylistic, expressive and poetic features push documentary away from a referential basis and patterns of argumentation toward the formal aesthetic realm of avant-garde cinema (Nichols, 1994: 94–5). However, the performative work remains dominantly within the realm of documentary through the fact that it retains a referential claim on the socio-historical world. The word 'performative' does not here necessarily refer to dramatic performances by subjects (though many of the actions of subjects within the performative text are excessively stylized). A performative documentary is one in which the text 'performs' – 'draws attention to itself' and its visual and expressive virtuosity (Nichols, 1994: 97). Nichols includes in this category the works *A Song of Ceylon* (Jayamanne, 1985), *Tongues Untied* (Riggs, 1989) and *Looking for Langston* (Julien, 1991), among others. Generally, the mode is characteristic of films produced for art house exhibition and is rarely utilized in television documentary. Indeed, the works from which Nichols constructs the five modes of documentary representation are largely drawn from documentary cinema with little or no attention to documentary screened on contemporary

television. It can be noted, however, that recent developments in television documentary practice constitute a substantial revision of, and departure from, pre-existent modes. Such developments function as the basis of two newly emergent modes, one of which can be termed the 'reconstructive', the other as 'observational-entertainment', a hybrid term which reflects the hybrid status of the mode's melding of aspects of observation and 'entertainment'.

The reconstructive mode encompasses the increasingly prominent practice of dramatic reconstruction of historical and contemporary events and experiences, such as those used in drama-documentary and documentary drama. Reconstruction, the dramatic restaging of events, operates through many of the conventions of fictional realist drama, including multiple camera set-ups on film sets. The 'second order' experience of the world (Paget, 1998: 81) located in dramatic restaging operates through conventions of acting and performance, including rehearsals, scripted dialogue and pre-planned shots which are rallied within the reconstructive mode to maintain belief in the authenticity of the depicted world. Though borrowing heavily from fictional techniques, the reconstructive mode works to locate the text within the sphere of the documentary truth claim, and to this end employs a variety of extratextual and formal features to indicate that the content is derived from the socio-historical world. The presence of these features in drama-documentary, and distinctions between their deployment in drama-documentary and documentary drama, are examined in Chapter 8. Reconstruction has become a standard feature of television tabloid news documentaries where it has commonly, though controversially, been used in reports of crimes. In another way, reconstruction is innovatively melded to the conventions of tabloid news formats and *film noir* in *The Thin Blue Line's* incisive and subtle investigation of a murder case which mixes reconstructions with features of the interactive and reflexive modes. Reconstruction of a different kind has proliferated through an increasing reliance on the manipulations made possible by digital media. The intersection of digital media representation and natural science topics has produced programmes such as *Walking with Dinosaurs* (BBC/Discovery, 1999), *The Ballad of Big Al* (BBC, 2000) and *Walking with Beasts* (BBC, 2001) which use putatively realistic dramatizations to re-create the look and behaviours of extinct animals.

The other newly identifiable mode, referred to here as 'observation-entertainment', comprises various features exhibited in recent factual forms such as 'reality television', the docusoap, and reality game shows (see Chapter 10, where the term 'popular factual entertainment' is used to describe these forms). The new mode relies on observation, though the sense of closeness, or intimacy, with the subject achieved within the mode outstrips that of 'traditional' observationalism and leads in one way to a 'snoopy sociability' in which the spectator is situated as a bystander to the routines of people's working lives (Corner, 2001a). In another way it verges on a form of surveillance, replete with camera angles reminiscent of closed-circuit surveillance camera footage, that pries into otherwise proscribed spaces. In both cases, the looking and hearing of classic observationalism are replaced with the voyeuristic and gossipy pleasures of peeping and overhearing. The subject's denial of the camera's presence in classic observationalism is also replaced in the newer mode with a degree of self-conscious performance by subjects. Performance, and a sense of playing to the (hidden) camera, is a prominent feature of the reality game show *Big Brother*, a programme which revises and replaces the traditional purpose of documentary as argument about the world with the viewing pleasures derivable from looking or spying and over-hearing. The voyeuristic pleasures of the mode are heightened through techniques which include musical enhancement of mood and a visual style which in certain cases is reminiscent of rock music video. Corner (2000a) uses the phrase 'documentary as diversion' to describe the pronounced move to entertainment in the observation-entertainment mode.

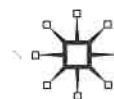
The array of theoretical tools confronted here – realism, style, conventions and modes – form part of the 'communicative package', the 'particular visual and aural "shape" of a work', as Corner calls it (1998: 97). Importantly, the formal features outlined here operate within documentary texts which circulate within, and are informed by, disciplinary, historical and discursive settings. The following chapter examines the foundational documentary films of Flaherty and Grierson, paying attention to sponsorship as a context within which documentary film developed. Subsequent chapters extend this approach by examining the content and representational forms of work from a range of documentary subgenres through reference to the varying settings or contexts in which they occur.

Documentary Screens

*Non-Fiction Film
and Television*

Keith Beattie

palgrave
macmillan



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