

6

Jargons of Authenticity
(Three American Moments)

Paul Arthur

By now it is, or should be, standard wisdom that documentaries and Hollywood narratives do not issue from separate and pristine worlds but have over the course of their histories maintained a tangled reciprocity—by turns technological, thematic, political—in which each has, in part, defined its purview through cultural myths of what the other is not.¹ Predictably, the results of this interpenetration have historically been neither constant nor symmetrical. Whether approached as cohesive movements, as nexuses of formal practice, ideological weapons, or vehicles of the status quo, American documentaries have never marshalled a serious challenge to the hegemony of fiction film in the representation of social reality. And this is so despite the demonstrable status of nonfiction genres in popular literature and television.

However, two prominent moments of documentary production—New Deal sponsorship in the late thirties and the surge of cinema vérité-activated theatrical features in the late sixties—exhibit features crucial to any popular contestation of the regime of studio fiction.² The unexpected notoriety around a cluster of nonfiction films released in the last few years provides an occasion to reexamine consistent dynamics in documentary's desultory vision of mainstream intervention and the claims of heightened epistemic authority which undergird that vision.³ If the territory consigned to documentary historiography has often resembled a frozen tundra, the search for *noncontingent* templates is a project akin to Nanook's igloo: a half-built shelter maintaining the illusion of closure yet exposed to all the elements.

A number of factors tend to converge during documentary's interludes of high visibility. Technological breakthroughs such as sound recording or the lightweight sync-sound rig open production processes to new repre-

sentational options. Reception garnered by individual films—*The River* (1937), *Monterey Pop* (1967), *Roger and Me* (1989)—stimulate public interest and with it a climate for viable distribution. There is as well the cyclical revival of debate over the moral probity of dominant film practices, their escapism or sensationalism or “irrelevance” to glaring social problems. At the height of the Depression, in the cauldron of late sixties' rebellion, and in the throes of Reagan's disastrous economic policies, journalistic assaults on Hollywood's irresponsibility have directed normally myopic media attention to nonfiction's promise of greater verisimilitude.⁴ This translates into the traditional notion that documentary flourishes in the midst of crisis. The crisis scenario, however, must be ballasted by recognition that moments of prominence are also co-extensive with major consolidations in the motion picture industries. Social documentaries of the 1930s developed within and against the growing strength of Hollywood's major studio monopolies. Direct cinema and its theatrical offshoots emerged with the sovereignty of prime-time television, while the recent wave of documentary releases follows the precipitous rise of home video and cable TV and is contemporaneous with an onslaught of “reality-based” programming.⁵ In each case, transient cultural leverage has been fueled by, and in turn amplifies, other nonfiction discourses found in literary, art, theatrical, advertising, and other arenas.

This chapter is concerned with several interlocking elements of mainstream documentary as situated at particular historical junctures: the formal embedding of truth claims, guarantees of authenticity, and hierarchies of knowledge; the imaging or textual projection of technology in relation to issues of social power and authority; and the intramural valorization, via allegories of production, of documentary as an alternative and politically progressive cinematic program. My assumption is that regardless of the events or personalities presented, or the ideological forces with which films are aligned—almost exclusively, the undulations of American liberalism—commercial documentaries enact polemical dialogues both with previous nonfiction styles and with reigning codes of dominant cinema. Further, succeeding styles tend to repudiate the methods of earlier periods from the same perspective of realist epistemology attending the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel's “attempt to use language to get beyond language,” the absolute desire to discover a truth untainted by institutional forms of rhetoric.⁶ Or as Brian Winston suggests of the cinematic conventions inevitably arising from this effort: “The need for structure implicitly contradicts the notion of unstructured reality” and documentary movements are sustained by “ignoring” this contradiction.⁷ Each new contender will generate recognizable, perhaps even self-conscious, figures through which to signify the spontaneous, the anticonventional, the refusal of mediating process

Analyzing structures and visual patterns in New Deal and direct cinema documentaries requires that certain established critical axioms be jettisoned; principally, that films of the thirties offer a totally unproblematic declaration of authority—textual as well as social—and that direct cinema, since it expunges any hint of “metaphor and pattern,”⁸ is uniquely and universally descriptive (rather than prescriptive). Against this backdrop, recent works can be construed as acknowledging false claims implicit in earlier styles while fashioning determinate conventions under a contemporary rubric of decentered subjectivity and the inadequacy of cinema’s cognitive tools.

Pluralism, Technocracy, and Naturalization

Who shall be master, things or men?

The City

Technics can by itself promote authoritarianism as well as liberty, scarcity as well as abundance, the extension as well as the abolition of toil.

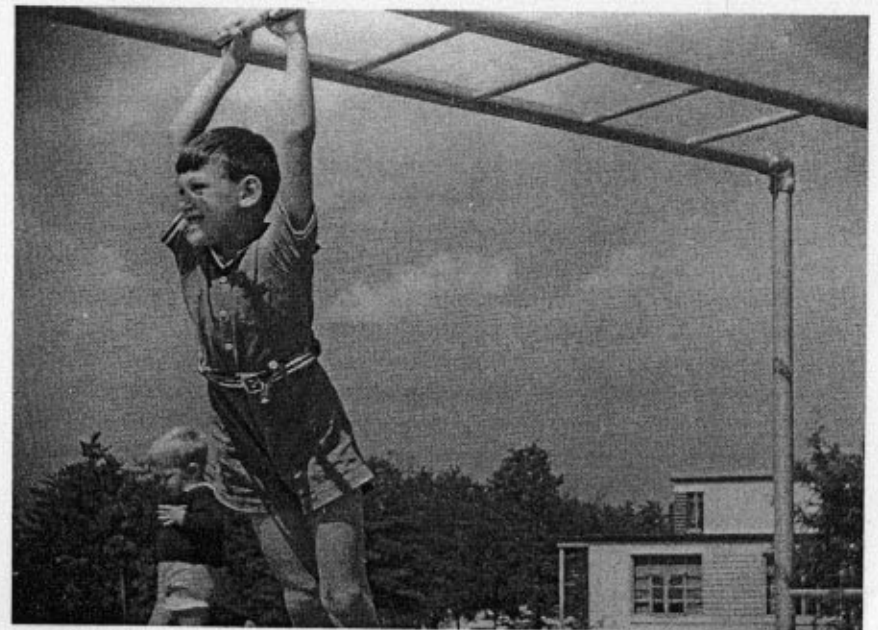
Herbert Marcuse⁹

Freighted with unprecedented cultural significance, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), *The River*, *The City* (1939), and a few other sponsored documentaries were honed by the imperatives of two historical conditions: widespread mobilization of nonfiction practices as instruments in the expression and propagation of liberal democratic social philosophy; and the increased validity of nonfiction production under terms of economic scarcity. Like its European counterparts, American social documentaries conspired in a public belief that it was advantageous to address pressing needs through a discourse purporting to offer the highest quotient of immediacy, responsiveness, clarity, and verisimilitude. Such epithets were commonly ascribed by politicians and journalists to a variety of remedial government activities from FDR’s “Fireside Chats” to the WPA State Guides. Similar virtues were located in the popular reception of radio, weekly news magazines, political theater as “living newspaper,” and the first versions of public opinion polls.

The embodiment of approved *political* values as properties of filmic structure and iconography directs an understanding of how this truncated film movement served as an armature of New Deal policy and ideological contestation while advancing a heuristic model of progressive cinema. An initial strategy can be referred to as stylistic fragmentation and multiplicity, a concatenation of discrete segments containing disparate visual and aural cues yet bracketed by a unifying theme and narrational logic. *The City* is

the most conspicuous example although *The River* marks a similar preference for mixed materials; for instance, the sandwiching of original footage with maps, archival shots, intertitles, and other graphics presented over a soundtrack combining original music and voice-overs with diegetic voices or sound effects. The division in *The City* into semiautonomous sections has prompted critiques that cite a “crucial weakness [in] placement and tone.”¹⁰ In this view, the film loses focus and sacrifices potency due to insufficient structural balance, stylistic unity, or transparency. Its claims to truth, therefore, are vitiated.

The problem with this reproach is it discounts the role of aesthetic alterity in establishing preeminence over competing modes of realism. A brief gloss of *The City*’s ordering principles confirms the impression of disparity as it invites other possible readings. Sections vary in length from 2 minutes to over 15 minutes. Visually, the opening “Colonial” sequence is characterized by static long shots, even lighting, lyrical tracking, and panning movements and circular object motifs. By contrast, the “megalopolis” section features jarring rhythmic montage, extreme camera angles, dislocations of scale, and the absence of eyeline matches. The concluding “Green Belt” section employs narrativized editing of action, a profusion of centered medium shots, and wipes and other soft transitions. In addition, the music track, while developing a consistent set of melodic phrases and



The City (1939).



The City (1939).

motifs, dominates during the “megalopolis” section but retreats to the background in favor of spoken narration for the “Green Belt” segment. The voice-over itself frequently shifts in tone, tense, and mode of address, juxtaposing a hortatory second-person with first- and third-person plural comments.

The polemical thrust of successive tropes is readily apparent. Depersonalization in the metropolis is figured as a disorienting clash of graphic elements, whereas the humanizing appeal of the planned community is reified in familiar Hollywood conventions of spatio-temporal harmony and continuity. The alleviation of urban disorder by social engineering is argued verbally and demonstrated visually. Spoken narration is not the sole or leading repository of the film’s “message,” as many contend. Visual metaphor and pastiche may prompt abstract ideas not readily conveyed by verbal speech while serving other channels of argumentation. As the reflexive index of a politically ratified method of production, stylistic heterogeneity inscribes a discontinuous, multiple process of creativity onto the film’s surface. Shot in different locations by different cameramen, written and edited in successive stages by a loose-knit group—a necessary expedient for documentaries of the period—*The City* invokes, through its

structure, a signifier of plural authorship, a trope of individual freedom embedded within a unifying consensus of social directives.

Admittedly, the film’s overarching analysis *cum* solution is unfrayed by this symbolic plurality. Yet the lodging of presentational authority in a foregrounded play of difference metaphorically links the process of production—and by extension that of viewing—to the social remedies proposed. That is, the rationalized urban planning advocated by the film reconstitutes *gemeinschaft* concepts of individual autonomy in contradistinction to then-rampant conservative attacks on the state’s purported authoritarian suppression of individual (municipal, state, regional) liberties.

Additionally, the text’s refusal to subsume formal gaps and disparities proffers in its historical context a higher guarantee of verisimilitude. As Alfred Kazin remarked of Christopher Isherwood’s contemporaneous *Berlin Stories*:

If the accumulation of visual scenes seemed only a collection of “mutually repellent particles,” as Emerson said of his sentences, was not *that* discontinuity, that havoc of pictorial sensations, just the truth of what the documentary mind saw before it in the thirties?¹¹

From this perspective, formal elements appear immiscible because they are ordered by external and unmanipulated properties of daily life. Like instances of literary production such as Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy or the theatrical wave of “living newspapers,” *The City* (and to a lesser degree *The River, And So They Live* [1940]) displays heterogeneity and imbalance as realist tropes, as more concerted obeisance to the textures of lived reality, and, in *The City*, as a demonstration of the unequal parameters of urban growth and decay.

Undoubtedly, cinematic provenance for this mixed presentation derives from the newsreel.¹² Despite the newsreel’s alliance with conservative Republican politics, its professed spontaneity helped legitimize an essay-like discursivity, lending *The City* a cloak of provisionality and open-endedness belied by the vehemence of its verbal brief. Yet, if social documentaries tapped the well of authenticity inherent in the newsreel tradition, they also maintained a requisite distance from it through the absorption of avant-garde impulses pioneered by Cavalcanti, Ruttmann, Leger, and especially by Soviet cinema. As Grierson himself was quick to note, emphasis on the “creative treatment” of reality works to blunt the charge of propaganda.¹³ Truth and Beauty exist in inverse proportion to one another. The former can be signified through a negation of “classical” codes, while the latter acts to counter assertions of political manipulation.

This tightrope of rhetorical artifice and directness toiled to ensure filmic fidelity as well as relative autonomy.

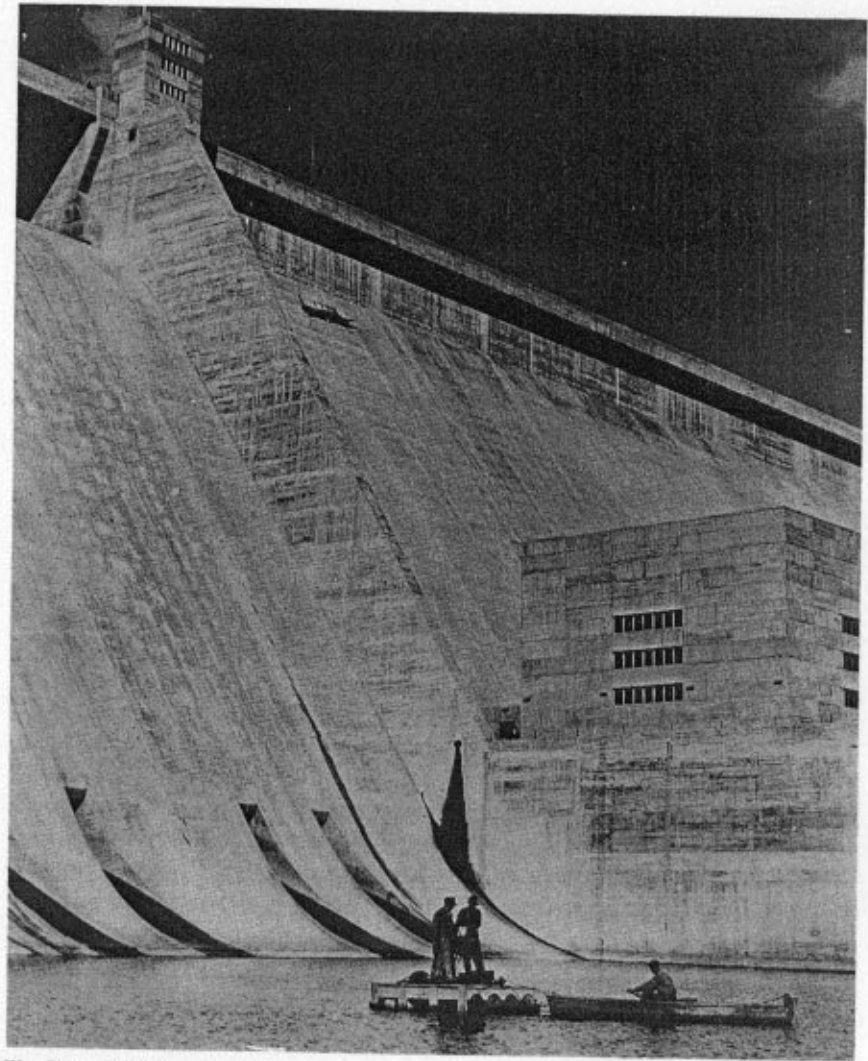
The precedent of Soviet cinema offered other weapons for an aesthetic arsenal. A matter of frequent debate in thirties documentary circles, Soviet films were admired for their experimental rigor and challenged on grounds of political servitude. Along with montage editing and themes such as the mass hero, American documentaries imported for their own purposes the self-conscious thematization of industrial technology exemplified in the work of Dziga Vertov. Given the tenor of New Deal politics, it is no surprise that films uncritically valorized the role of technology in progressive social change: for instance, *The River* espouses benefits of hydroelectric dams, while *Power and the Land* (1940) lobbies for agricultural modernization. Yet, the bureaucratic machinery required to rationally implant and control mechanical devices posed a more serious representational dilemma. Liberal documentaries were faced with the unenviable task of reconciling the idea of centralized government power to viewers fed on obdurate tenets of individualism, free enterprise, and states rights. Patterns of machine imagery took on a pivotal role in this partisan polemic.

With direct support from government agencies or indirect support from liberal foundations, documentaries were virtually obliged to show the historical advance of capitalist technology and the social relations it enforced as a natural process: organic, not simply dependent on but co-extensive with the utilization of natural resources. There is a central myth rehearsed iconographically and augmented by spoken narration that goes something like this. In an Edenic, preindustrialized past there existed a balance between man and nature, between individual and communal sustenance. Without intended malice (to say nothing of class interest), uncontrolled economic growth upset the balance. Although growth is inherently beneficial, a lack of rationalized limits produces aberrations such as floods, ecological pillage, and uninhabitable cities. The founding harmony can be restored by judicious application of technology in federal programs: Good (i.e., natural) tools placed in the hands of benevolent craftsmen.

Marcuse observes—in an essay written just 2 years after *The City* and indebted to that film's philosophical mentor, Louis Mumford:

Technology, as a mode of production, as the totality of instruments, devices and contrivances which characterize the machine age is thus at the same time a mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behavior patterns, an instrument for control and domination.¹⁴

Although Marcuse's critique is directed at the technocratic rationalization of fascist regimes, it is equally pertinent to New Deal advocacy of social



The River (1937).

engineering. He defends the concept of a democratically constituted "public bureaucracy," but perceives the danger in policies underwritten by the "natural law" of, say, Frederick Taylor's "scientific" theories of industrial management. Technology can never be merely a neutral (natural) framework of social organization. Simply stated, Marcuse's position is that machines produce or enforce their own debased axioms of human need in social formations that grant them a paramount role in the alleviation of oppression.

Unable or unwilling, due to constraints of sponsorship or mass appeal, to directly confront the contradictions of a capitalist political economy, documentaries visualize *power* as an abstraction. They routinely conflate idealist properties of advanced technology, human and natural resources, and centralized planning. The linchpin in this metaphoric equation is the fusing of technology—as reified image of federal policy—with elements such as water, forestation, crop growth, and other forms of natural productivity. Bureaucratic solutions are thus figured as technological interventions equipped with the stamp of natural process. It takes a river to harness a river. Further, it was ideologically useful to represent liberal remedies as a return to rather than a divergence from a prelapsarian unity of nature, society, and individual. Real and imagined threats to New Deal philosophy by entrenched conservative interests were rhetorically vanquished or deflected through association of the New Deal with a version of history placing it as the culmination of an authentic, innate process.

Urban overcrowding, like the flooding of the Mississippi or the deracination of the environment, are excesses of ineluctable socioeconomic development. Central government acts to refocus not the social ends but the “techniques.” If the river of American historical development overflows its banks and creates human misery, then the well-oiled machine of New Deal policy can step in to resolve privation, restore the course. The narrator at the end of *The City* tells us “a different day begins.” This new day, the implementation of federal controls, the promise of a New City, is given symbolic expression in images of children at play. The “rebirth” of *gemeinschaft* society is exemplified by kids sliding down a playground chute, an image then compared with the rush of water over a sluice—creating a small visual epiphany melding machine, childhood, and nature. Cities and forces that govern their growth are confected as organic shapes: A small housing tract and an urban street scene are match cut to the vertical profile of forests; the New York skyline is rhymed in a single composition with a field of weeds.¹⁵

In *The River*, the Roosevelt administration is described implicitly as a formal mirror of the Mississippi, its branches and tributaries stretching across the nation’s continental limits, offering cohesion to the disorderly flow of regional and local conflicts. Similarly, in *Power and the Land*, the collective purchase of electrical power through the Rural Electrification Project is analogized to the communal harvesting of crops. Displacing conflict, competition, capitalism’s distorted human license onto images of cooperation, sponsored documentaries enlist montage not as the dialectical forum imagined by Soviet filmmakers but as a device for reconciling otherwise troubling discrepancies of wealth and privilege.¹⁶

A final plank in the documentary agenda ties images of technology to the apparatus of film production via the argument over control of resources.

The narrator of *The City* challenges: “You decide. Both are real, both are possible.” We the citizen-viewers can retain the excesses of the present system of fulfilling human needs or choose what is arguably the next historical stage. There the question “Who shall be master, things or men?” generates the answer: “At last man will take over.” What is meant by “man” is open to several readings. Given the polemical stance taken against Hollywood by documentarists of the period,¹⁷ the studio system with its assembly-line manufacture and its profit motive are, by implication, aligned with the uncontrolled forces of private industry and urban growth. Given models such as *The Man With the Movie Camera* (1929) and Leger’s *Ballet Mecanique* (1924), the identification between machinery and the mechanics of film production is an inclusive means of celebrating the liberatory potential of advanced technology.

If the charge against American capitalism in thirties’ documentaries, meager as it is, concerns a lack of regulation, the failure to employ resources to spread enough benefit to enough people, the same complaint was lodged against Hollywood. The era of a variegated market stocked by small corporate competitors was over; the major studios exerted sovereign control through vertical integration, the star system, and streamlined narrative formulas. If documentaries argued the best method for regulating industrial/natural resources—the efflorescence of private capital or federal controls—the same choice might apply to cinema as industry and social institution. Intent on challenging the domination of fiction film and infused with a heady faith in the cinema apparatus as a progressive instrument for change, engaged artists welcomed government and foundation sponsorship as the promise of an alternative system of production. Funding was inadequate and precarious at best; yet by consciously aligning their fate with New Deal policy, filmmakers acted out of both civic responsibility and self-interest. A majority of creative personnel on these films received their training during the early thirties in radical newsreel and agitprop groups such as the Film and Photo League. They had grown disenchanted with limitations on production and distribution and sought a wider audience and a larger aesthetic vehicle through which to participate in the struggle for social change.¹⁸

Despite justifiable misgivings over sponsorship, liberal-left documentarists hoped to build a “third term” of film production, one which retained the human-scaled collaborative ethos of their former radical projects while enhancing the ability to affect public opinion. The modest popular success of *The River* and *The City* created a tiny aperture through which a challenge to Hollywood’s stranglehold could be envisioned. Promotion of New Deal ideology provided a foundation from which to allegorize the role of documentary in a naturalized landscape of cinema.

Performance, Authority, and Direct Cinema

The period is charged with its stupid issuelessness as with an explosive.

Erich Auerbach¹⁹

Thirty years removed from the Great Depression, a new generation of documentarists forged a loose-knit coalition whose aesthetic philosophy was primed by resistance to the same common enemy, Hollywood, yet was as vehemently opposed to the methods of *The City* and its cohort. An extensive body of interviews conducted in the late sixties and early seventies forms a collective text that remains the best theoretical account of direct cinema. A set of shared assumptions precipitate around issues of technology, immediacy, and mediation; disputes surface over ethical procedures and, particularly, the chimera of objectivity. There is, however, general agreement that New Deal documentaries and films share a premeditated, even authoritarian, vision of social representation that is no longer tenable. The verbal articulation, in Stephen Mamber's phrase, of an "uncontrolled cinema" is rife with a familiar privileging of phenomenal experience over artifice accompanied, as in realist doctrines of the previous century, by abject denials of fixed tropes or rhetorical structuration. Without invoking the spectre of a cinema verité political unconscious, it is possible to locate in the denial of conventionality a textual crisis of authority, a twinned symptom of fulsome speech and reticence, an ambivalence toward what has been called the "documentary voice."²⁰

Much has already been written in reproof of the movement's idealist faith in neutral, noninterventionist recording and editorial reconstruction. In its *ad hoc* polemics, an ethical imperative weds the sync-sound rig to an aesthetic of unscripted, handheld long takes ordered solely by response to profilmic "stimuli." Thomas Waugh correctly scores the "fetishization of the image" and suggests it is driven by a "gospel of inarticulacy."²¹ Bill Nichols similarly disdains the "magical template of verisimilitude" fashioned to disguise the work of standard continuities and rhetorical effects.²² Unquestionably, refinements in lightweight camera and sound equipment increased speed, mobility, and representational purview as it simplified the process of production. However, an almost transcendent faith in equipment defers intentionality as it creates, in the minds of many filmmakers, a virtual metaphysics of presence.

In pragmatic terms, all traditional *a priori* activities, such as research, scripting, rehearsal, and various *posteriori* stages, such as narration, musical scoring, and analytical editing, are either eliminated or collapsed onto the moment of recording. The crucial, if not the only, labor takes place in the confrontation of camera/sound operator and event or social

actor. An analogous moment of "focus" occurs as spectators apprehend the image on the screen. Spontaneous, aleatory signification caught in the synapse of recording is unsealed in its phenomenal freshness during the act of reception. As Frederick Wiseman puts it:

The way I try to make a documentary is that there's no separation between the audience watching the film and the events in the film. It's like the business of getting rid of the proscenium arch in the theater . . .²³

Behind the curtain of such verbal positioning stands a tableau of glaring contradictions in which the dynamics of "pure observation" are undercut by textual markers guaranteeing the same order of truth enacted in the partisan structures of thirties films. Albeit in a different register, direct cinema inscribes self-validating diegetic figures invested with the movement's own philosophical qualities. There is as well a corresponding reciprocity between filmic rhetoric and the context of liberal ideological discourse, now in decline rather than ascendancy. Direct cinema is as much a product of and participant in a popular discourse of social renovation as its predecessor.

The cornerstone of direct cinema's rejection of previous approaches is voice-over narration, engendering the contrary demand to "show" instead of "tell"; a preference for the particular instance over the abstract and, by extension, the holistic (image or human presence) over the fragmentary. By 1960, Robert Drew was promoting a style that would allow filmmakers to "stop talking and let the action within the frame tell the story."²⁴ Numerous statements follow Drew's lead by connecting the "freedom" (Richard Leacock's term) afforded by the apparatus with the refusal of didacticism or "manipulative" meaning in any form. D. A. Pennebaker takes solace in not having to "label" events,²⁵ whereas Wiseman wants to avoid the temptation to "formalize" meaning "as a series of rational statements."²⁶ The implied aversion to language in its ordering, or depleting, of sensory impressions is a pervasive—and quite powerful—facet of the antiauthoritarian program of sixties countercultural and political opposition.²⁷

A lesson gleaned from the triumphs and limitations of thirties activism was an abiding mistrust of top-down solutions—at its political extremes a mistrust of social theory *tout court*—expressed in cinema as a complete abandonment of extratextual appeals to authority, the refusal of history as causal explanation, and the disavowal of preconceived agendas and concrete social prescriptions. Albert Maysles provides a striking summary: "I don't see frankly, trying to make a film to create better understanding. Our motivations for making films aren't intellectual ones."²⁸ Wiseman

avers: "I personally have a horror of producing propaganda to fit any kind of ideology other than my own view. . . ." ²⁹ This "horror" is quite palpable, it undergirds the movement's entire aesthetic philosophy. Just as Wiseman "doubts the capacity to motivate people to large-scale social change," ³⁰ he and his cohort envision the production process as a form of value-free "research" (a term employed by several makers) in which the goal is, as Wiseman again phrases it, "to find out what my own attitude is towards the material that's the subject of my film." ³¹

It is possible to extrapolate from these statements the wish to exchange one brand of social science methodology for another. Sponsored documentaries display an obvious debt to reformist sociology, particularly the Chicago School and related theorists such as Mumford. Direct cinema, many of whose adherents came from social science and physical science backgrounds, adopts methodological as well as ethical principles which mirror data-based empirical methods aligned with a corporate liberal fixation on "disinterested" science. ³² Documentary's version of pure observation intersects a sociology of the status quo in which social inequities are simultaneously privatized and made an object of nonapprobatory study. The filmic project becomes, in Wiseman's words, a "natural history" of American life all the more valuable because it "refuses to take sides, cast blame, or offer solutions." ³³ The finished works can then be understood as "unanalyzed data," the accretions of a "statistical survey," with filmmakers cast in the role of field workers "with a camera instead of a notebook." ³⁴

Unlike earlier documentaries in which the presentation of evidence, argument, and scenic displays of collective social transformation govern formal construction, direct cinema insists on decontextualization. Because its "findings" are unfalsifiable, it cedes to itself an imminent freedom from contradiction. Whereas thirties films were construed as overburdened by the general, direct cinema hews to the particular, refraining from classifying individuals as types or social interactions as symptomatic of any larger pattern (although titles such as *Salesman*, *Showman*, *High School*, and *Law and Order* suggest otherwise). Judgment is thrust in the lap, or mind, of the individual spectator. Makers and supporters alike subscribe to traditional realist metaphors ³⁵ in claiming a more active, more pluralistic, "democratic" spectatorship arising from the ambiguity of (in theory) unasimulated scenes and/or the lack of mediation through which they are presented. As Noël Carroll points out, liberal doctrine of the period was transposed cinematically as a space where multiple viewpoints were entertained, a Bazinian principle of perceptual freedom adduced as "an expressive emblem of egalitarianism." ³⁶ In the arena of circulation, a stance of noncontrol neatly attached itself to the demands of the FCC's Fairness Doctrine by which controversial issues were to be presented devoid of "untruthful" partisanship. ³⁷

One function then of direct cinema's intense specificity is to deny not only the onus of explanation but potential disagreement, relegating knowledge claims to an intersubjective plane, Leacock's "one man's truth." If part of documentary's continual need to guarantee fidelity to the Real entails a sign of openness or plurality, direct cinema attempts to displace the New Deal's formal tropes of heterogeneity onto presumably symmetrical, equivalent acts of recording and reception (the myth of filmmaker as "naive" viewer). Whereas in an earlier period, argumentative mastery or the ability to coherently assemble fragments of reality signaled an objective reckoning of historical process, here nonclosure or simplicity of design are equated with unbiased access or a "multiple consciousness of opposing perspectives." ³⁸

In league with the movement's confusion of textual "authority" with the "authoritarian," there is a linkage between the privileging of technology as a marker of neutrality and the assertion of individual over technocratic or collective social solutions. Resisting general propositions as a framework through which to understand society, the "personal" is mobilized not, in the jargon of sixties counterculture, as "political" but, to borrow Erich Auerbach's wonderful description of Flaubert, as charged with an explosive issuelessness. Visually as well as philosophically, direct cinema is predisposed toward intimacy, physical proximity, an isolated focus on "personality" struggling for self definition in a web of institutional pressures. This is, in essence, the master narrative at the heart of Robert Drew's celebrated "crisis structure." If one could isolate for thirties films the most characteristic image category, it would probably be groups of people in exterior long shots. In direct cinema's brief commercial foray of the late sixties, the typical configuration is most likely an interior facial close-up.

This formal shift, determined in part by technological advances, social science allegiances, and enveloping humanist discourses, can be retraced at several textual levels. Whereas thirties documentary expressed the quotidian through contrastive editing—as a shared, historically grounded condition—direct cinema constructs everyday life as a temporally distended preserve of idiosyncratic behavior. Refitting a cinematic construct of duration, the long take, to the expression of personhood, immediacy and authenticity are signaled by tropes of uneventfulness within the image, by awkward gaps and silences, the seemingly haphazard trajectories of handheld movements. This visual array conforms to what Roland Barthes locates in literature as "the realistic effect," grounded in the adumbration of "non-signifying detail"; events, gestures, objects seemingly absolved of coded meaning. ³⁹ In direct cinema, social history is transposed into a kind of portraiture; dramatization of social process replaced by dramatization of the camera recording process. The value of concerted action as

theme and formal logic gives way to stasis, the individual entrapped by circumstance, as a measure of commitment to the present.

Extrapolated from interviews and films, this schema helps to illuminate direct cinema's central and obsessive attachment to subjects under public scrutiny, to performers in one guise or another, as it clarifies the movement's agenda of self-realization. In the early Drew Associates "Living Camera" productions, network broadcasting dictated a concentration on famous or newsworthy people. Yet it is not simply Kennedy, Nehru, Jane Fonda, Marlon Brando, and the Beatles who are shown navigating among predictable role-playing, humanizing improvisation, and breakdown. It is also racecar driver Eddie Sachs, the salesmen who peddle bibles door-to-door, guards and inmates in *Titicut Follies* (1967), and teachers and administrators in *High School* (1968). Due to self-imposed methodological constraints and the positive program proclaimed for spontaneous observation, direct cinema virtually required preestablished identities or role expectations behind which filmmakers could mask their intervention and against which they could define a heightened authenticity and insight into character.⁴⁰

Significantly, the existential locus of performance provides implicit justification for the camera's presence. Far from exhibiting the flux of spontaneous behavior, what occurs on direct cinema's makeshift stage is already mediated, learned, in greater or lesser degree intended for visual/auditory consumption. Compare the self-conscious, direct-address "routines" of even an inexperienced performer such as the young female English teacher in *High School* to the indirect and cognitively unsettling images of share croppers' cabins in *The River*. For various reasons, the latter sequence required the imposition of fourth-wall theatrical conventions of invisibility, in context a protective shield for social actors and an inadvertent sign of the camera's estrangement. A constant theme of direct cinema is the blurring and remapping of lines between mandated roles and autonomous expressions of personal identity. Designation of celebrity helps maintain the fiction that camera observation is part of a natural landscape of behavior.⁴¹ Whether the camera is addressed directly or buffered by a profilmic audience or interrogator, it is there because of an inherent complicity by which one's "image" or personal identity is a mutual construct of performer and receiver.

It is of little consequence whether a subject is filmed in a public, semipublic, or "intimate" setting. In films such as *Meet Marlon Brando* (1965) and *Don't Look Back* (1966), the narrating posture of image and sound maintains a seemingly discreet neutrality hinged precisely on diegetic figures such as newspaper and magazine reporters who ask the questions and conduct the interviews eschewed by filmmakers on ethico-aesthetic grounds. Thus, an unspoken drive to reveal through verbal

language a hidden or more truthful facet of personality is projected onto others. These unwitting go-betweens, in their misguided fealty to rational speech as benchmark of communication (in contrast to direct cinema's faith in the unfettered image) elicit patently unconvincing responses, confirming the probity of an observational style. What can be known of an individual and his or her social surround emanates from the compact of behavioral freedom from artifice struck between camera and subject. Foregrounding of performance can thus paradoxically "defuse it as a threat to its claims for truth."⁴² In *Don't Look Back*, Bob Dylan dismisses a reporter's attempt to encode meaning in language: "The truth? The truth is a plain *picture* of a tramp vomiting into the sewer."

Separate films or directorial choices pose diverse enactments of this structuring relationship. In privatized settings such as the working class homes in *Salesman* (1969), the film's ostensible objects—the door-to-door vendors—become surrogates in the interviewing process, drawing out intimate details of clients lives in the course of their sales pitch. The interactions of salesman and client are bracketed, placed in quotes, by recognition of (and endless dialogue about) performance skills: an example of how direct cinema often subcontracts the task of intervention, sometimes commentary and analysis, to central or peripheral players in the profilmic. In *Titicut Follies*, guards are more than willing—when they are not engaged in singing, telling jokes, and reciting anecdotes—to "perform" their mentally deranged charges, eliciting for the camera the most antic, disoriented routines which are set against literal stage acts. Wiseman elaborates parallels between guards and inmates, sane and insane, as he extends a theatrical metaphor in multiple scenes of "public" performance: His "follies" include inmates singing, dancing, delivering long speeches, and playing musical instruments.⁴³ In Wiseman's and Leacock's films, the gesture of zooming from medium shot to close-up serves as formal correlative of the desire to delve into inner, psychological states while clinging to a facade of unguided attention.

Acute interest in performance leads, finally, to another source of anxiety over the problematic of power and textual authority. Just as social actors are recruited for their ability or failure to direct their own images, the filmmaking process is often allegorized—through the mediation of a performer—as a techno-physical contest and/or an existential quest. An inkling of this self-serving stake in performance appears when filmmakers criticize their previous work or the work of a colleague on grounds of failing to relinquish enough control over meaning—committing the error of, say, creating a metaphoric relation through editing or visually isolating a potentially symbolic object.⁴⁴ At the same time, they freely endorse intricate means by which to suppress the viewer's perception of spatio-temporal discontinuity. From this perspective, if one could command the

equipment and physically negotiate the field with absolute fluidity and perceptual acumen, the breach between life and representation might be healed. Recording becomes an arena of personal testing on both sides of the camera. David Maysles speaks of "raw material that doesn't want to be shaped"; Leacock and Pennebaker refer to "challenges" and "confrontations" arising from the recording situation.⁴⁵

Direct cinema's stipulation of transparency and noncontrol as a paradigm of authenticity is at once futile and disingenuous. Even at a technological level, the search for a degree-zero mode of recording is endless. Just as documentarists in the sixties criticized the ponderous production methods of thirties films, Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines rebuke direct cinema for its reliance on three-person crews:

Shooting one-person restores the possibility of kinship. The filmmaker doesn't carry on with "his people" in front of "his subjects." The dichotomy those labels reveal, in the filmmaker himself, is gone along with the crew. . . . The filmmaker becomes another human being in the room.⁴⁶

The next step might be remote control or implanted mini-cams, *roboté*. Clearly, the bone of contention here is not neutrality but *mastery*: how to realize the ideal performance for image/sound recorders in the theatricalized role of "pure observer." There are in fact plenty of textual models, in particular the grace-under-pressure narrative spun for direct cinema's roster of artists, sports heroes, politicians, and commonplace eccentrics. Among the most concise declarations occurs in *Man Who Dances: Edward Villella* (1970) as the dancer-choreographer states in direct address his "perfect vision of a great performance." It is "easy, smooth . . . linear . . . possessing freshness, honesty . . . quickness, lightness"—in short the very qualities of structure and camera-handling most cherished by direct cinema practitioners.

Nehru (1962), made for television by Drew Associates in advance of the commercial flowering of documentary features, is a remarkable example of recorder-subject interaction as a contest of skill and wit. It constitutes a kind of inventory of possible hurdles and small triumphs registered in the act of filming. According to Stephen Mamber, the film is "an almost open admission of failure,"⁴⁷ yet, from another angle, it allows unique access to a powerful subtext in the movement as a whole. Leacock and soundman Greg Shuker admit that the decision to include extensive voice-over commentary, as well as visual references to the recording process, stemmed from the producer's desire to pump up audience interest in footage that ultimately fell short of the convulsive drama suggested in the opening

narration: "It was a time of foreboding in India; of war, invasion, signs in the heavens."

As Nehru calmly conducts quotidian affairs of state, the filmmakers fabricate a "crisis" of production. They strike a bargain with the Prime Minister: "He would ignore our presence; we for our part would do nothing to interfere with what was going on . . . ask no questions, simply observe." The progress of the film turns on which party will best serve the bargain. Actually, the subject seems to have little trouble keeping his end, but the filmmakers lurch and stumble, barely able to refrain from probing interview questions they mutter behind the scenes. Shuker gets his equipment caught in a moving jeep transporting Nehru from a frenzied rally and his agile escape from danger is duly recorded and applauded in voice-over. The added commentary reproduces a running phenomenological report on the filming process: "I decide to move my mike in closer"; "Nehru sees something and I pan over to see what it is"; "Now Nehru has noticed us, a slip on his side of the bargain"; "With my camera still moving I'm trying to force my way forward." From an almost Godardian prologue—where the camera equipment is introduced directly to the viewer—to a jitterbug performed by camera and feisty dog at a family dinner, *Nehru* exposes anxiety about not only "seeing" but identifying with, and being *seen by*, the object of the camera's "detached" gaze. The agreement, or more accurately the complicity, inherent in documentary's social intervention is here centered and calibrated in its, often comic, vicissitudes.

Leacock and Shuker discover a diegetic trope for their own professed cinematic philosophy, the Indian concept of *darsham*: an aura of intense but impersonal and unobtrusive witnessing. Nehru is said to embody this state and so, by extension, do the filmmakers. Yet the textual evidence symptomatically suggests a founding ambivalence that is played out in an improvised scenario of presence and absence, where the supposed baggage of a shaping (analytic, polemical, authoritative) ego is tactically withdrawn only to be reinvested in the performative treatment of exemplary personalities. The movement's rhetoric is bonded to its public figures in a mutual validation of agency, the inscription of vocational competence—or, in Wiseman's institutional critiques, malfeasance.

The assertion that direct cinema utilizes its social actors as a relay for or projection of its own cinematic program—encoding specific political and ideological assumptions (including the reification of a patently masculinist performance ethos)—can be placed within sporadic efforts to re-read the movement's contradictions under a rubric of modernist reflexivity.⁴⁸ However, in several notable appraisals, failure to acknowledge the hardening of figuration into tropic patterns results in much the same metaphysical morass opened by the filmmakers' own *ad hoc* theorizing. The conventional nature of direct cinema is denied by Gianfranco Bettetini, for

instance, when he revalues the documentary sequence shot as foregrounding processes by which scenes are "manufactured." He compares an inferred constructedness of mobile-camera long takes to Brecht's prescriptions for epic theater, yet adopts a familiar recourse to claims of renewed fidelity to the Real:

In the sequence-shot, reality is revealed according to parameters that appear to be rather more its own, and less invented, than is the case in narrative situations codified by classical editing.⁴⁹

In his formulation, the sequence shot is an ideal format for a kind of "research" from which the "fortuitous, aleatory and accidental elements . . . find room to expand naturally."⁵⁰

In a similar vein, Jean-Louis Comolli, in an article that confusingly melds related strategies in documentary and the French New Wave, notes how an emphasis on theatrical performance can endow reality with "a new lease of meaning and coherence . . . its truth reinforced by and because of this detour through the 'fictitious.'" ⁵¹ He proposes that direct cinema has inherent "political value" because it circumvents a "triple ideological dependency: capital-intensive production, spectacle, and rhetorical convention." It seems to me that this is hardly an improvement on the idealist assertions made by filmmakers on behalf of a heightened authenticity. In effect, this approach disdains documentary's fiction of truth only to install something like the truth of fiction.

Against a backdrop of repeated calls for a more overt, discontinuous, and demystifying set of nonfiction film practices⁵² and following more than a decade of political documentaries mixing interviews with archival footage—*The Murder of Fred Hampton* (1971), *Hearts and Minds* (1974), *Union Maids* (1976), *With Babies and Banners* (1977)—some recent mainstream films attempt to revitalize previous practices through a cultural discourse befitting the postmodern moment.⁵³

Gilding the Ashes: Toward an Aesthetics of Failure

My success seemed dependent on the failure of others.

Tony Buba
Lightning Over Braddock

There is currently more popular interest in nonfiction cinema than at any time since the late sixties. This renewal has been spurred by, among other factors, wholesale incorporation of *verité* techniques in TV advertising, the continuing strength of nonfiction genres in the publishing industry, and the onslaught of prime-time dramatic and news series such as "Ameri-

ca's Most Wanted" and "Cops" which deploy an array of fictional and direct cinema strategies around tabloid stories. What the recent body of theatrical films—*Sherman's March* (1987), *Lightning Over Braddock* (1988), *Roger and Me* (1989), *Driving Me Crazy* (1990), and *The Thin Blue Line* (1990)—shares with other cultural phenomena is a perhaps unprecedented degree of hybridization. Materials, techniques, and modes of address are borrowed not only from earlier documentary styles but from the American avant-garde and from Hollywood as well. Voice-over narration, found footage, interviews, reenactments, and printed texts mingle in a pastiche that implicitly rejects the boundary distinctions of prior filmic modes. However, unlike related media and literary practices, the new documentary's most salient quality is an explicit centering of the filmmaking process and a heavily ironized inscription of the filmmaker as (unstable) subject, an anti-hero for our times.

As a group the new films do not manifest, or not yet, the coherent polemics, social ambit, or ideological fealties which define New Deal or direct cinema documentaries as part of a movement. In occasional interviews or writings, filmmakers predictably denounce the aesthetic assumptions and impact of earlier styles. Errol Morris says bluntly:

I believe cinema verité set back documentary filmmaking twenty or thirty years. It sees documentary as a sub-species of journalism. . . . There's no reason why documentaries can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything.⁵⁴

If Morris and company dismiss one type of formal truth claim, their films are organized around a set of strategies in which authority and verisimilitude are rhetorically embedded in a negative register of denial, mockery, and collapse. By inference, the social ideals of bureaucratic control in New Deal films, or spontaneous individual performance in direct cinema, are no longer able to support an edifice of documentary truth.

Indeed, the prospect for completion of a straightforward documentary project of any stripe may be under interrogation. In each case cited above—and in *Demon Lover Diary* (1980), a cogent if little known anticipation of the current style—*failure* to adequately represent the person, event, or social situation stated as the film's explicit task functions as an inverted guarantee of authenticity. The new works are textual parasites, fragments or residues of other works which for one reason or another became impossible to realize.⁵⁵ One ramification of postmodern aesthetics, precipitated in part by the anti-metaphysical bent of poststructuralist theory, is that certain types of artistic mastery are culturally suspect. The

epistemic ambition to speak from a totalizing framework of knowledge about some fully intelligible reality is anathema. The proscription of unified subjectivity is perhaps especially severe for (politically conscious) white male filmmakers working at the margins of mass culture. Although it is too soon to make any decisive judgment, it is tempting to posit a documentary "aesthetics of failure" that grafts a protean cultural agenda onto traditional problems of authority.⁵⁶

Operating under sanctions of what did *not* happen—an interview with General Motors Chairman Roger Smith; an account of General Sherman's attack on the Confederacy; a collection of filmic portraits of a depressed steel town; a behind-the-scenes promotional trailer for a Broadway musical—filmmakers assume an active presence as diegetic characters and/or voice-over narrators (either spontaneous with the flow of recording or indirect). This presence is marked by a studied self-deprecatory distance and a resultant celebration of formal disjuncture and disorientation. The displacement of textual (non)authority into the profilmic allows as well a return of analytic commentary, discursive sequencing, and associative or metaphoric editing patterns while maintaining some of direct cinema's myth of immediacy. Operating under this libertarian ethos, it is required that filmmakers peel away the off-screen cloak of anonymity and, emerging into the light, make light of their power and dominion.

At once recognizing and missing the point entirely, Gary Crowds remarks that "*Roger and Me* might have acquired a little more political bite if it had focused a little more on 'Roger' and somewhat less on 'Me.'"⁵⁷ In truth, it is precisely Moore's confection of an ineffectual, uncertain journalistic self that lends an Everyman quality to his social analysis. The assertion in all of these films of the recorder's central, albeit amusingly out-of-control, position in the representational process is reminiscent of Jean Rouch's cinema vérité self-implication in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) and other films. But a willingness to actually take apart and examine the conventions by which authority is inscribed—as opposed to making sport of them—is largely absent.⁵⁸ As distinct from Rouch's work, an unrealized or "impossible" project disguises mechanisms of internal validation which are as immunized against contradiction as direct cinema's allegories of performance.

Thirties social documentaries annex cinematic authority in iconographic identification with industrial technology and the power of central government symbolized in this motif, and direct cinema exhibits diegetic figures as mirrors for an ideal of filmic performance. The new films affirm a vested, and ultimately naturalized, stake in the inadequacy of any representational system to capture lived reality. *Sherman's March* starts with a brief invocation of common materials out of which historical documentaries are fashioned: maps, still photos, voice-over recitation of

facts. It veers quickly into a diaristic account of the filmmaker's journey south and his visits with family and friends. A counterthematic is proposed: "A meditation on the possibility of Romantic love in the South during an era of nuclear weapons proliferation." Although there are occasional metonymic connections among Sherman, romance, and weaponry, what ensues is scarcely a "meditation." In short order, even the ancillary focus becomes a front for the work of self-absorbed disconnection, the externalized crisis of making a "commitment."

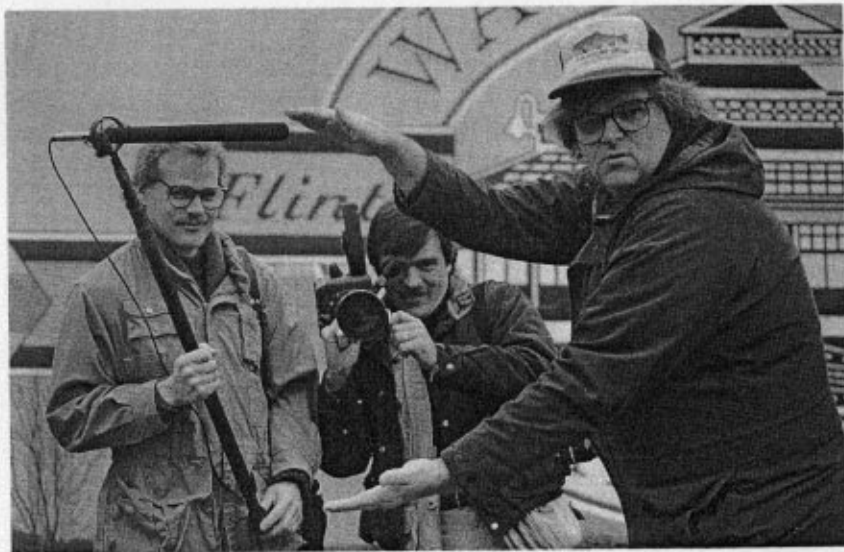
At one point, director Ross McElwee's sister tells him, "You have an instant rapport with people because you have a camera." Indeed, the documentary camera is a derisive, but unmistakably useful, weapon and defensive shield. Most of McElwee's filmed adventures revolve around antiquated, silly projections of masculinity. He frequently compares himself to Sherman (even donning a Civil War uniform in one shot), yet stresses his inability to conquer any of the targets, female or filmic, in his path. At a Scottish picnic, he watches passively "as men compete in various events of strength and virility." A succession of aspiring performers are interviewed: the women as potential love objects, the men as alter egos or distorted versions of his own doubts and desires. A Burt Reynolds impersonator, and then Reynolds himself, are simultaneously addressed and chided as embodiments of assertive qualities he ambivalently lacks.

McElwee has qualms about the digression from the Sherman project: "I keep thinking I should return to my original plan . . . but I can't stop filming Pat"; "it's all very confusing . . . I can't figure out what to do next." He imagines "a sort of creeping psychosexual despair" that is then echoed in myriad malfunctions. The car breaks down; he forgets to turn on the tape recorder for an important encounter; an amusement park train ride runs into technical difficulties; he cannot frame or adequately follow certain subjects with the camera. Constant self-effacement and irresolution assume the shape of a dramatic device, intended to minimize and deflect the grotesque ambition of finding a love life through cinema vérité interaction. What the device certifies through negative mastery is finally the sincerity and truth of the filmmaker's observations about himself, women, and social attitudes. In a telling twist of the traditional realist promotion of a "styleless style," *Sherman's March* parades a narrative of introspective abasement as the very sign of unvarnished reflection.

Despite profound differences in approach and aspiration, *Roger and Me* steers an analogous course. Here, the ostensible, unrealized goal is modest and politically pointed: trapping GM's Roger Smith into a spontaneous reckoning of the disastrous human effects of his corporate policies. This scenario is not doomed from the outset. Unlike McElwee, Moore is at pains to demonstrate good faith in meeting his announced goal. There is a gradual awareness, however, that the desired interview would be

unilluminating and ambiguous. Lacking the requisite subject-recorder complicity, the filmmaker redirects his failure to engage Smith as proof of his own honorable political sympathies and of corporate America's malfeasance.

Once again ironic citations of misconnection and confusion pile up as the measure of a heightened authenticity. In a humorous prelude devoted to Moore's childhood perceptions of General Motors, he states: "My heroes were people who got out of Flint." He then relates a painful professional experience in San Francisco where, after losing a job as a magazine editor ("California and I were a mismatch"), he returns to Michigan in the same sort of rented truck featured in later scenes of laid-off workers. His new job as filmmaker is consistently identified with the conditions of the (often eccentric) unemployed workers; and it is predicated on their mutual failure to make the system work. Like the ex-worker who breeds rabbits to sell as either meat or pets, the filmmaker demonstrates improvisatory skill by seeming to readjust the shape of his movie as he goes along. That is, unlike *Roger and Me's* corporate nemesis, the film text cannot be constructed like an assembly-line product. Moore's



On location for the making of the documentary film, *Roger and Me*, about the closing of General Motors plants in Flint, Michigan and its effect on the residents of the town are left to right BRUCE SHERMER, JOHN PRUSAK and writer, producer and director MICHAEL MOORE. The film is released by Warner Bros. COPYRIGHT © 1989 WARNER BROS. INC. (ALL RIGHTS RESERVED). FOR USE SOLELY FOR ADVERTISING, PROMOTION, PUBLICITY OR REVIEWS OF THIS SPECIFIC MOTION PICTURE.

social solidarity is grounded in a trope of technical awkwardness, a feigned inadequacy and victimization defined against the ruthless instrumentality of General Motors—and, by extension, Hollywood.

Stalking the aloof chairman, he invents fake identities: "My friends and I decided to pose as a TV crew from Toledo. . . . I wasn't sure what a TV crew from Toledo looked like but apparently the ruse worked." Just then, Moore and his crew are unceremoniously escorted from the building. Found footage from Hollywood movies and industrial advertisements are cobbled together with interviews and observational sequences while popular songs (for example, the Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice") impose a flat irony over scenes of economic privation. Prevented from obtaining access to GM headquarters, Moore typically remarks: "I was getting the big blow-off once again." Smith's refusal of contact is dramatized directly and also displaced onto other forms of technical miscarriage. A "Nightline" broadcast from Flint is cancelled when the engineering truck is stolen. Various schemes to rejuvenate the local economy end in collapse. Officials issuing on-screen corporate excuses or cheery prognostications are later fired. When Moore invades the annual GM stockholders' meeting to confront Smith face-to-face, his microphone is turned off. A textual array of breakdowns and exposed limitations presents the filmmaking process as a series of inadequate gestures at empowerment by which fidelity to the Real is simultaneously derided as a goal and instated.

Parallels between documentary process and productive (and nonproductive) labor are even more extensive and politically incisive in *Lightning Over Braddock*. Buttressed by the same autobiographical impulse found in *Sherman's March* and *Roger and Me*, the film interweaves personal history with social history toward a highly subjective account of the depleted fortunes of a Pennsylvania milltown. It opens on a TV interview with Tony Buba, whose previous films on the local economy garnered (for himself and for Braddock) some useful publicity. This gambit leads to a recapitulation in direct speech, voice-over exposition, and film excerpts, of Buba's college life and initiation into documentary filming. Shifting easily between tenses, levels of presentation, and epistemic frameworks, the film issues a kind of metadiscourse that undercuts every spontaneous gesture and sincere mimetic intention.

Present as a muted concern in other films, here the intricate slippage in roles from recorder to social actor to scripted fictional character to commentator provides a structuring logic formalized in an extreme concatenation of materials. There are collisions of video footage and film fragments shot in different gauges; actual and faked interviews and observational sequences; enacted flashbacks and ramshackle Hollywood fantasies such as the local staging of Ghandi's assassination. One can never be sure of the director's interpersonal ties with the featured characters, all

unemployed denizens of Braddock. They seem, in turn, autonomous subjects and willing conspirators earning a modest payday before the camera; yet, in sequences with cranky "Sweet Sal" Carulo, a feeling of genuine antagonism creeps in. At an early stage, Buba informs us that the project planned as "Lightning Over Braddock" is under constant revision and that the original scheme of a sweeping portrait of the town must be abandoned.

Toward the end, we are told that grant money ran out before many sequences were finished. The screen goes black (as it does at several points), then forges ahead with new ideas and ambitions—including blowing up (which?) *Lightning* into 35mm for mass distribution and other partially realized projects such as a "steel mill musical." Buba says he is unclear about what he is doing and inserts demands by collaborators that he simply "quit." Later, he renounces his commitment to social documentary altogether and plots to "sell out" to Hollywood, a vocation for which the fictional sequences are to presumably serve as advertisement.

An anarchic pattern of technical struggle, breakdown, and recuperation is directly linked to economic conditions. The film both demonstrates and refuses the "real irony" that "as the layoffs increase, his fortunes rise." Yet power is thwarted by vivid limitations. Buba exploits the inability to use sound for a performance of "Jumping Jack Flash" by a worker scrounging cash as a club entertainer; rights to the song cost \$15,000 "three times the per capita income of a Braddock resident." "Hey," he reminds us, "this isn't a Hollywood feature we're making here." The singer's silently moving lips—like the failed business ventures of another figure, Jimmy Ray, and the unfathomable acting career of "Sweet Sal"—binds film and subject in a concordance of nonfulfillment. And here, as elsewhere, it is exactly the open admission of, indeed a central obsession with, inadequacy emblazoned by formal disjunction and underwritten by dramatic displays of nontotalized knowledge—patriarchal mastery in disarray—which performs the labor of signifying authenticity and documentary truth.

In a recent essay, filmmaker-theorist Trinh Minh-ha, following a cogent dissection of documentary myths of verisimilitude, proposes a new non-fiction epistemology based on challenging filmic patterns of authority rather than merely replacing one unacknowledged source of authority with another:

To compose is not always synonymous with ordering-so-as-to-persuade, and to give the . . . Meaning can therefore be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilized, and when it does not rely on a single source of authority but, rather empties or decentralizes it.⁵⁹

She advocates a practice in which the subject is constantly "in process," where documentary "displays its own formal properties or its own constitu-

tion as work" and where the expression of identity or subjective agency is one in which

the self vacillates and loses its assurance. The paradox of such a process lies in its fundamental instability; an instability that brings forth the disorder inherent in every order.⁶⁰

Trinh's prescriptions are nuanced and ardently progressive. And she intends her remarks for, and produces her own work within, a cinematic order largely unconstrained by commercial demands for topicality, familiarity, and identification. She would thus appear to have little interest or faith in the transformation of mainstream cinematic genres. Keeping this in mind, it is odd to find her notions—of defeating the "establishment of totality" by creating "a space in which meaning remains fascinated by what escapes and exceeds it"—at least partially tested by recent filmic practice. One explanation for this unexpected convergence lies in the popular translation in multiple fora of poststructuralism's critique of Western metaphysics. For instance, the unavoidable multiplicity of subjecthood and the constructedness of historical truth prop up recent controversies over multicultural education in the United States and the ramifications of the film *JFK* (1991).

It is doubly ironic, then, that the strategies found in these fashionable, mainstream postmodern documentaries remain wedded to the same principles of authenticity, if not the same rhetorical codings, as earlier styles. As I hope is now apparent, *Roger and Me* and its ilk substitute reflexive abnegation for New Deal and direct cinema paradigms of authority. There have been, and will continue to be, versions of the quest for documentary truth which develop different orders of structuration or manage to obviate the most self-contradictory tensions in the opposition of lived reality and tropes of presentation. The three moments of production considered here are yoked in a formal tradition that defines itself according to both Hollywood fictional codes and competing documentary styles. Despite affinities, the individual movements are embedded in and determined by particular historical and cultural assumptions about appropriate expressions of truth, and by corollary discourses that shape available options for representing social reality.

Technology and its imbrication with power is thematized in each instance according to the changing political dynamics of liberalism: in the first, iconographic identification with industrial technology and its ability to rectify social affliction; in the second, an incorporation and masking of the apparatus as an extension of individual cognitive acuity and physical skill; and in recent films, disavowal or technical proficiency as guarantee of non-omniscience and metaphoric link with disenfran-

chised proflimic subjects. Thus, the role of authorial agency in its manifest relation to technology moves from a stance of partisan intervention to one of neutral, transparent observation to a slippery ambivalence in which the instrument of cinema is a necessarily visible but confoundingly inadequate mediator.

Finally, all three sketch implicit cinematic programs for an exemplary nonfiction treatment of reality. Each construes its values and functions in opposition to Hollywood domination while adhering to certain of that institution's most ingrained effects of knowledge, coherence, and closure. In a sense, what succeeding documentary styles *refuse* of the formulas of narrative fiction bespeak their designated areas of social impact. Sponsored documentaries of the thirties eschew the establishing of strong individualized characters and the attendant possibility of viewer identification while providing familiar cues for dramatic expectation and closure. Direct cinema and, with some readjustment, recent films withhold or actively undermine closure and distend—if not abolish—prospects for dramatic development while offering compensation in the form of diegetic intimacy with sympathetic characters (including the filmmakers themselves). It is highly unlikely that the realist windmills of authority and transparency against which American documentaries have been tilting for 50 years will suddenly disappear or be demolished by postmodern allegories. The quiddity of the form will, for better or worse, continue to pivot on historically specific legitimations of authenticity.

I wish to thank Amy Taubin, Dana Polan, Ivone Margulies, and members of the Columbia University Seminar of Cinema and Interdisciplinary Interpretation for their valuable comments during the preparation of this chapter.