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Chapter 1

Defining the Documentary

Naming

Documentary film begins in the last years of the nineteenth century with the first films ever projected, and it has many faces. It can be a trip to exotic lands and lifestyles, as was *Nanook of the North* (1922). It can be a visual poem, such as Joris Ivens's *Rain* (1929)—a story about a rainy day, set to a piece of classical music, in which the storm echoes the structure of the music. It can be an artful piece of propaganda. Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov, who ardently proclaimed that fiction cinema was poisonous and dying and that documentary was the future, made *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) as propaganda both for a political regime and for a film style.

What is a documentary? One easy and traditional answer is: not a movie. Or at least not a movie like *Star Wars* is a movie. Except when it *is* a theatrical movie, like *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), which broke all box-office records for a documentary. Another easy and common answer could be: a movie that isn't fun, a serious movie, something that tries to teach you something—except when it's something like Stacy Peralta's *Riding Giants* (2004), which gives you a thrill ride on the history of surfing. Many documentaries are cannily designed with the express goal of entertainment. Indeed, most documentary filmmakers consider themselves storytellers, not journalists.

A simple answer might be: a movie about real life. And that is precisely the problem; documentaries are *about* real life; they are not real life. They are not even windows onto real life. They are portraits of real life, using real life as their raw material, constructed by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what story to tell to whom, and for what purpose.

You might then say: a movie that does its best to represent real life and that doesn't manipulate it. And yet, there is no way to make a film without manipulating the information. Selection of topic, editing, mixing sound are all manipulations. Broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow once said, "Anyone who believes that every individual film must represent a 'balanced' picture knows nothing about either balance or pictures."

Documentary Film The problem of deciding how much to manipulate is as old as the form. *Nanook of the North* is considered one of the first great documentaries, but its subjects, the Inuit, assumed roles at filmmaker Robert Flaherty's direction, much like actors in a fiction film. Flaherty asked them to do things they no longer did, such as hunt for walrus with a spear, and he showed them as ignorant about things they understood. In the film, "Nanook"—not his real name—bites a gramophone record in cheerful puzzlement, but in fact the man was quite savvy about modern equipment and even helped Flaherty disassemble and reassemble his camera equipment regularly. At the same time, Flaherty built his story from his own experience of years living with the Inuit, who happily participated in his project and gave him plenty of ideas for the plot.

A documentary film tells a story about real life, with claims to truthfulness. How to do that honestly, in good faith, is a never-ending discussion, with many answers. Documentary is defined and redefined over the course of time, both by makers and by viewers. Viewers certainly shape the meaning of any documentary, by combining our own knowledge of and interest in the world with how the filmmaker shows it to us. Audience expectations are also

built on prior experience; viewers expect not to be tricked and lied to. We expect to be told things about the real world, things that are true.

We do not demand that these things be portrayed objectively, and they do not have to be the complete truth. The filmmaker may employ poetic license from time to time and refer to reality symbolically (an image of the Colosseum representing, say, a European vacation). But we do expect that a documentary will be a fair and honest representation of somebody's experience of reality. This is the contract with the viewer that teacher Michael Rabiger meant in his classic text: "There are no rules in this young art form, only decisions about where to draw the line and how to remain consistent to the contract you will set up with your audience."

Terms

The term "documentary" emerged awkwardly out of early practice. When entrepreneurs in the late nineteenth century first began to record moving pictures of real-life events, some called what they were making "documentaries." The term did not stabilize for decades, however. Other people called their films "educationals," "actualities," "interest films," or perhaps referred to their subject matter—"travel films," for example. John Grierson, a Scot, decided to use this new form in the service of the British government and coined the term "documentary" by applying it to the work of the great American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's *Moana* (1926), which chronicled daily life on a South Seas island. He defined documentary as the "artistic representation of actuality"—a definition that has proven durable probably because it is so very flexible.

Marketing pressures affect what is defined as a documentary. When the philosopher-filmmaker Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) was released in theaters, public relations professionals downplayed the term "documentary" in the interest of ticket sales. The film is a sophisticated detective story—did Randall Adams

commit the crime for which he is sentenced to die in Texas? The film shows the dubious quality of key witnesses' testimony. When the case was reopened and the film entered as evidence, the film's status suddenly became important, and Morris now had to assert that it was, indeed, a documentary.

Conversely, Michael Moore's first feature, *Roger and Me* (1989), a savage indictment of General Motors for precipitating the decline of the steel town of Flint, Michigan, and a masterpiece of black humor, was originally called a documentary. But when journalist Harlan Jacobson showed that Moore had misrepresented the sequence of events, Moore distanced himself from the word "documentary." He argued that this was not a documentary but a movie, an entertainment whose deviations from strict sequencing were incidental to the theme.

Documentary Film

In the 1990s, documentaries began to be big business worldwide, and by 2004 the worldwide business in television documentary alone added up to \$4.5 billion revenues annually. Reality TV and "docusoaps"—real-life miniseries set in potentially high-drama situations such as driving schools, restaurants, hospitals, and airports—also burgeoned. Theatrical revenues multiplied at the beginning of the twenty-first century. DVD sales, video-on-demand, and rentals of documentaries became big business. Soon documentaries were being made for cell phones, and collaborative documentaries were being produced online. Marketers who had discreetly hidden the fact that their films were documentaries were now proudly calling such works "docs."

Why it matters

Naming matters. Names come with expectations; if that were not true, then marketers would not use them as marketing tools. The truthfulness, accuracy, and trustworthiness of documentaries are important to us all because we value them precisely and uniquely for these qualities. When documentarians deceive us, they are not just deceiving viewers but members of the public who might act

upon knowledge gleaned from the film. Documentaries are part of the media that help us understand not only our world but our role in it, that shape us as public actors.

The importance of documentaries is thus linked to a notion of the public as a social phenomenon. The philosopher John Dewey argued persuasively that the public—the body so crucial to the health of a democratic society—is not just individuals added up. A public is a group of people who can act together for the public good and so can hold to account the entrenched power of business and government. It is an informal body that can come together in crisis if need be. There are as many publics as there are occasions and issues to call them forth. We can all be members of any particular public, if we have a way to communicate with each other about the shared problems we face. Communication, therefore, is the soul of the public.

As communications scholar James Carey noted, "Reality is a scarce resource." Reality is not *what* is out there but what we *know*, *understand*, and *share* with each other of what is out there. Media affect the most expensive real estate of all, that which is inside your head. Documentary is an important reality-shaping communication, because of its claims to truth. Documentaries are always grounded in real life, and make a claim to tell us something worth knowing about it.

True, consumer entertainment is an important aspect of the business of filmmaking, even in documentary. Most documentary filmmakers sell their work, either to viewers or to intermediaries such as broadcasters and distributors. They are constrained by their business models. Even though documentary costs much less than fiction film to make, it is still much more expensive to produce than, say, a brochure or a pamphlet. Television and theatrical documentaries usually require investors or institutions such as broadcasters to back them. And as documentaries become ever more popular, more of them are being produced to delight

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audiences without challenging assumptions. They attract and distract with the best-working tools, including sensationalism, sex, and violence. Theatrical wildlife films such as *March of the Penguins* (2005) are classic examples of consumer entertainment that use all of these techniques to charm and alarm viewers, even though the sensationalism, sex, and violence occur among animals.

Paid persuaders also exploit the reality claims of the genre, often as operatives of government and business. This may produce devastating social results, as did Nazi propaganda such as the viciously anti-Semitic *The Eternal Jew* (1937). Such work may also provoke important positive change. When the Roosevelt administration wanted to sell Americans on expensive new government programs, it commissioned some of the most remarkable visual poems made in the era, those by Pare Lorentz and a talented team. Works such as *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938) helped to invest taxpayers in programs that promoted economic stability and growth.

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In its short history, however, documentary has often been made by individuals on the edges of mainstream media, working with a public service media organization such as public broadcasting, with commercial broadcasters eager for awards, with nonprofit entities, or with private foundation or public education funds. On the margins of mainstream media, slightly off-kilter from status-quo understandings of reality, many documentarians have struggled to speak truthfully about—and to—power. They have often seen themselves as public actors, speaking not only to audiences but to other members of a public that needs to know in order to act.

Some recent examples demonstrate the range of such activity. Brave New Films's *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* (2005) is an impassioned, didactic argument indicting the large retail superstore for such practices as inadequate medical plans for employees and the willful destruction of small businesses. It does

not strive for balance in representing Wal-Mart's point of view; it does strive for accuracy in representing the problem. The film was made for action; it was used to organize legislative pushback and social resistance to the company's most exploitative practices. Wal-Mart aggressively countered the film with attack ads, and the filmmakers countercharged Wal-Mart with inaccuracy. Bloggers and even mainstream media picked up the discussion. Brave New Films positioned itself as a voice of the public, filling a perceived gap in the coverage that mainstream media provided on the problem. Viewers of the film, most of whom saw it through DVD-by-mail purchases and as a result of an e-mail campaign, viewed it not as entertainment but as an entertainingly-produced argument about an important public issue.

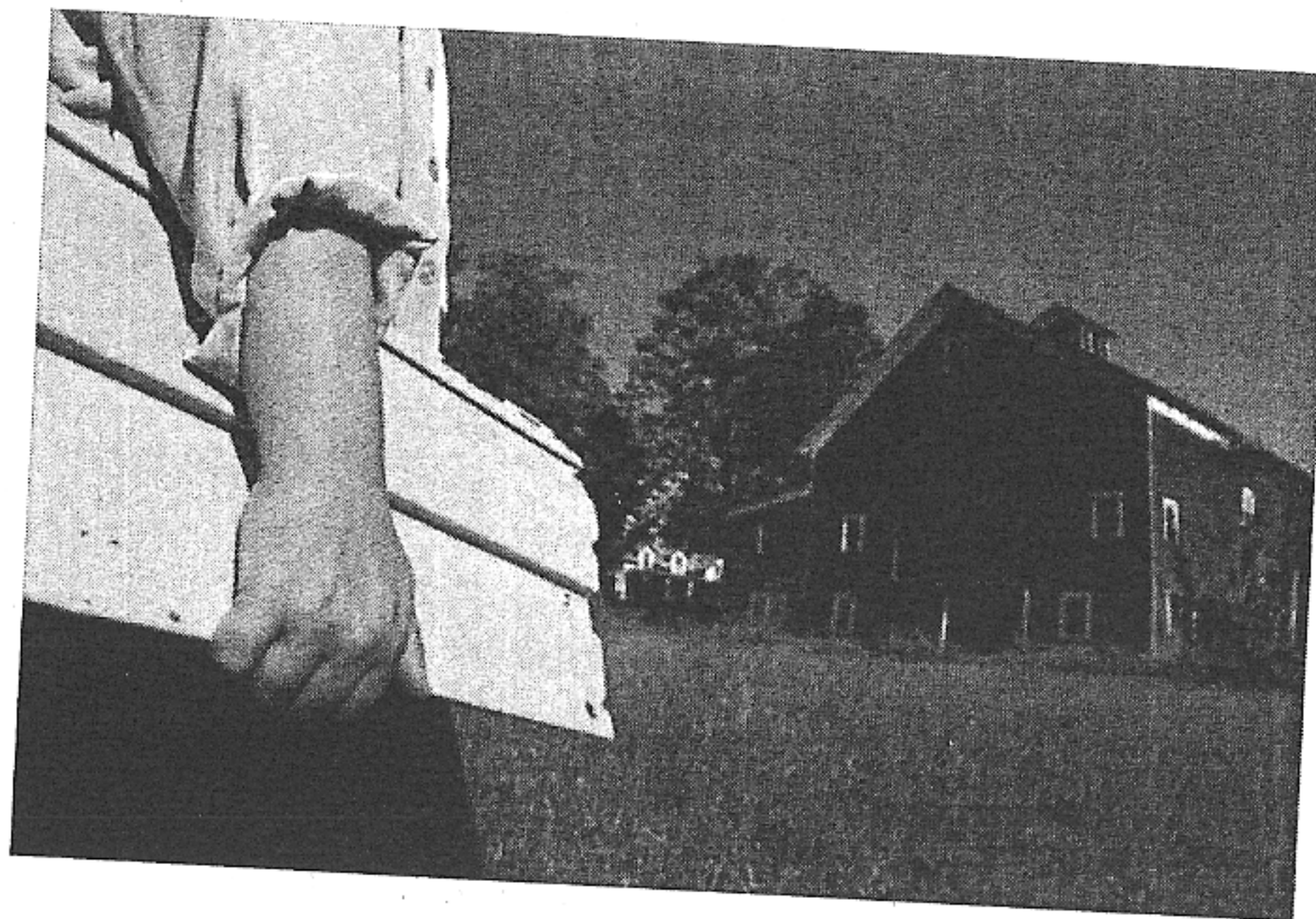
Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a sardonic, anti-Iraq war film, addressed the American public directly, as people whose government was acting in the public's name. Right-wing commentators in commercial media attempted to discredit the film by charging that it was indeed propaganda. But Moore is not a minion of the powerful as propagandists are. He was putting forward, as he had every right to, his own view about a shared reality, frankly acknowledging his perspective. Further, he was encouraging viewers to look critically at their government's words and actions. (Potentially weakening this encouragement, however, was his calculated performance of working-class rage, which can lead viewers to see themselves not as social actors but merely as disempowered victims of the powerful.)

Other recent documentaries for public knowledge and action use techniques designed to attract interest across lines of belief. Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight* (2005) showcases an argument about the collusion between politicians, big business, and the military to spend the public's money and lives for wars that do not need to be fought. Jarecki deliberately chose Republican subjects, who could transcend partisan politics and speak to the public interest. In Davis Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), Al Gore and Davis

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Guggenheim, in an easy-to-understand presentation, let scientific data speak to the urgency of the issue. The director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, Jim Hansen, noted the public value of the work: "Al Gore may have done for global warming what *Silent Spring* did for pesticides. He will be attacked, but the public will have the information needed to distinguish our long-term well-being from short-term special interests."

Styles can be dramatically different, in order to accomplish the end of public engagement. Judith Helfand and Dan Gold's *Blue Vinyl* (2002) employs the personal diary format to personalize a problem. The film follows Helfand as she takes a piece of her parents' home's vinyl siding and discovers the cancer-causing toxicity of vinyl at the beginning and end of its life cycle (it creates dioxin). Helfand becomes a representative of the public—people who need inexpensive siding and also suffer the health consequences of using it. Brazilian José Padilha's *Bus 174* (2002),



1. *Blue Vinyl* used personal essay to explore social issues; Judith Helfand—a piece of her suburban home's vinyl siding in hand—explores toxic effects of vinyl production. Directed by Daniel B. Gold and Judith Helfand, 2002.

in retelling a sensational news event in Rio de Janeiro—the hijacking of a bus, a several-hour standoff, and ultimate death of both hijacker and a bus rider, telecast live—brings viewers both into the life of the hijacker and the challenges of the police. By contrasting television footage that had glued viewers to their sets for an entire day along with investigations into the stories leading up to the event, the film reframes the "news" as an example of how endemic and terrible social problems are turned into spectacle. *Three Rooms of Melancholia* (2005), an epic meditation by Finnish filmmaker Pirjo Honkasalo, draws viewers into the Russian war against Chechnya by creating an emotional triptych. In "Longing," her camera caresses the earnest faces of twelve-year-old cadets in St. Petersburg, training to fight Chechens; in the second part, "Breathing," a local social worker visits the sad apartments of Grozny under siege, where daily-life problems become insuperable; the third, "Remembering," takes place in an orphanage just over the border, where Chechnyan young people learn bitterness. Little is said; in contemplative close-up, the faces of puzzlement, pain, and endurance speak volumes. The viewer has become complicit with the camera in knowing.

Whether a filmmaker intends to address the public or not, documentaries may be used in unexpected ways. One of the most infamous propaganda films of all time, *Triumph of the Will* (1935), has had a long life in other, anti-Nazi propaganda and in historical films. Israeli Yo'av Shamir's *Checkpoint* (2003), a scrupulously observed, non-narrated record of the behavior of Israeli troops at Palestinian checkpoints, was intended and was used as a provocation to public discussion of human rights violations. The Israeli Army embraced it as a training film.

Our shared understanding of what a documentary is—built up from our own viewing experience—shifts over time, with business and marketing pressures, technological and formal innovations, and with vigorous debate. The genre of documentary always has two crucial elements that are in tension: representation, and

reality. Their makers manipulate and distort reality like all filmmakers, but they still make a claim for making a truthful representation of reality. Throughout the history of documentary film, makers, critics, and viewers have argued about what constitutes trustworthy storytelling about reality. This book introduces you to those arguments over time and in some of its popular subgenres.

Form

What does a documentary look like? Most people carry inside their heads a rough notion of what a documentary is. For many of them, it is not a pretty picture. “A “regular documentary” often means a film that features sonorous, “voice-of-God” narration, an analytical argument rather than a story with characters, head shots of experts leavened with a few people-on-the-street interviews, stock images that illustrate the narrator’s point (often called “b-roll” in broadcasting), perhaps a little educational animation, and dignified music. This combination of formal elements is not usually remembered fondly. “It was really interesting, not like a regular documentary,” is a common response to a pleasant theatrical experience.

In fact, documentarians have a large range of formal choices in registering for viewers the veracity and importance of what they show them. The formal elements many associate with “regular documentary” are part of a package of choices that became standard practice in the later twentieth century on broadcast television, but there are quite a few more to be had. This chapter provides you with several ways to consider the documentary as a set of decisions about how to represent reality with the tools available to the filmmaker. These tools include *sound* (ambient sound, soundtrack music, special sound effects, dialogue, narration); *images* (material shot on location, historical images captured in photographs, video, or objects); *special effects* in audio and video, including animation; and *pacing* (length of scenes,

number of cuts, script or storytelling structure). Filmmakers choose the way they want to structure a story—which characters to develop for viewers, whose stories to focus on, how to resolve the storytelling.

Filmmakers have many choices to make about each of the elements. For instance, a single shot may be framed differently and carry a different meaning depending on the frame: a close-up of a father grieving may say something quite different from a wide shot of the same scene showing the entire room; a decision to let the ambient sound of the funeral dominate the soundtrack will mean something different than a swelling soundtrack.

Since there is nothing natural about the representation of reality in documentary, documentary filmmakers are acutely aware that all their choices shape the meaning they choose. All documentary conventions—that is, habits or clichés in the formal choices of expression—arise from the need to convince viewers of the authenticity of what they are being told. For instance, experts vouch for the truthfulness of analysis; dignified male narrators signify authority for many viewers; classical music connotes seriousness.

Challenges to conventions stake an alternative claim to authenticity. At a time when ambient sound could be collected only with difficulty, conventions of 35mm sound production included authoritatively delivered narration. They also included lighting and even staging, appropriate to the heavy, difficult-to-move equipment. Some documentaries used careful editing between the crafted compositions of each scene, to create the illusion of reality before the viewer’s eyes. When filmmakers began experimenting with lighter 16mm equipment after World War II, the conventions that arose differently persuaded viewers of the documentary’s truthfulness. Using very long “takes” or scenes made viewers feel that they were watching unvarnished reality; the jerkiness of handheld cameras was testimony to the you-are-there immediacy,

and it implied urgency; “ambush” interviews, catching subjects on the fly or by surprise, led viewers to believe that the subject must be hiding something. The choice against narration, which became fashionable in the later 1960s, allowed viewers to believe that they were being allowed to decide for themselves the meaning of what they saw (even though editing choices actually controlled what they saw).

Documentarians employ the same techniques as do fiction filmmakers. Cinematographers, sound technicians, digital designers, musicians, and editors may work in both modes. Documentary work may require lights, and directors may ask their subjects for retakes; documentaries usually require sophisticated editing; documentarians add sound effects and sound tracks.

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A shared convention of most documentaries is the narrative structure. They are stories, they have beginnings, middles, and ends; they invest viewers in their characters, they take viewers on emotional journeys. They often refer to classic story structure. When Jon Else made a documentary about J. Robert Oppenheimer, the creator of the first atomic bomb—a scientist who anguished over his responsibilities—Else had his staff read *Hamlet*.

Conventions work well to command attention, facilitate storytelling, and share a maker’s perspective with audiences. They become the aesthetic norm—off-the-shelf choices for documentarians, shortcuts to register truthfulness. Conventions also, however, disguise the assumptions that makers bring to the project, and make the presentation of the particular facts and scenes seem both inevitable and complete.

Showcasing convention

How, then, to see formal choices as choices, to see conventions as conventions? You may turn to films whose makers put formal choice front and center as subject matter, and contrast their choices with more routine work.

One of the easiest ways to see conventions is through satire and parody. For example, the great Spanish surrealist artist Luis Buñuel’s *Land without Bread* (*Las Hurdes: Tierra sin Pan*, 1932) begins as a seemingly tedious, pompous excursion into an impoverished corner of Spain. Soon, however, it becomes clear that Buñuel, aided by the commentary written by the surrealist artist Pierre Unik, is using dry, pseudo-scientific conventions to incite bewilderment and outrage, both at the narrator and then at the horrific social conditions of the countryside. The British Broadcasting Company (BBC)’s 1957 *The Spaghetti Story*, a segment in its *Panorama* series, takes viewers to Switzerland to discuss the latest spaghetti harvest (growing on trees) as a joke that also functions as a media literacy lesson. The wry *In Search of the Edge* (1990), purportedly about why the earth is flat, employs a wide range of educational-documentary devices that people associate with “regular documentary”—all with deliberate clumsiness—to demonstrate false logic in scientific arguments and manipulation in filmmaking. Here, experts are given such titles as “university professor” and are shown in front of bookcases signifying scholarship, although they speak nonsense; flashy graphics demonstrate physical impossibilities; the narrator’s tone is contemptuous of the notion that the earth is round; a family photo is shown in gradual close-up, Ken Burns-style, only to show the mentioned character with her head turned. The Australian film *Babakiueria* (1988), made by an aboriginal group, satirizes ethnographic film conventions, including the ascribing of mysterious or magical properties to exotic others in narration, the expert witness, the pretentious narrator, and the portrayal of scientific investigation as heroic exploration. In the film, aboriginal scientists investigate what they believe to be a white Australian cultural ritual site, which actually is a barbecue area.

Mockumentaries, or tongue-in-cheek fake documentaries, also offer the chance to see conventions at an angle. Rob Reiner’s *This Is Spinal Tap!* (1984), about an imaginary heavy metal band, famously parodied rockumentaries—performance films of rock

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bands—with their contrast of high-energy stage performance with goofy backstage antics and their populist success narratives. Like later mockumentaries such as *Best in Show* (2000) and *A Mighty Wind* (2003), the humor depended on the audience being able to identify the conventions.

Artistic experiment

Another way to see conventions is to analyze films by makers who see themselves primarily as artists—makers manipulating form rather than storytellers using the film medium—as they invent, reinvent, and challenge. Where the market pressures of attracting audiences have led many filmmakers to employ familiar conventions, artists working outside the film and video marketplaces have sought to go beyond them. They are frontline innovators and experimenters.

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One highly celebrated example of such artistic countercurrents is the city symphony film. In the 1920s and 1930s, when theaters were showing nature adventures, war newsreels, and exotica, artists producing for galleries in interwar Europe imagined cinema (then a silent medium) as, among other things, a visual poem, one that could unite the experience of different senses. It was a time of exuberant experimentation and international communication. City symphonies participated in the modernist love of the urban, of machinery, and of progress. They absorbed elements from artistic movements such as surrealism and futurism, and they let people see what they usually could not or would not. Among the machines artists loved was the camera itself, which represented a superior “mechanical eye,” as Russian documentarian and theorist Dziga Vertov called it. An early example of the city symphony was Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s *Manhatta* (1921), and the form proliferated on the European continent in the later 1920s.

The city symphony was given its name by the German filmmaker Walther Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927). Ruttmann also commissioned a score for the film. The very term

“city symphony” unites the brash industrial enterprise of the modern city with the classical musical form that demonstrates the capacity to organize and coordinate many individual expressions into a whole. The film takes the viewer into Berlin on a train and then on a day-long tour of the many urban patterns emerging from the interaction of people and machines, culminating with fireworks. In the film, Ruttmann experimented with Vertov’s ideas about the power of documentary to be an “eye” on society in a way that transcended the power of human observation.

Many artists seized upon the city symphony notion as a way of experimenting with the medium. The Brazilian artist Alberto Cavalcanti was inspired by the project Ruttmann was developing and made *Rien que les Heures* (1926), a film about Paris, even before Ruttmann completed his. It features clever special effects in a whirlwind tour of Paris that includes both the highest and lowest classes of society. In the south of France, Vertov’s exiled younger brother, Boris Kaufman, and the French artist Jean Vigo, produced a slyly satirical little film, *À Propos de Nice* (1930), showing the beach town as a self-indulgent culture of gambling and sun- and self-worshiping. (Vertov wrote filmmaking instructions to his brother.) In Belgium, Henri Storck made a closely observed film about his own beach town, in *Images d’Ostende* (1930), and the Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens, who went on to work with Storck, made what became a classic of these films, *Rain*. Vertov, in touch with these developments, created his masterpiece, *Man with a Movie Camera*.

The city symphony form remains an unusual, poetic choice, an exception to the rule of documentary conventions. Godfrey Reggio’s 1982 *Koyaanisqatsi* uses lightshow-like techniques along with time-lapse photography (one of the techniques pioneered by city symphony films) to make a histrionic commentary on mankind’s devastating effect on the earth. The title refers to a Hopi word meaning “life out of balance.” American film scholar Thom Andersen used nearly a century of cinema to look at how Los

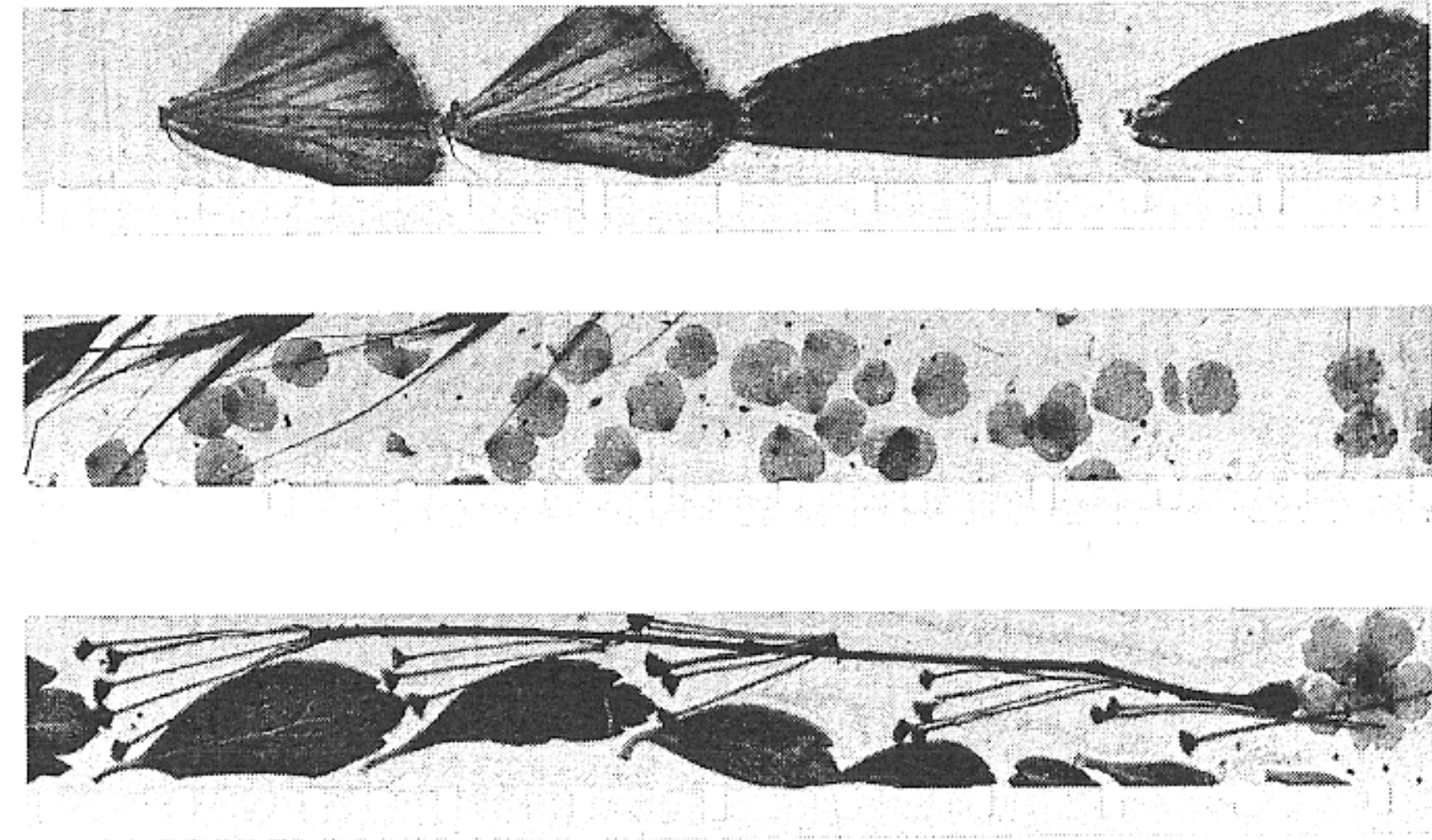
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Angeles has been represented in the movies in *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003). It sometimes wryly, sometimes bleakly shows the city in the commercial and public imagination.

Other self-described artists have searched for ways to use documentary film as a road to purity of vision and a celebration of the ecstasy of sensation itself. Because their films deliberately eschew conventions such as story line, narrator, and sometimes even discernable objects in the world, they provide another way of understanding what we have come to expect. Kenneth Anger, Jonas Mekas, Carolee Schneeman, Jordan Belson, and Michael Snow all made films that creatively interpreted real life, although they identified themselves as avant-garde artists and not documentarians. One of the best known American avant-garde artists who did think of himself as a documentarian—and a scientist—was Stan Brakhage.

Brakhage wanted viewers to return to an “innocent eye,” a purity of experience of vision. He wanted to help people *see*, not only what the eye takes in from the outside but also what the eye creates as a result of memory or bodily energy from the inside. “I really think my films are documentaries. All of them,” he said. “They are my attempts to get as accurate a representation of seeing as I possibly can.” Most of Brakhage’s work was silent and executed in the passionate belief that seeing was a full-body action. Surprisingly, his artistic intuitions and perceptions of how the eye works are supported by scientific research on optics.

Brakhage made hundreds of films; two of the most seen are *Mothlight* (1963) and *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1981). In both short films, Brakhage encased found natural objects, put them between two pieces of celluloid and then printed the images created. *Mothlight* contained moth wings; *Garden* contained twigs, flowers, seeds, and weeds. The images produced then created an experience for viewers, which referred to the original but was entirely different.



2. In *Mothlight*, experimental documentarian Stan Brakhage pressed moth wings and scraps of twigs and flowers between celluloid strips. Directed by Stan Brakhage, 1963.

Art films have also experimented with sound. The German experimental filmmaker Hans Richter translated sound rhythms into visual experience in the 1920s and 1930s. The Indian filmmaker Mani Kaul, who grew up artistically in India’s subsidized “parallel cinema” (i.e., parallel to commercial cinema) in the 1970s, has worked repeatedly with Indian song traditions, including *Dhruvad* (1982), which mesmerizes with the sound and image of one classical music performance style designed to facilitate spiritual meditation. Such work highlights the way in which we often take sound for granted as a convenient emotional conductor.

In all these works, the conventions of “regular documentary” are largely absent. No narrator tells us what is going on; no experts provide authority; ordinary reality is deliberately distorted so that we will see it differently; soundtracks are used for other purposes than cueing story-linked emotions. Patterns of light and dark, the hypnotic sound of repetitive music, the sight of objects from the natural world projected at many times their size, and other devices

shock us out of our visual habits. These experiments have greatly expanded the repertoire of formal approaches for documentary filmmakers. At the same time, these experiments provide a sharp contrast to the most common conventions, those usually used in broadcast television.

Economic context

Conventions are also conditioned by business realities. On television, where viewers make a decision within one or two seconds about whether to watch, producers now strive to make every moment compelling and to signal brand identity not only through identifying logos but through style. They also search for ways to streamline production and reduce costs through style and form. A History Channel executive in the later 1990s memorably explained that channel's then-formula—clips either of stock footage or of small staged scenes or objects interpolated with talking heads and stitched together with narration—to a group of striving producers: "We do it because it's cheap and it works."

Filmmakers have looked to three kinds of funders to pay for their documentaries: *patrons* or *sponsors*, both corporate and governmental; *advertisers*, typically on television and usually at one remove; and *users* or *audiences*. Each source of funding has powerfully affected the choices of filmmakers.

Government sponsors have been critically important to documentary filmmaking. In the British Commonwealth, institutions that promote the making and distribution of documentary film include the BBC, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and the Canadian National Film Board. Throughout continental Europe, governments provide subsidies to artists who work on documentaries. German, French, and Dutch documentary work has flourished with this kind of investment. In the developing world, ex-colonial powers sometimes provide stipends for cultural production; national governments may offer resources and often control access to screens. Cultural nationalism

is a powerful motive for national governments to provide these subsidies. Programming themes and styles often reflect a concern to express national identity, especially against the unceasing international flow of U.S. popular media.

By contrast, U.S. taxpayer support for documentary has historically been anemic, in a nation where cultural policy has always strongly supported commercial media. U.S. public broadcasting was given a rebirth in the liberal heyday of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, with committed public funds for the noncommercial, nongovernmental entity to help build capacity of the then-feeble public broadcast stations in most major cities. During the 1970s and 1980s, other cultural organizations, especially the taxpayer-funded National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, also contributed to American documentary. Unconventional styles, themes, and politically sensitive topics often raised conservative ire in Congress.

Another way in which governments have been important to documentary filmmaking is through regulation that encourages certain kinds of production over others. For example, when the British government authorized the existence of private commercial television channels, it also required hefty public interest responsibilities, which translated into ambitious documentary projects funded in hopes of prestige, recognition, and license renewal. British Channel 4 was launched with funds siphoned from advertising revenues of a commercial channel and was given a mandate to feature the work of independent producers, including many documentarians. Chad Raphael has argued that American broadcast network fear of government regulation (networks had been caught rigging quiz shows) led to a period of lavish funding for investigative public affairs documentaries. (Indeed, the decline of government regulation of television in the 1980s resulted in a decline in public affairs documentaries.)