

[11] *New Subjectivities: Documentary
and Self-Representation in the
Post-verité Age*

This chapter, first written in 1995 for the Japanese magazine Documentary Box, offers a historical overview of a broad shift in documentary filmmaking style over a twenty-five-year period (1970–1995). If many of the founding ambitions of nonfiction filmmaking were congruent with those of the natural or social sciences as argued in chapter 8—the gathering of “facts,” the careful preservation of imperiled folkways, the construction of arguments through demonstrative proofs—the work of later practitioners bears the marks of a radical shift of values associated with the emergence of second-wave feminism by the early 1970s. A new foregrounding of the politics of everyday life encouraged the interrogation of identity and subjectivity and of a vividly corporeal rather than intellectualized self. Struggles for equity in the public sphere were now joined by interrogations of (inter)personal conflict, of private histories and interiorized struggles. The dramatic growth of personal documentary filmmaking in the post-1960s era thus comes to be understood in relation to an emergent cultural moment in which politics were not so much abandoned as transformed. This essay provides a sense of historical context for the chapters of the third part of the book, “Modes of Subjectivity,” in which various modalities of autobiographical practice are explored.

► **Cinema and the Secularization of the Divine**

The documentary film has long been tied up with the question of science. Since the protocinematic experiments in human and animal locomotion by Eadweard Muybridge and others, the cinema has demonstrated a potential for the observation and investigation of people and of social/historical

phenomena. In the 1930s, noted avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter described this potential with particular urgency:

Technology, overcoming time and space, has brought all life on earth so close together that the most remote "facts," as much as those closest to hand, have become significant for each individual's life. Reason has given rise to a secularisation of the divine. Everything that happens on earth has become more interesting and more significant than it ever was before. Our age demands the documented fact. . . . The modern reproductive technology of the cinematograph was uniquely responsive to the need for factual sustenance. . . . The camera created a reservoir of human observation in the simplest possible way.¹

As an instrument of "reproductive technology," the cinema was endowed with the power to preserve and represent the world in real time. "The (apparent) incorruptibility of optics," wrote Richter, "guaranteed 'absolute truth.'"²

But as Richter's parenthetical qualification of cinema's veridical status indicates ("the [apparent] incorruptibility of optics"), few have ever trusted the cinema without reservation. If ever they did, it was the documentary that most inspired that trust. For the young Joris Ivens, the small, spring-driven Kinamo camera was a tool for investigating the natural world. Having learned "all its advantages and also its weaknesses from Professor Goldberg, the inventor of this practical little instrument," Ivens set out in 1928 to make a film about a railroad bridge over the Maas River in Rotterdam:

For me the bridge was a laboratory of movements, tones, shapes, contrasts, rhythms and the relations between all these. I knew thousands of variations were possible and here was my chance to work out basic elements in these variations. . . . What I wanted was to find some general rules, laws of continuity of movement. Music had its rules and its grammar of tones, melody, harmony and counterpoint. Painters knew what they could do with certain colors, values, contrasts. If anyone knew about the relation of motion on the screen he was keeping it to himself and I would have to find out about it for myself.³

Ivens was researching the unique characteristics of a *cinematic* rendering of the world, already aware that the laws of optics and of chemistry alone could guarantee nothing. If, as he was to discover in his making of *The Bridge*, there were real possibilities for a felicitous translation onto film of this engineering marvel, there remained much to be discovered about how this medium could best evoke the dynamism of the bridge's mechanical action without, for example, sacrificing a sense of the monumentality of its scale. The making of the film was a kind of laboratory experience.

Of course, Ivens's enthusiasm for a systematic understanding of cinema's representational potential was partially historical, a by-product of modernism. Note in this context the writings of Dziga Vertov, who in his "We: Variant of a Manifesto" (1922) produced blissful accounts of man's "desire for kinship with the machine" and of "our path [which] leads through the poetry of machines, from the bungling citizen to the perfect electric man."⁴ Vertov, trained in medicine, described his cinematic labors as a "complex experiment" and film itself as "the sum of the facts recorded on film, or, if you like, not merely the sum, but the product, a 'higher mathematics' of facts."⁵

All of these desires evinced by the early practitioners of the cinema—factual sustenance, the discovery of the laws of cinematic motion, and the perfectibility of perception—are deeply implicated with the scientific project. It is the domain of nonfiction that has most explicitly articulated this scientific yearning; it is here also that the debates around evidence, objectivity, and knowledge have been centered. I would argue, then, that nonfiction film and the scientific project are historically linked. The work of a number of scholars offers further corroboration of this point.⁶ I would also argue that the perceived relations between the two (perceived, that is, by the community of practitioners, critics, and scholars) have shifted in important ways over the years. In the post-World War II period, the status of the documentary/science dyad has most frequently centered on the particularly vexed question of objectivity.

While the difficulties surrounding the distinctions between subjective and objective knowledge in the European intellectual tradition are ancient, Raymond Williams points to the developments in German classical philosophy from the late eighteenth century on as crucial to current understanding. Especially in the aesthetic realm, an explicit dualism was forming by the mid-nineteenth century. But important changes were under way. Whereas in previous centuries, the prevailing scholastic view of *subjective* was "as things are in themselves (from the sense of subject as substance)," and *objective* was "as things are presented to consciousness ('thrown before' the mind)," the emergence of positivism in the late nineteenth century effected a radical reorientation of meaning. Now *objective* was to be construed as "factual, fair-minded (neutral) and hence reliable, as distinct from the sense of *subjective* as based on impressions rather than facts, and hence as influenced by personal feelings and relatively unreliable."⁷ Attentive as ever to the "historical layering" of meaning in intellectual concepts, Williams suggests that the coexistence of an increasingly dominant positivist ideology with the residual idealist tradition has created considerable misunderstanding:

In judgments and reports we are positively required to be *objective*: looking only at the facts, setting aside personal preference or interest. In this context a sense of something shameful, or at least weak, attaches to *subjective*, although everyone will admit that there are *subjective factors*, which have usually to be put in their place. . . . What must be seen, in the end, as deeply controversial uses of what are nevertheless, at least in *subject* and *object*, inevitable words, are commonly presented with a certainty and at times a glibness that simply spread confusion.⁸

Given nonfiction's historical linkages to the scientific project, to observational methods and the protocols of journalistic reportage, it is not at all surprising that, within the community of documentary practitioners and critics, subjectivity has frequently been constructed as a kind of contamination, to be expected but minimized. Only recently has the subjective/objective hierarchy (with the latter as the favored term) begun to be displaced, even reversed.

The Observational Moment

In his elucidation of four documentary modes of exposition, Bill Nichols has described the observational mode as that approach to documentary filmmaking often called direct cinema, characterized by the prevalence of indirect address, the use of long takes and synchronous sound, tending toward spatiotemporal continuity rather than montage, evoking a feeling of the "present tense."⁹ Throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s, this mode was in its ascendancy in the United States and Canada, with a related but philosophically antagonistic approach (deemed by Nichols the interactive mode) developing in France at about the same time under the aegis of Jean Rouch. Brian Winston has argued that the American practitioners tended, like Richard Leacock (trained as a physicist) and Albert Maysles, to be under the influence of the natural sciences in their early pronouncements of an ethic of nonintervention, even artistic selflessness: for example, one critic's description, "It is life observed by the camera rather than, as is the case with most documentaries, life recreated for it," or Robert Drew's statement "The film maker's personality is in no way directly involved in directing the action."¹⁰ Winston suggests that Rouch, an anthropologist, and his occasional partner Edgar Morin, a sociologist, had "the advantage of a more sophisticated conception of the problems raised by participant observation" than their American counterparts.¹¹

But even in the heyday of direct cinema, the specter of subjectivity could not be wholly expunged. According to Stephen Mamber's account,

a disagreement arose between producer Robert Drew and D. A. Pennebaker during the shooting of *Jane* (1962) about whether or not the sound of the camera should be filtered out during an extended sequence with Jane Fonda, sitting alone before her dressing-room mirror: "Pennebaker felt that the noise should remain, making it clear that the audience was not seeing Jane alone in her dressing room, but Jane alone in her dressing room with a camera observing her."¹² By the time of the making of *An American Family* (a twelve-part documentary series about the William C. Loud family of Santa Barbara, California, shot in 1971, broadcast on the Public Broadcasting System in 1973), there could be little doubt that the filmmaker's personality was rather intimately involved in the creation of the final product.

In several scenes with Lance or Grant, the two most active "performers" among the five Loud siblings, a conspiratorial glance is exchanged with the camera as a kind of confirmation of its role as witness. In episode 4, Pat Loud journeys to Eugene, Oregon, to help celebrate her mother's birthday. As Pat and her mother settle down with cocktail glasses in hand, the daughter offers a toast to her aging parent: "To lots of birthdays!" Apparently misunderstanding the intent of the wish (she reads it as a toast to all those celebrating their birthdays rather than as a wish for many more years of her own good health), Mrs. Russell replies, "Who else has a birthday?" From off-camera, Pat rather flatly intones, "Susan has a birthday." Mrs. Russell's gaze shifts from her daughter to some point off-screen and to her right: "Oh yeah, sure, I knew it was something else. I'm not the only one having a birthday." This rather puzzling exchange is clarified only with the realization that mother and daughter are sharing this scene with filmmakers Alan and Susan Raymond, the latter of whom is the Susan in question. Indeed, the Raymonds shared a life with the Loud family for seven months, this despite the fact that their off-camera presence and the effects of their personalities on the seven principal subjects are only rarely acknowledged. By the time of the Raymonds' *American Family Revisited* (broadcast in 1983, updated in 1990), only remnants of the invisible fourth wall remain. Each of the Louds in turn speaks to the occasionally imaged filmmakers about the impact of the series on their lives as well as the effects of the presence of the camera on their behavior. (Remarkably, the ever rational Bill Loud calibrates his response to Pat's on-camera announcement that she is filing for a divorce in episode 9 in the following way: 80 percent or 90 percent spontaneous, only 10 percent for the camera.) The Raymonds choose to end the follow-up piece on the fate of this American family, which had unraveled years earlier for all the world to see, with a reference to themselves, announcing that indeed *they*

were still married and that in 1988 Susan had given birth to a son, James. Covering nearly two decades, the updated *American Family* saga offers dramatic evidence of the shift away from a self-consciously observational approach to a more interactive, even reflexive, modality. Again, as with the modernist yearnings of Vertov, Ivens, and Richter, this transformation is historically contingent.

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Performing the Self

By 1990, any chronicler of documentary history would note the growing prominence of work by women and men of diverse cultural backgrounds in which the representation of the historical world is inextricably bound up with self-inscription. In these films and tapes (increasingly the latter), subjectivity is no longer construed as "something shameful"; it is the filter through which the real enters discourse, as well as a kind of experiential compass guiding the work toward its goal as embodied knowledge. In part, this new tendency is a response to the persistent critique of ethnography in which the quest to preserve endangered authenticities "out there," in remote places, is called into doubt. In his introduction to *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, published in 1983, Clifford Geertz suggested that the predilection for general theories in the social sciences had given way to a "scattering into frameworks." This meant a movement away from "universalist moods" toward what he called "a keen sense of the dependence of what is seen upon where it is seen from and what it is seen with."¹³ It is not difficult to imagine observational cinema of the 1960s as a cinematic variant of the social scientific approach to which Geertz disparagingly refers, an approach in which generalizable truths about institutions or human behavior can be extrapolated from small but closely monitored case studies (e.g., *Primary* [1960], *High School* [1969], *An American Family*).

In the domain of documentary film and video, the scattered frameworks through which the social field came to be organized were increasingly determined by the disparate cultural identities of the makers. The documentative stance that had previously been valorized as informed but objective was now being replaced by a more personalist perspective in which the maker's stake and commitment to the subject matter were foregrounded. What had intervened in the years between 1970 and 1990 that might have contributed to this effusion of documentary subjectivity?

The cultural climate of this period, at least in the West, has been characterized by the displacement of the politics of social movements

(e.g., antiwar, civil rights, the student movement) by the politics of identity. According to this scenario, the clarion call to unified and collective action came to be drowned out by the murmur of human differences. Instrumental to this sea change was the feminist movement, whose revaluation of the prior alternative political structures suggested that social inequities persisted, internal to the movement. Young men challenged the authority of their fathers to establish state policy but left intact gendered hierarchies. Women and the issues that mattered to them—forthright interpersonal communication; equal stress on the integrity of process as well as product; open and universally accessible structures for decision making; shared responsibility for the domestic and familial—received scant attention. The women's movement changed all that and helped to usher in an era in which a range of "personal" issues—race, sexuality, and ethnicity—became consciously politicized (evidenced by the post-Stonewall gay rights movement as well as the intensification of racially or ethnically based political initiatives). In all cases, subjectivity, a grounding in the personal and the experiential, fueled the engine of political action. While some have seen the emergence of identity politics as an erosion of coalition, a retreat from meaningful social intervention, other cultural critics have argued loudly and persuasively for its efficacy. Stanley Aronowitz has suggested that the current emphasis on multiple and fluid identities (and the critique of "essential" identity as the underpinning for social collectivities) is entirely consistent with post-Newtonian physics:

The sociological theory, according to which individuals are crucially formed by a fixed cultural system containing universal values that become internalized through the multiplicity of interactions between the "person" and her external environment, now comes under radical revision. We may now regard the individual as a process constituted by its multiple and *specific* relations, not only to the institutions of socialization such as family, school, and law, but also to significant others, all of whom are in motion, that is, are constantly changing. The ways in which individuals and the groups to which they affiliate were constituted as late as a generation earlier, may now be archaic. New identities arise, old ones pass away (at least temporarily).¹⁴

If indeed we now live in an age of intensified and shifting psychosocial identities, it should surprise no one that the documentation of this cultural scene should be deeply suffused with the performance of subjectivities.

While never considered a part of the mainstream documentary tradition, video artist Wendy Clarke has produced work that foreshadows current developments as well as echoes important discoveries of the past. Beginning in 1977, Clarke began experimenting with the video diary format, attempting to use the camera as a tool to plumb the depths of her

own psyche. This concept evolved into the *Love Tapes* project, in which individuals of all ages and backgrounds are given three minutes of tape time in which to speak about what love means to them. Each love tape, while identical in length and subject matter, announces difference at the level of sound and image; Clarke renders each subject the *metteur-en-scène* of her own discourse through a choice of visual backdrop and musical accompaniment. Each individual is seated in a booth with only a self-activated camera, monitor, and the concept of love as a spur to performance. In all instances, those who might, in the interactive mode, have been the interview subject become the source and subject of enunciation; differences of experience, affiliation, and identity join with the unpredictability and variation of desire to make each of these monologues unique. Thousands of love tapes later, the project offers testimony to the absolute heterogeneity of the historical subject.

Some years previously, Jean Rouch, a prime shaper of the interactive mode in which the filmmaker-subject encounter takes precedence over externalized observation, had begun to explore the power of the camera to induce the display of subjectivity. Far from avoiding or disavowing the potential influence of the camera on its subjects, Rouch had from the late 1950s on employed the cinematic apparatus as a kind of accelerator, an incitation for "a very strange kind of confession."¹⁵ Replying to an interviewer's question regarding camera influence in 1969, Rouch replied: "Yes, the camera deforms, but not from the moment that it becomes an accomplice. At that point it has the possibility of doing something I couldn't do if the camera wasn't there: it becomes a kind of psychoanalytic stimulant which lets people do things they wouldn't otherwise do."¹⁶ The famous sequences with Marilou and Marceline in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) in which the subjects choose to probe memory and emotion *for*, rather than *in spite of*, the camera offer an apt illustration of Rouch's concept.

But *The Love Tapes* and the films of Rouch are only precursors for the new subjectivity on display in documentary film and video of the 1980s and 1990s. The work to which I refer may rework memory or make manifesto-like pronouncements; almost inevitably, a self, typically a deeply social self, is being constructed in the process. But what makes this new subjectivity new? Perhaps the answer lies in part in the extent to which current documentary self-inscription enacts identities—fluid, multiple, even contradictory—while remaining fully embroiled with public discourses. In this way, the work escapes charges of solipsism or self-absorption. In her recent book titled *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Annette Kuhn offers an eloquent rationale for the use of some of her family photographs as case studies for a work of personal and

popular memory. In terms that echo the feminist precept that the personal is the political, Kuhn argues that memory work, when properly conceived, folds public and private spheres into each other:

The images are both "private" (family photographs) and "public" (films, news photographs, a painting); though, as far as memory at least is concerned, private and public turn out in practice less readily separable than conventional wisdom would have us believe. . . . if the memories are one individual's, their associations extend far beyond the personal. They spread into an extended network of meanings that bring together the personal with the familial, the cultural, the economic, the social, and the historical. Memory work makes it possible to explore connections between "public" historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and "personal" memory. In these case histories outer and inner, social and personal, historical and psychical, coalesce; and the web of interconnections that binds them together is made visible.¹⁷

Kuhn's description of the coalescence of outer and inner histories offers an overarching characterization for the recent documentary works to which I refer.

In a number of instances, the maker's subjectivity is explicitly aligned with social affiliations. As in Kuhn's description, a network of familial, cultural, economic, and psychical forces converge and find expression in an act of historical self-inscription; but in these instances, autobiographical discourse is conditional, contingent on its location within an explicit social matrix. A particularly rich example of this phenomenon occurs with works that explore exilic identity, films such as Jonas Mekas's *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1975), Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1975), Raul Ruiz's *Of Great Events and Ordinary People* (1979), Marilu Maller's *Unfinished Diary* (1983), Meena Nanji's *Voices of the Morning* (1991), Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* (1991), and Dick Hebdige's *Rambling Man* (1994). The exploration of displacement and cultural disorientation bridges the divide between the self and an Other who is specifiably kindred. In the first two of *Lost, Lost, Lost*'s six reels, Mekas focuses on the Brooklyn-based community of Lithuanians, the Displaced Persons, who in escaping Soviet persecution in the immediate post-World War II years experience profound dispossession—of land, climate, custom, language, and cultural context. The poets and statesmen of Lithuania find themselves without familiar mooring in a land whose size and world stature doubles that of the Soviet Union, reinforcing their sense of oppression at the hands of the "big nations." Although Mekas's magisterial film has most frequently been categorized as an autobiographical work of the American avant-garde, in fact it charts at least three histories over a fourteen-year period

(1949–1963)—that of the Lithuanian exiles, the ban-the-bomb social protest movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the emergent underground film scene of the same period. This filmic documentation takes as its pivot Mekas's own history and experience but envelops it in layers of historical documentation. Mekas's subjectivity is eloquently performed across decades of real time, three hours of film time, but his is an identity constituted, as Aronowitz has argued, by multiple and specific relations to institutions and significant others, all of whom are in motion.¹⁸

During the post-*vérité* period between 1970 and 1995, documentary explorations of gay and lesbian identities have exhibited a particular dynamism and vitality. In this category I would include works such as *Territories* (Sankofa Film and Video Collective, 1984), *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1989), Gurinder Chadha's *I'm British But . . .* (1989), Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim* (1990), Sadie Benning's prolific output from 1988 through 1992—including *If Every Girl Had a Diary* (1990), *Jollies* (1990), and *It Wasn't Love* (1992)—*Thank You and Good Night* (Jan Oxenberg, 1991), Sandi DuBowski's *Tomboychik* (1993), and Deborah Hoffmann's *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* (1994). There is no template to which these works conform; only a few of them feature a coming-out scenario, and those that do (*Tongues Untied*, for example) often discover ways to reinvent the form. Riggs's controversial piece may be the most outspokenly politicized of the group from its opening incantation ("Brother to brother, brother to brother . . . brother to brother, brother to brother") to its iconoclastic summary claim, "black men loving black men is *the* revolutionary act." From the outset, Riggs puts himself and his body on the line. In an opening sequence, Riggs, undulating and unclothed, moves rhythmically against a black, featureless background, riveting us with his fiery gaze and dramatic narration. But the temptation to read the tape as an exclusively first-person discourse is undermined by the recurring presence of a black men's group, which functions as a rapping and snapping Greek chorus. It is this collectivity of black gay men (of whom Marlon is but one) that occupies the film's political and ethical balance point. Successfully fusing the personal with the social, *Tongues Untied* is both a germinal political manifesto of its epoch and a paradigmatic instance of the new documentary subjectivity.

Other gay- and lesbian-identified pieces take up the maker's sexuality less explicitly. Frequently these works attempt to situate the artist-subject in the familial order, to witness or account for the difficulties of accommodation within rigid family structures to queer sensibilities and life choices. In these cases, identity comes to be constructed less in relation to the family as a relatively abstract institution than to particular, well-loved

family members with whom the maker must nevertheless settle accounts. Often, this relative (the mother in Hoffmann's tape, a grandmother in DuBowski's and Oxenberg's pieces) is ill, dead, or dying. Sexuality and its sources or etiology are only occasionally the overt subject matter of such work. Instead these films and tapes affirm the degree to which the (queer) identities of the makers are bound up with those of certain special (but straight) family members. These mothers and grandmothers, heterosexual but unerringly eccentric, have helped create the people the artists have become. Works such as these mourn and memorialize loss, yet they testify with equal force to continuity, to the intransigence of subjectivity, a process charged and revived by contact with significant others in life and in memory. These works are perhaps the next generation of the new queer subjectivity on film and tape. Janus-faced, looking behind as well as ahead, personal yet embedded in the commonality of family life, these are works that bridge many gaps of human difference—those of generation, gender, and sexuality.

How can we account for the dramatic, even explosive, appearance of new subjectivities on film and tape as the century comes to a close? Julia Watson has written about the historical conditions in which women have voiced their "unspeakable differences" through autobiographical discourses: "For the immigrant or multicultural daughter, naming the unspeakable is at once a transgressive act that knowingly seeks to expose and speak the boundaries on which the organization of cultural knowledge depends and a discursive strategy that, while unverifiable, allows a vital 'making sense' of her own multiple differences."¹⁹ Such a statement well summarizes the circumstances in which this latest phase of documentary exposition has arisen. During the direct cinema period, self-reference was shunned. But far from a sign of self-effacement, this was the symptomatic silence of the empowered, who sought no forum for self-justification or display. And why would they need one? These white male professionals had assumed the mantle of filmic representation with the ease and self-assurance of a birthright. Not so the current generation of performative documentarists. In more ways than one, their self-enactments are transgressive. Through their explorations of the (social) self, they are speaking the lives and desires of the many who have lived outside "the boundaries of cultural knowledge."