



## Introduction

Moving picture nonfictions, typically called documentaries or nonfiction films and television, are a diverse lot. Those I examine in this book include independently-produced features (*American Dream*, *Brother's Keeper*, and *The Lovely May* [*Le Joli Mai*]), journalistic documentaries (*See it Now* with Edward R. Murrow, *Frontline*), government-sponsored films (*The River*, *Song of Ceylon*, *Why Vietnam?*), anti-war, anti-government films (*Far From Vietnam*, *Hearts and Minds*), public television programs (*The Civil War*, *Eyes on the Prize*, and *Nature*), network news "magazines" (*CBS 60 Minutes*, *20/20*), compilation films (*The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, *Victory at Sea*), and poetic and experimental work (*Manhatta*, *Valentin de las Sierras*).

*Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* works toward a *pragmatics* and a *rhetoric* of moving picture nonfictions. Nonfiction film pragmatics is the study of how nonfictions are used to perform various social tasks. Erik Barnouw implicitly acknowledges the rich variety of nonfictions in his history of the genre in section headings alluding to the diverse purposes of their makers: explorer, reporter, advocate, poet, promoter, observer, guerrilla, etc.<sup>1</sup> Michael Renov describes four functions of nonfiction films as (1) to record, reveal, or preserve, (2) to persuade or promote, (3) to analyze or interrogate, and (4) to express.<sup>2</sup> The purposes of the nonfiction film are limited only by the breadth of human communication itself.

It has been argued that images can perform many of the actions for which language is used – warning, asserting, identifying, informing, ridiculing, critiquing, etc.<sup>3</sup> When we broaden the study of speech acts to encompass actions performed through the presentation of entire nonfiction texts, and to images and sounds used *within* texts, the matter becomes quite complicated. Instead of the simple utterances of a language user, we have a complex meld of images and sounds, in a work playing in some cases longer than two hours (consider *Shoah* or *The Civil War*, for example). Moreover, the sentence is typically uttered

by an individual, often for a discernible purpose, whereas a work of nonfiction is a group project which, after its initial release, can be used for a variety of purposes depending on the context of exhibition.

One of the tasks of the nonfiction student or scholar is to investigate how producers, distributors, exhibitors, and audiences employ films and videos in the realm of human action. However, if the uses of nonfiction films are as varied as the films themselves, theory alone cannot circumscribe the work's possible uses, or determine *a priori* the ideological effect of a text or genre. History and criticism must place movements, filmmakers, and individual films in their contexts. Theory, at best, supplies conceptual tools.

To contribute to such a pragmatics, we must first explore central philosophical issues. The first four chapters of this book examine two issues fundamental to all theoretical explorations of nonfiction film. The first – the nature of nonfiction and the nonfiction film – has proven to be utterly baffling to generations of filmmakers and scholars. The second issue – the semantics of moving picture photography – is no less central, and the scholarly discussion every bit as contentious. While emphasizing the historical nature of the genre, these chapters propose a characterization of nonfiction moving pictures that distinguishes fiction from nonfiction, accounts for the diversity of nonfiction films and videos, and accounts for expressive techniques, often mistakenly called “fictional,” in nonfictions.

A pragmatics of nonfiction moving pictures must deal with the semantic issues of photographic realism and reference. It must also explore the rhetorical uses of images and sounds. Sometimes those who endorse a qualified realism of the image, as I do here, are claimed to hold all types of fantastical beliefs, ranging from the “presence” of the photograph's referent, to confidence that the photograph *automatically* guarantees unproblematic evidence about its referent, to a belief in magic. Photographic realists are also claimed to have various shortcomings of a personal or psychological nature. At various times, they have been called philistines, narcissists, or fetishists. In *The Burden of Representation*, for example, John Tagg writes that Roland Barthes' assertions about photographic realism must be considered in light of “the death of his own mother, his reawakened sense of unsupportable (sic) loss, and his search for ‘a just image’ and not ‘just an image’ of her,” and implies that Barthes' claims stem from a desire for “the repossession of his mother's body.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Barthes may in fact have had this problem, and other real-

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ists may hold various naïve beliefs, it is nonetheless possible to make a more sophisticated case for photographic realism. In the third and fourth chapters I do so, drawing on diverse sources to argue that as iconic and indexical signs, still and moving photographs (and recorded sounds) can refer to the profilmic scene in ways that account for its unique informative power. However, the iconic and indexical aspects of the image are never automatic, guaranteed, or unproblematic. Moreover, images and sounds also have connotative and symbolic aspects, and point forward, so to speak, to their rhetorical functions.

This book is also meant to contribute to a rhetoric of nonfiction moving pictures. I mean “rhetoric” not in the relativistic sense of Stanley Fish. Fish makes rhetoric into an all-encompassing phenomenon, claiming as irrelevant and misleading all notions of truth, evidence, or reason. Fish’s project calls first for a debunking of orthodoxies and “arrangements of power,” a recognition that everything is rhetorical. Second, for a loosening or weakening of “the structures of domination and oppression that now hold us captive.”<sup>5</sup> These forces he identifies with rhetoric, arguing that we must counter the power of rhetoric and liberate ourselves from its hegemony. However, if all is rhetoric, then our debunking is itself just more self-serving drivel (with no grounding in truth, evidence, reason). Why should anyone be persuaded by it?<sup>6</sup>

Nor do I mean by “rhetoric” merely the realm of persuasion. I take the word in a broader sense, as the study of the richness, complexity, and expressiveness of nonfiction discourse, and the means by which it is structured to have influence on the viewer. To this end, the fifth chapter describes nonfiction discourse in general terms, then examines the means by which it fashions its representation – through selection, ordering, emphasis, and what I call “voice.” The sixth chapter discusses the means others have used to talk about subgenres of nonfiction, from Bill Nichols’ modes of documentary to divisions based on categorical, rhetorical, and narrative form. Then it further expands on the concept of voice, showing the formal means by which nonfiction texts claim or disavow levels of authority, and describing what I call the “formal” and the “open” voices. The seventh and eighth chapters examine structure, style, and technique, in each case not as elements of a “free-floating play of signifiers,” but of an expressive discourse that makes reference to the actual world. In the ninth chapter I explore an alternative to the formal and open voices, the “poetic voice,” manifesting itself in poetic documentaries, avant-garde nonfictions, metadocumentaries, and parodies.

Chapters 5–9 emphasize the formal, syntactical qualities of nonfic-

tion moving pictures. Yet it would be inaccurate to describe my project as formalist. As I said above, I'm interested in studying the place nonfictions occupy in the social world, and in the morality and ideology of discourse. A valuable way to contribute to such a study is to investigate the formal workings of texts, since their structures influence how texts can be used and what effects they may have. I want to avoid the bold and general, but misguided, claims some theorists make about "the" ideological effect of nonfiction films.<sup>7</sup> For example, Brian Winston argues that the photograph is invested with such an aura of science that despite all disavowals by filmmakers, spectators always take the image as unproblematic and transparent truth.<sup>8</sup> This misleading "scientificity" is allegedly built into the photographic apparatus, an outcome of its historical association with scientific instruments. Yet Winston doesn't believe in the automatic veracity of the photographic image. Is it right for Winston to impart a universal ideological effect to the photograph from which he is exempt? My contention is that ideological effects cannot be posited at such a broad level of generality, but instead must be determined in reference to specific texts, events, contexts, and audiences. If this makes it more difficult to determine ideological effect apart from history, then so be it. History, criticism, and theory must have a symbiotic relationship.

I make no general claims about *the* historical meaning of nonfiction moving pictures, or their *central* ideological effects. They have none. It seems to me that nonfictions occupy a central place in Western culture, but that their importance is manifested in infinite variations. Moreover, nonfiction moving pictures, like photography in general, have no unitary ideological effect, central function, or singular purpose, but a multitude of effects and purposes, depending on use, context, audience, and other factors. Rhetorical, text-based studies can contribute to the overall pragmatics of nonfiction film by examining how texts make meaning and use persuasive techniques. A fuller understanding of the uses of films, however, requires serious historical and critical investigation.

The final chapter of *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* considers some broad issues raised by nonfiction discourse. There I examine the strengths and weaknesses of the formal and open voices and their alternatives, showing how each is suited for specific purposes. I question and evaluate concepts such as objectivity, balance, and fairness in relation to historical or journalistic documentaries, and show how these concepts play out in an historical compilation documentary,

*The Twentieth Century*. I discuss filmic illusion and reflexivity as they apply to the nonfiction film spectator. Finally, I conclude with some remarks about truth-telling and the ethics of nonfiction discourse.

This book integrates theory and philosophy with criticism. “Theory” here means the systematic investigation of issues central to nonfiction moving pictures. I am primarily concerned with understanding the nature and functions of nonfiction film, and thus with analysis rather than prescription. The book is also criticism, because it provides extended analyses to show how individual works exemplify particular issues. It adheres to no well-defined school or program, but approaches issues with reference to a broad spectrum of sources, from film theory, philosophy, cultural criticism, narratology, psychology, art theory, and of course, nonfiction film scholarship.

*Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* does not cover all relevant issues. Although it deals with the ethical responsibilities of the film maker toward the audience, it does not examine the rights of persons used as documentary subjects, a topic explored quite thoroughly elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> The same is true for ethnographic and anthropological films, a discussion of which is better left to those more familiar with particular problems raised by those fields. Neither does this book deal extensively with the dramatic documentary, or docudrama. This topic has *not* been sufficiently explored, and someone should begin that project soon.

Moreover, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* does not claim the last word on the subjects it *does* cover. It is rather part of a collaborative project in film studies, media studies, and other disciplines. I care less about whether I am right in all cases than about the contribution this work makes to discussion, synthesis, and perhaps even controversy – to that collaborative conversation which, we hope, leads to better understanding and perhaps beyond that to more tangible benefits. I take issue with many scholars throughout these pages, and in turn, welcome their criticisms, corrections, and questioning. Too often in film and media studies, carping and defensiveness take the place of constructive discussion and debate. We often take defensive postures toward criticism of our work, and allow debate to degenerate into personal animosity. We can and should disagree with each other openly.

When I first cite a film within the text, I give its date of release. For historical information about the films, see Richard M. Barsam’s *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) or Erik Barnouw’s *Documentary: A History of the Nonfiction*

*Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). These books also include bibliographies of works on specific nonfiction films and film makers. This work is not a history of nonfiction moving pictures, though it does assume a basic familiarity with that history. The better the reader's historical grounding, the better she will be able to test my claims against specific films and the historical record.

The past few years have witnessed a marked increase in the scholarly attention paid to nonfiction moving pictures. An annual conference, "Visual Evidence," is devoted to the subject. Many significant books have been published, and a book series is planned on the topic.<sup>11</sup> To existing theoretical paradigms – William Guyn's semiological-psychoanalytic model, narrowly derivative of Metz, in *A Cinema of Nonfiction* (1990); Bill Nichols' "discourse of sobriety," with roots in anthropology and information theory, in *Representing Reality* (1992); Michael Renov's Derridean-inflected "modalities of desire" in documentary poetics in *Theorizing Documentary* (1993); and Brian Winston's post-modern skepticism in *Claiming the Real* (1995) – this book offers a distinct alternative.

*Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* provides a philosophical discussion of the central issues of nonfiction discourse. In its integration of philosophy, theory, and criticism, it contributes to a pragmatics of nonfiction film. It develops a rhetoric of nonfiction, exploring the diverse means – structure, style, discourse, and voice – through which moving picture nonfictions represent the world.

## CHAPTER 1

### What Is a Nonfiction Film?

Why bother to define the nonfiction film?<sup>1</sup> Some might say that we already know one when we see one. Others may wish to avoid definitions because “defining” film genres may degenerate into academic pigeon-holing, that pedantic exercise whereby scholars assign films to synthetic categories, only to find that actual films exceed and escape those categories. Furthermore, definitions sometimes become a search for nonexistent essences. Defining then becomes a prescriptive attempt to promote a preferred characteristic as “essential” under the guise of a merely descriptive definition.

If all of these objections bear an element of truth, why not forgo discussion of definitions altogether? My contention is that characterizing nonfiction film, when properly approached, is indispensable for a study such as this. Questions about the nature and function of nonfiction and documentary infuse *all* of the theoretical debates about the genre. Every emerging style and many of the films that capture national attention give rise to similar questions about the nature of nonfiction film in relation to issues such as objectivity, the forms and purposes of nonfiction, and the uses and effects of photography and sound recording.

*Roger and Me* (1989), for example, caused intense controversy in the United States press. The debate centered on whether director Michael Moore’s rearrangement of the film’s chronological order of events constituted deceitfulness, or was acceptable documentary practice.<sup>2</sup> Much of the confusion stemmed from different conceptions of nonfiction film. We can usefully discuss these issues only after we have either (1) come to a mutual agreement about what nonfiction films are, or (2) acknowledged differences in our uses of the terms “nonfiction” or “documentary.”

### Why Categories, Definitions, and Distinctions?

To organize entities into analytic categories is sometimes called “Aristotelian,” a word none too complimentary in contemporary film studies. The spirit of the age, which in film studies is at present postmodernist, points us toward intertextuality, dispersion, and diffusion. Among its other claims, Derridean deconstruction has challenged the ease with which we make linguistic distinctions. A basic element of postmodern thought squarely contests fitting films into broad categories.

Postmodern theorists criticize the imposition of artificial categories onto the world as though they were natural and discovered. The postmodernist argument often proceeds from a rejection of the objectivist, classical notion of categories, which holds that all categories can be defined by an essential property or properties common to their members, to a wholesale dismissal of categories and categorization as means of discourse and thought. However, the postmodern emphasis on dispersion, diffusion, and intermixture goes too far if it denies the value of categories altogether. As George Lakoff writes, categorization is fundamental to the way we make sense of experience.<sup>3</sup>

Although the classical conception of categories fails for many types of categories, most of our words and symbols designate categories; understanding language depends on categorization. Categories are fundamental to thought, perception, action, and speech. When we see something as a kind of thing, we are categorizing. Categories also enable reasoning. With an unclear understanding of the categories we use, we risk confusions of thought and talking at cross-purposes. To reject categorization is to reject communication, understanding, and meaningful experience. A more prudent course would be to operate with a more subtle and complex understanding of how categories function. If we do this, the characterization of nonfiction film becomes suggestive and enlightening, rather than artificial and controlling.

We must also take definitions seriously, because defining the documentary is often connected with issues of power and control. Definitions often promote preferred uses of nonfiction film, or foreground characteristics thought to be desirable or “proper.” What various groups think nonfiction films *are* determines in part which films are funded, find distribution, and receive recognition. The case of *Roger and Me* is again illustrative. When the film failed to receive an Academy Award nomination for Best Feature Documentary in 1989, 45 filmmakers (including Pamela Yates, Spike Lee, and Louis Malle) circulated an “Open Letter to



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the Film Community” in which they express “outrage” at the omission. Yates claims that the nominating committee “seems to have a very narrow-minded approach to what documentary films are. They can only be quote unquote objective reportage.”<sup>4</sup> In 1992 a group of well-known nonfiction filmmakers again assailed the Board of Governors of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for passing over what the filmmakers considered to be the finest examples of the genre. The films not nominated were the documentaries that won notoriety and/or some measure of successful distribution: *Paris is Burning*, *35 Up*, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse*, *A Brief History of Time*, *Empire of the Air*, and *Truth or Dare*.<sup>5</sup>

At issue here is not the value of Academy Awards, but the nature of nonfiction film, and what constitutes not only excellence, but *proper uses* of the genre. The definition of nonfiction film, and more narrowly of the documentary, is often hotly contested and is negotiated through the relationships between discourse and practice.

Nonetheless, we still know a nonfiction film when we see one. Or do we? If this means that we can all pick out films that are clear examples of the nonfiction category, then it is true but trivial. On the other hand, if the statement, “We already know what a nonfiction film is,” means that understanding the nature of the category of nonfiction is easy, then it couldn’t be more wrong. I may be able to pick out *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1976) as a nonfiction film, but still have little idea of what makes it nonfiction. In fact, recent discussions of nonfiction show that we differ about what a nonfiction film is.

If we think of nonfiction film as any film not fictional, we need an understanding of the nature of fiction. If we attempt to find positive characteristics of nonfiction film, we must find a means to relate films as diverse as *The Man With the Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kinoapparatom*, 1929), *High School, Glass* (*Glas*, 1958), *Sans Soleil* (1982), *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), and *CBS Sixty Minutes*. It turns out that the issues here are quite complex. We don’t easily come to know what nonfiction film is, but only tentatively, and provisionally, after careful consideration.

**Fiction and Nonfiction: Notes on a Distinction**

A common position among both film scholars and nonfiction filmmakers is that the distinction between the fiction and nonfiction film is illic-

it. John Grierson, the British filmmaker and producer who did so much in the 1930s to define what the documentary would be for future generations, called the documentary the “creative treatment of actuality.” In contrast, those who deny the distinction between fiction and nonfiction think of nonfiction film, by definition, as somehow “unmanipulated,” and seemingly define nonfiction films as the “transparent,” rather than “creative,” treatment of actuality. Jean-Louis Comolli, in an essay on *cinéma vérité*, equates manipulation of filmic materials with a tendency toward fiction:

[An] automatic consequence of all the manipulations which would mold the film-document, is a coefficient of “non-reality”; a kind of fictional aura attaches itself to the filmed events and facts. From the moment they become film and are placed in a cinematic perspective, all film-documents and every recording of a raw event take on a filmic reality which either adds to or subtracts from their particular initial reality . . . , un-realizing or sur-realizing it, but in both cases slightly falsifying it and drawing it to the side of fiction.<sup>6</sup>

Comolli assumes that although manipulation is associated with the fiction film, in nonfiction reality is represented transparently, as a pristine and untouched re-presentation of the real. Comolli implicitly invokes the realism of André Bazin, who argued that the photograph is a phenomenon of nature, and ideology becomes mixed with the cinema only when the photograph is manipulated or put into a context foreign to it. For Comolli, when a filmed event or “fact” is manipulated, it loses its natural purity and takes on an aura of fiction.

Several filmmakers have similarly equated manipulation of nonfiction material with fiction. The direct cinema filmmakers Albert Maysles and Frederick Wiseman, for example, see editing as a “fictionalization” of their materials.<sup>7</sup> Maysles says: “I’m interested in fictional technique as it relates to factual material . . . [I]n a sense, editing is a fiction, really, because you’re putting it together, you’re taking things out of place.”<sup>8</sup> Wiseman has claimed that “reality-fictions” is a more accurate word for his films than “documentaries,” and that what he is doing is similar to the novelist’s reporting on events.<sup>9</sup>

The arguments of Comolli, Wiseman, and Maysles function as an important countermeasure to the claim that nonfiction offers pure, unmediated truth. Yet their common mistake, in my opinion, is to equate the manipulation of materials with fiction, as if only a film that lacked any manipulation of the “pristine” photographic document could qualify as nonfiction. Those who deny the distinction between fiction and