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Q & A: Poetics of the Documentary Film Interview

The study of documentary film needs a closer scrutiny of essential formal devices. This essay analyzes one of those practices with the goal of proposing a poetics of the film interview. David Bordwell explains: “A historical poetics of cinema produces knowledge in answer to two broad questions: 1. What are the principles according to which films are constructed and by means of which they achieve particular effects? 2. How and why have these principles arisen and changed in particular empirical circumstances?” (371). The importance of the interview in the contemporary documentary film requires an understanding of its fundamental principles. Many contemporary documentary films are little more than interviews and compilation material. Landmark works such as *Shoah* (1985) are almost completely interview based, and celebrated filmmakers such as Errol Morris establish their projects firmly on the interview. Interviews rarely operate as a neutral means of verbal explanation. Poetics can demonstrate how cinematic form shapes the interview into more than a simple question-and-answer exchange. Such a method allows analysts to examine the interplay between sound and image and enriches our understanding of the screen documentary, a mode in which content often eclipses the crucial operations of form. A poetics of the interview will make filmmakers sensitive to the impact of their formal decisions and viewers aware of how the design of the interview shapes their response.

Historical Origins

A poetics arises from historical practice, so how has the interview managed to move to such a central place in the documentary? The prominence of the interview is a noteworthy historical development that helps distinguish the contemporary documentary from its predecessors.

From *Nanook of the North* in 1922 until the transformation of the documentary in the landmark works of 1960, particularly *Primary* and *Chronicle of the Summer*, the interview rarely appears. In his 1934 essay, “The Creative Use of Sound,” John Grierson discusses sound montage, asynchronous ideas, a choral effect, and sound imagery but makes no mention of the interview (157–63). The interview begins to assume prominence only during the television era and after effective mobile sound equipment becomes employed around 1960. Thomas Waugh has accurately identified the interview as a “basic artifact of television culture” (246), and its verbal lineage can be traced back through broadcasting to radio and print journalism (Bell and Leeuwen 28–59). Two streams of influence have shaped the contemporary documentary interview: the French cinema vérité tradition, with roots in ethnography, and the American political heritage, with ties to television journalism. But documentary historians have failed to acknowledge the dual influences and the crucial choices they pose for the filmmaker. A brief review of key documentary histories portrays the important distinction between these two schools of documentary interview.

Erik Barnouw emphasizes the French cinema vérité tradition. Understanding this tradition depends upon distinguishing between the Anglo-American “direct cinema” and the French cinema vérité (Barnouw 240, 254). Direct cinema avoided the interview. Though the filmmaker could record interviews, such as the journalists’ with Bob Dylan in *Don’t Look Back* (D. A. Pennebaker, 1967) and the interrogation of students by school authorities in *High School* (Frederick Wiseman, 1968), the disciple of direct cinema aspired to the filmmaker’s nonintervention in the social world under observation. On the contrary, the cinema vérité tradition, led by Jean Rouch in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), embraced the interview as a central catalyst in the interaction between filmmaker and subject. For

Rouch, engagement with the world rather than detached observation should guide the documentary filmmaker. As a result, *Chronicle of a Summer* highlights interview dynamics and employs numerous self-conscious approaches, including the interview subjects commenting on their interviews and the interviewers reflecting on their practice.

Furthermore, vérité featured the exploratory encounter rather than authoritative statements; the interview subject often expresses doubt, uncertainty, or contradiction in reaching for an elusive understanding. The vérité interview was adapted by Chris Marker in *Le Joli Mai* (1963) and aggressively embraced by Marcel Ophuls in his influential *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970). In Ophuls's documentary on the occupation of wartime France, the on-camera confrontation of the filmmaker with the interview subject served as an essential counterpoint to the found footage. The interview attempted to wrestle the truth from a series of friendly or hostile witnesses, whereas the images often presented a distorted record, even blatant propaganda, of occupied Vichy France. As a result, the verbal evidence was privileged in contrast to the distortions of the visual record.

Taking a cue from Ophuls, later filmmakers, prominently Claude Lanzmann, often exhibited a suspicion of visual information. Connie Fields's *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980) offers another example of the Ophuls model in which the testimony of interviewees is privileged over the historical record presented in the found footage. The innovative practices of Rouch and Ophuls changed the direction of documentary. Barnouw notes that cinema vérité "gave status to the interview, a device that had been shunned by most documentarists" (261). By 1970 the interview had become a significant tool and had shifted the relationship between sound and image in documentary practice.

In France the lineage of the interview develops through Rouch's ethnographic films and positions the filmmaker as a provocateur seeking a personal revelation from his subject. On the other hand, in the United States the interview's genesis is more closely related to television journalism and Emile de Antonio's political cinema. Surprisingly, Barnouw's influential history fails to acknowledge de Antonio. By contrast, important documentary historians Bill Nichols and Thomas Waugh emphasize de Antonio and the American influence upon the interview without giving sufficient attention to the French. De Antonio was attracted to the interview as a reaction against the detach-

ment of direct cinema and the movement's inability to engage with compelling political issues. Furthermore, the filmmaker reacted against the balanced pose of American network news; rather, he wanted to persuade his audience to instigate social change. Nonetheless, he found many of his models and materials in television journalism. De Antonio's documentaries began in the television archives with *Point of Order* (1963), a portrait of the army-McCarthy hearings completely assembled from found footage. With *Rush to Judgement* (1966) de Antonio introduced the interview into a mix with the found footage. *In the Year of the Pig* (1968), de Antonio's investigation of the Vietnam War, achieves a mature fluency in the found footage/interview exchange. As Waugh has explained, de Antonio's collage style is "fundamentally aural . . . films of verbal language and dialogue" animated by the movement between the historical found footage and the analytic interview (249). The filmmaker himself acknowledges that "words are very important . . . in all of my work" (Waugh 249). Like that of the French, de Antonio's use of the interview enhanced the verbal at the expense of the visual.

De Antonio's use of the interview is distinct from that of Rouch or Ophuls. The French filmmakers self-consciously highlight the mechanics of the interview and feature the transforming power of the encounter between interviewer and interviewee. On the other hand, *In the Year of the Pig* blends its interviews into the historical footage of warfare, political speeches, public demonstrations, staged events, etc. The interview commentary frequently operates like a traditional voice-over narrator. Many of the interviews themselves, David Halberstam's, for example, are actually found interviews recorded years before the production. Without careful examination it is difficult to tell which interviews were conducted by de Antonio and which are found. Only on one occasion, near the middle of the film, does a clapboard appear and an offscreen question from the filmmaker precede a statement by Senator Thurston Morton. As opposed to the cinema vérité style, which strives to instigate a special reaction from the confrontation between filmmaker and interview subject, de Antonio's self-effacing approach uses the arrangement of his evidence—found footage and interviews—to highlight the reasoned argument. Rather than revealing themselves, de Antonio's subjects present information or offer analysis in order to persuade the audience. Both the cinema vérité model and de Antonio's practice exercised an influence upon what was to become after 1970 the

dominant practice in contemporary documentary, the film composed of interviews and found footage.

The historical origins of the interview reveal vital options. In the cinema vérité approach the subject of the film arises from the confrontation between filmmaker and interviewee in which the presence of the filmmaker is a dynamic provocation. It looks for witnesses who speak from a position of vulnerability. Often a tension emerges between interview and image, filmmaker and interviewee. Cinema vérité seeks out the division, hesitations, and ambivalence in testimonials that circle within a complex field of truths. By contrast, the political approach poses a subject and then enlists the interview as a tool for analysis that typically functions in a complementary relationship with the imagery. The political tradition seeks out authorities who can speak from a position of knowledge. The vérité approach uses the interview to reveal or expose, the political to persuade. As a result, these two traditions feature substantially difficult techniques and goals that inform our understanding of interview poetics. That said, these two traditions need not be mutually exclusive, and over time they have evolved and even blended into each other.

In spite of the prominence of the documentary interview, it has received little attention in the scholarly literature. Bill Nichols has perhaps made the most sustained attempt at analyzing the interview. He divides the documentary movement into a series of modes that represent competing styles and historical trends (Nichols, *Introduction* 138; see also *Representing* and “The Voice”). His “participatory” mode, sometimes called “direct address” or the “interactive,” emphasizes the interaction of filmmaker and subject and features the interview. The power exercised by the filmmaker over the interview subject motivates Nichols. He argues from a political perspective for a more egalitarian exchange to counter hierarchies that reinforce institutional authority. He wants the filmmaker to explore his or her subject by encouraging the active participation of the interviewees. In this regard, Nichols poses four categories of interviews: the “conversation,” in which there is a free and open exchange between interviewer and subject; the “masked interview”; the “pseudo-dialogue”; and the “common interview,” in which the interviewer exercises increasing authority by carefully structuring the exchange to realize a predetermined outcome (*Representing* 50–56). Nichols tries to correlate degrees of participation to the design of the interview, but no clear model emerges. He

fails for at least two reasons: first, because design qualities do not determine the degree of participation, and second, because he does not take into account the offscreen production practices.

Most documentary interviews lack the sense of spontaneity and honesty that characterized cinema vérité at its most powerful. Not only do filmmakers edit interviews, often selecting only bits of a long conversation, but many do preinterviews. The onscreen exchange may have been rehearsed in a preliminary session. In speaking of *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* Connie Fields explains, “We did extensive pre-interviews—seven hundred women were interviewed over the phone, two hundred in person on audio tape, thirty-five were videotaped; and we filmed five” (Zheutlin 160). Maybe the initial meeting between filmmaker and subject influenced the project, but the interview that appears onscreen no longer portrays a free and open exchange. The eventual shooting, trying to recapture the impact of that first, stimulating encounter, may be carefully structured. Performance is also a factor. Dave Davis acknowledges, “You plan to film people to some extent based on how they will come across in front of the camera. Some people freeze up in front of a camera, some don’t” (Zheutlin 151). As a result, though an interviewee’s influence may be enormous, its degree is not readily transparent.

The exploratory aspect of the documentary may have taken place largely in preproduction, but the fresh experience of its discoveries needs a strong interview performance to come across onscreen. Furthermore, granting freedom to interviewees, as Nichols suggests, may jeopardize the unity and coherence of the project. As a result, Nichols’s attempt to classify interviews based upon the degree of subject participation is not an effective tool. On the other hand, a useful poetics of the interview draws upon the options that arise from the historical tradition of the documentary, particularly those posed by cinema vérité and political journalism.

Analytical Categories

The contemporary documentary interview needs to be re-examined with special attention to historical precedent and the relationship between sound and image. This essay poses five categories contributing to the poetics of the interview: presence, perspective, pictorial context, performance, and polyvalence. These categories establish the parameters for

the poetics of the documentary interview that allow us to analyze contending approaches with precision.

The first category involves the presence of the filmmaker and bears on the process of the interview. Ken Burns, for example, eliminates the filmmaker's presence and any evidence of the question-and-answer exchange. As a result, the speaker addresses the camera directly, reinforcing his authority with the viewer. *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (Alex Gibney, 2005) follows the Burns practice. At the opposite pole, Michael Moore generally presents himself in conversation with his subjects, often contesting or supporting the range of opinions and attitudes that emerge. Everything is filtered through Moore's performance as the jocular Everyman, and the filmmaker is fully acknowledged. Morgan Spurlock follows the Moore pattern in *Super Size Me* (2004) by emphasizing the central presence of the filmmaker who is regularly in conversation with his subjects. Morris takes an intermediary pose, occasionally acknowledging his presence with a question or offscreen comment but not intruding into the image. Rather than instigating a confrontation with his frequently controversial subjects, Morris prefers suggestive and open-ended questions that invite an expansive reply, allowing the subject to reveal his or her personality to the viewer. Werner Herzog in *Grizzly Man* (2005) is similar to Morris. Only occasionally does Herzog's voice arise with an offscreen question, but gradually the filmmaker reveals the quest of his subject, Timothy Treadwell, developing into madness. As a result, the Burns interview often seems like a lecture, Moore presents a conversation, and Morris fosters a confession or therapeutic self-appraisal.

Perspective is the second category; it concerns setting and camera position. The camera can remain at a medium distance from its subject, allowing an evocative setting to develop its visual dimension, sometimes adapting the "walk-and-talk" setup common to fiction film. By contrast, the filmmaker can work toward neutralizing the setting and assume a traditional TV framing of head and shoulders, closer to the "stand-and-deliver" practice in fiction filming. Finally, the camera may move abnormally close to the speaker or foster a direct stare into the lens to gain a greater sense of intimacy or intensity. Burns generally keeps his setting neutral and his distance comfortably conversational while allowing for some variety in perspective. *Howard Zinn: You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train* (Deb Ellis and Denis Mueller, 2005) is another example of this approach. Morris likes to foster a greater sense of intimacy, with eyes

looking directly into the lens or the camera close up on the face. Michael Apted's *Up* series occasionally uses this technique in interviewing subjects about their personal development. Moore is more likely to cultivate the social environment surrounding his witnesses, as does *Street Fight* (Marshall Curry, 2005), the chronicle of the Newark mayoral race that delivers a palpable feel of the urban milieu. Who can forget the slaughter and gutting of the rabbit in *Roger and Me* (1989) while Moore asked his subject about "pets or meat"?

Pictorial context refers to the independent imagery that complements or works in counterpoint to the verbal testimony of the speaker. The filmmaker can cut away from the talking head to a montage of found footage, a staged reenactment, or other material shot for the production. Once the interviewee's presence is established his or her voice can work independently of the image as a narrator explaining or commenting on events. The interview may be divided and dispersed, giving the subject a growing presence over the course of the entire film. Furthermore, the filmmaker may interrupt an interview by cutting away to another episode or interview subject, only to return to the original interview later. In such an instance the filmmaker may offer us crucial information that may change our attitude toward the subject. In *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) Errol Morris mocks the credibility of Judge Metcalfe and Mrs. Miller, a witness against Randall Adams, by cutting away to silly low-budget Hollywood films to discredit their testimony.

The fourth category is performance, an undervalued visual element in the interview. Documentary filmmakers from Robert Flaherty to the present have directed their casts and can work with them to fashion memorable performances. In addition to speech, facial expression, hand gestures, body language, and clothing characterize the interviewee. Though Bill Nichols has reservations about the impact of a star, most documentary films welcome them. The performances of Shelby Foote in *The Civil War* (Ken Burns, 2000), the rabbit lady in *Roger and Me*, and Temple Grandin in *Stairway to Heaven* (Errol Morris, 1999) speak of a sensitive collaboration between filmmaker and interviewee. *Crumb* (Terry Zwigoff, 1994) is a memorable documentary in which the performances of the maladjusted family members—Crumb's bizarre mother and his troubled brothers, Charles and Maxon—recall the grotesque comics that brought the subject fame. The ability of a subject to perform for the camera may be a vital

element in convincing the documentary filmmaker to pursue a project in the first place. Just as in fiction films, the dynamic visual presence of an actor can create a magnetic attraction to the screen.

Polyvalence is a fifth category of interview poetics. Polyvalence is distinct from the other four because rather than being an aspect of the interview's design it emerges as a result of the whole. Polyvalence gauges the interview's overall formal effect. Here the choice arises between affirming or undermining the authority of the interviewee as opposed to a more exploratory approach in which the subject develops and evolves over the course of an interview, expressing hesitation, doubt, ambivalence, or even contradiction. Rather than a unified film that articulates a clear attitude toward its subject, the ensemble of interviews may contribute to a range of opinions in which a genuine tension or conflict emerges. For example, in *The Fallen Champ: The Untold Story of Mike Tyson* (1993) Barbara Kopple sustains a delicate balance over the course of many interviews between portraying the boxer as a victimized ghetto refugee or a brutal thug. A difference may also arise between the filmmaker and subject, especially if the interviewee is given a genuine opportunity to contest the filmmaker. The options that arise in this category are similar to the distinction Carl Plantinga draws between the textual authority of the "formal voice" as opposed to the ambiguity of the "open voice" (101–19). *The Civil War* (1990) may be Ken Burns's most satisfying documentary because of the range of opinion expressed by historians Shelby Foote and Barbara Fields, common soldiers such as the Yankee Elisha Hunt Rhodes and the rebel Sam Watkins, and Southern women like Mary Chesnutt versus Northern men like George Templeton Strong. More typically, Burns cultivates unity from the authority of his interview subjects. Michael Moore makes his attitude clear over the course of his films, but he does allow for sympathetic testimonials from those with whom he disagrees, such as the color lady in *Roger and Me*. He sometimes displays his own uncertainty, as in *Bowling for Columbine* when his interview subjects have no explanation for the baffling contrast between Canada's minimal gun violence compared to that of the United States, even though Canada has similar laws allowing for ready access to firearms. Oftentimes the detachment or irony in Moore's humor creates an off-balance feeling toward an interview subject, such as Fred Ross, the eviction deputy in *Roger and Me*, that enhances the polyvalence in his films. Errol Morris frequently develops a complex

range of feelings toward his eccentric subjects in which understanding, sympathy, and even mystery replace the speaker's authority. The lion tamer, the mole rat specialist, the robot scientist, and the topiary gardener in *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* (1997) are among Errol Morris's most enigmatic interview subjects. Linda Williams has pointed to the polyvalent pursuit of truth in *The Thin Blue Line*. She writes, "It is precisely Morris's refusal to fix the final truth, to go on seeking reverberations and repetitions that, I argue, gives this film its exceptional power of truth" (Williams 388).

Poetics in Practice

The above theoretical framework will now guide a comparison of the interview in the recent work of Ken Burns, Michael Moore, and Errol Morris, with special attention to *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (2004), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), and *The Fog of War* (2003). These three celebrated filmmakers are among the leaders of the contemporary documentary, and each designs the interview in a distinctive and imaginative fashion. While none of these cases represents the contemporary interview practice as a whole, these instances give a sense of the choices a filmmaker makes in designing the interview. I want to examine three interviews, asking in each instance how these categories function. I focus on the Stanley Crouch interview in *Unforgivable Blackness*, the James Nichols interview in *Bowling for Columbine*, and the "Seeing and Believing" episode with Robert McNamara from *The Fog of War*.

Ken Burns generally interviews a range of authorities who contribute definitive opinions on the subject. In the tradition of American television journalism, these authorities generally function like a voice-over narrator, offering exposition or evidence or drawing a general principle or concept from the particular details presented in the film. At least since his success with Shelby Foote in *The Civil War*, Burns has sought a "star" performer from among his field of authorities who can combine a specialist's vivid description of detail with the storytelling ability of a bar-room raconteur. The star authority strives for an intimate pose that makes the viewer feel like the confidante of an insider. In some respects Wynton Marsalis assumed this role in *Jazz* (Ken Burns, 2001), largely because of his ability to illustrate musical concepts with a quick phrase on his trumpet.

In *Unforgivable Blackness* nine authorities appear throughout the 213-minute documentary. A few, such as W. C. Heinz, Jose Torres, and George Plimpton, appear only once or twice. Others, including Randy Roberts, Jack Newfield, and Bert Sugar, develop a presence over the course of the film with regular appearances. Three African Americans—Gerald Early, James Earl Jones, and Stanley Crouch—receive sufficient screen time and presence to emerge as distinctive voices. Polyvalence is suppressed, as all these authorities contribute to the unified voice of the film. Stanley Crouch is the privileged star of this group.

In *Unforgivable Blackness* Crouch functions as a contemporary black authority on African American culture who explains the meaning of Jack Johnson during the champion's lifetime as well as today. Of particular note is Crouch's willingness to extrapolate from the experience of Jack Johnson to larger issues in American culture. That is, Crouch generalizes and conceptualizes from the Johnson case, often on a grand scale, so the boxer becomes an embodiment of pure individualism and the life of a free man. His ring victory over Jim Jeffries is similar to the Battle of Gettysburg; the struggle to bring Johnson down is compared to the triumph of Jim Crow in the South. Crouch supports the documentary's claim that Johnson's significance exceeds the celebrity of a champion prizefighter by portraying him as a sterling example of important truths about our society.

The design of the interview serves these aims. Stanley Crouch is the first and the last of the authorities to appear onscreen. The Crouch interview is divided into fifteen appearances throughout the film, so he achieves a pervasive influence that exceeds his actual screen time. In most appearances Crouch appears in a single-take, close-range face shot that offers a minimal perspective, though he occasionally speaks in voice-over for images. The filmmaker's presence is completely offscreen; at no point do we ever see Burns or hear his question. The editing enhances Crouch's performance by limiting his screen image to his best gestures toward the camera. His appearances build to a climax in the final section when he reports a personal story of his father's encounter with Johnson, during which Crouch becomes a voice-over narrator of an extended episode illustrated with found footage. Here the pictorial context presents unity of voice and image. Finally, Crouch pronounces the film's closing statement, speaking directly to the camera:

In his way, on a far lower scale, Johnson is there with people like Lincoln, Thomas Edison, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong. These home-made guys, these guys who you couldn't figure out, there's no recipe for. He's one of them. He's the kinda person who could come about only in the United States. Because America, whatever its problems, still has a certain kind of elasticity, a certain latitude that allows the person to dream a big enough dream that can be achieved if the person is as big as the dream.

Crouch is able to achieve his star turn because of his conceptualization of Johnson's experience, because of the number and ordering of his appearances, and finally because of his ingratiating performance, both vocal and in gestures toward the camera. In performance, Crouch exceeds the competing authorities, even the veteran actor James Earl Jones. Most likely, Crouch exercised a significant influence upon Burns in preinterview conversations, even though his performance appears well rehearsed. He expresses most emphatically the voice of the film. His seventh appearance, when he discusses American ideas of "Paradise Lost," is an example of his skill. In forty seconds Crouch offers a disarming explanation of various cultural "myths" or lies that exercise ideological power or, as he puts it, a desire to return "back to normal, i.e., us on top and them below us." Here Crouch looks away and back to the lens as he leans toward the camera for emphasis. He smiles, uses hand gestures, widens his eyes, and ends with a concluding glare. His vocal inflection includes rhythmic shifts and pauses. All these gestures function effectively within the restricted space of the close-up face shot, leaving the impression that he is speaking to the viewer as an intimate confidante. Furthermore, his ability to generalize about Johnson is matched with wit and a glee in storytelling. Crouch loves his subject and takes pleasure in sharing his tales. These ingratiating qualities remove all scholarly pretenses and promote a sense of getting the insider's truth from one who knows by experience. In *Unforgivable Blackness* the authority and veracity of the star performance reinforce the historical lesson about individual freedom promoted by the film. Though the ideas offered by Crouch are fundamentally verbal, his proclamations are reinforced visually by his dynamic presence.

In *Bowling for Columbine* Michael Moore explores a range of opinion in trying to discover the causes and effects of gun violence in the United States. Over the course of the film the numerous interview subjects sort themselves out as friends or enemies. They range from sympathetic figures struggling to contain violence, such as Arthur Busch, the

Flint County prosecutor, and Barry Glassner, the author of *Culture of Fear*, to suspicious characters who appear to promote violence, such as Dick Hurlin, the producer of *Cops*, and Evan McCollum, a public relations man for Lockheed Martin. Finally, there are the openly hostile confrontations with Dick Clark, representatives of KMart, and Charlton Heston. The James Nichols encounter is an early example of Moore in conversation with a man whom the filmmaker suspects of fostering violence. Moore's aim in talking to Nichols is to expose how an apparently normal person is a highly dangerous, unstable man who nevertheless has ready access to powerful firearms.

Moore uses interviews in a manner very different from that of Ken Burns. Though Moore represents the American political documentary associated with de Antonio, his interview tactics are those of the French vérité tradition, particularly Marcel Ophuls. Rather than simply promoting the interviewee's authority, Moore is prepared to challenge his subjects or manipulate them into a revealing confession. Moore's ubiquitous presence frames the contending interviews and maintains the unified voice of the film. Whereas Burns and de Antonio favor the monologue, Moore usually presents a dialogue, as the filmmaker works in tandem with his subject. However, as with Stanley Crouch, humor and performance function as vital ingredients with an important visual dimension. But here the star performer is ultimately Michael Moore, the first genuine marquee attraction produced by documentary film.

The Nichols interview lasts about two and a half minutes and is divided into three parts that offer distinct perspectives: part one introduces Moore and Nichols standing on Nichols's soybean farm, part two moves from outside the house to the Nichols kitchen, and the third part returns to the kitchen and peers at Nichols in his bedroom before concluding at the kitchen table. The perspective gradually penetrates into the house and serves as an analogue for penetrating into Nichols's demented consciousness. The three parts are separated first by a sequence explaining Nichols's association with the convicted Oklahoma City bombers, his brother and Timothy McVey. The second interruption resumes an earlier meeting with the Michigan teens Brent and DJ, who are involved in illegal weapons trafficking. The pictorial context associating the interviewee with the Oklahoma bombing and weapons trafficking identifies Nichols as dangerous. The interview proper works toward Nichols revealing to us that he is a menace. Moore begins talking to a prosperous middle-aged midwestern farmer

about his crops. The farmyard and the kitchen emphasize the common qualities of this man. Gradually, Nichols's extreme views emerge as he dismisses the explosives stored in the barn as "normal farm stuff," anticipates "blood running in the streets" when people discover that the government has enslaved them, and laughs uneasily, alluding to those who call him "a wildman." He joins Moore in condemning the Oklahoma City bombing, allowing that he must resist government oppression with the pen but keep the sword handy. However, when he takes Moore offcamera to his bedroom to show him the .44 Magnum under his pillow and then points the loaded weapon at his head, Nichols confirms our suspicions. Finally, Moore confronts him with hard questions about the constitutional right to bear arms, and Nichols is maneuvered into admitting that the public should not have access to weapons-grade plutonium because "there's wackos out there." In retrospect, Moore has directed the performance to end on the comic punch line in which Nichols ironically voices the fear that he represents for the audience. The interview has carefully orchestrated perspective and pictorial content to anticipate the subject's revelation.

The impact of the *Bowling for Columbine* interviews arises from the bizarre proponents of gun culture revealing their mania to the viewer. The James Nichols interview is the stellar example of comic effect growing from the juxtaposition of the normal and the crazy as the interview subject eventually reveals his obsessions. The art of the interview emerges from Moore gradually moving Nichols from the typical toward the bizarre. The perspective and the pictorial context are vital in cultivating the comic juxtaposition and suggesting a link between mainstream American habits and an obsessive attraction to guns, a link the film never satisfactorily explains.

Michael Moore emphasizes a broad perspective, tension in his pictorial context, and performance to cultivate the humorous juxtaposition of the ordinary and the bizarre. But the verbal irony at the conclusion of the interview, when Nichols suggests to us that he is one of the "wackos" we should fear, illustrates that words are not straightforward in their meaning; rather, the polyvalence of information, visual and verbal, works together to communicate with the audience. Whereas in the case of *Unforgivable Blackness* most, if not all, of Stanley Crouch's statements could be understood simply printed on the page, the menace represented by Nichols would not be fully conveyed if his replies were read rather than seen.

Errol Morris's interview technique draws upon the confessional approach of Jean Rouch and the French vérité tradition. Morris prompts his subjects with a few questions but allows them to tell their story at length. Eventually, the subjects reveal their idiosyncrasies, their contradictions, their insights, both the wonder and the flaws of their humanity. A close camera with the subject looking directly into the lens establishes the perspective for the confessional approach and fosters intense contact with the viewer. The filmmaker's presence hovers at the margins with only occasional intrusions, an offscreen question or comment. The filmmaker's voice speaks chiefly through the elaborate pictorial context, most conspicuously the associative, lyric montage inserts. Morris draws upon what Carl Plantinga and Bill Nichols have described as the poetic documentary mode.

The Fog of War is different from *Unforgivable Blackness* and *Bowling for Columbine* because the entire film is based on an interview with a single man, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Though McNamara's statements, culled from over twenty-three hours of speaking to the camera, serve as the foundation of the film, the pictorial context constructed by Errol Morris is stronger than the comparable work of Ken Burns and Michael Moore. McNamara's performance, particularly his verbal report, and Morris's perspective and pictorial context are at times in contest for control over the meaning of the film. The result is a polyvalent tension between word and image. Morris has the unusual ability to grant his interview subjects enormous latitude for interaction while the filmmaker still commands the voice of the film. All in all, *The Fog of War* is a more polyvalent treatment of the verbal and visual relationship in the documentary interview than the other two films. I have selected a two-minute excerpt in which McNamara discusses the Gulf of Tonkin incident that leads to lesson seven, "Belief and seeing are often both wrong" to illustrate how Morris shapes his interview. The sequence runs for one minute and fifty-one seconds, comprising twelve shots beginning on a medium perspective of McNamara explaining "It was just confusion" and ending on a series of dominoes falling onto a map of Vietnam, with the last domino falling at Saigon.

The aim of the sequence is to illustrate a lesson ("Belief and seeing are often both wrong"), with McNamara reporting that the decision to initiate a bombing campaign against North Vietnam was based on an erroneous belief. However, Morris emphasizes the misperception by tak-

ing McNamara's final words in the sequence, "it carried such heavy costs," and using them to trigger the dominoes falling onto the map. The movement from the statement of qualified misunderstanding to the implications that the result was a conflagration engulfing nations is based on an evocative visual trope elegantly staged for the camera.

The design of the interview sequence fosters the ascendancy of the pictorial context over McNamara's performance. The verbal reports establish the foundation of information guiding the sequence, but the visual treatment of the interview allows the imagery to grow in force and finally surpass the restrained oral report. Three of the first five shots present McNamara speaking at length in a constrained performance. The first two shots present him in medium-range perspective centered in the image. This first part of the sequence interrupts the testimony with only two brief shots of underwater torpedoes moving backward. The reverse-motion footage uses the pictorial context to underline the retraction that "it didn't happen." In the second part of the sequence the dominoes appear, beginning in shot six, and come to overshadow McNamara. The filming animates the dominoes dynamically, presenting them in six of the closing seven shots, each time from a different perspective accented by camera movement and growing in scale. McNamara's last two appearances in the sequence, in shots five and nine, move him into a close-up face shot and skew his image to the left side of the composition. Shot five is even divided with a jump cut to make McNamara appear further off-balance and cornered. With his closing words that the mistake "carried such heavy costs" the dominoes begin to fall and take over the sequence. The appearance of the dominoes in shot six is joined by music that rises to the end of the sequence, adding drum beats to strings in shots eleven and twelve. In the final shot the voice of Errol Morris makes apparent the filmmaker's presence: "We see what we wanna believe." McNamara replies, "Belief and seeing, they're both often wrong" as the last dominoes fall onto the map at Saigon. Morris's play with the torpedo footage, his reenactment of the dominoes, as well as his shifting perspectives on McNamara give the sequence a powerful pictorial context that finally sweeps over the interviewee's performance and undermines its claims. The filmmaker cultivates polyvalence from a growing conflict between the visual elements and the verbal report. Here the perspective and the pictorial context metaphorically express the enormous consequences underlying the generalization "it carried such heavy costs."

Michael Renov explains that “the fundamental aim of poetics [is] to submit aesthetic forms to rigorous investigation as to their composition, function and effect” (20). This essay proposes a poetics of the documentary film interview based on presence, perspective, pictorial context, performance, and polyvalence. What does an analysis of these compositional elements reveal about the function and effect of these three interviews? In the Stanley Crouch interview Ken Burns depends upon Crouch’s performance. Perspective and a complementary pictorial context foster his authority, but Crouch’s use of language and gesture commands the interview. Michael Moore uses perspective, pictorial context, performance, and verbal irony to give his encounter with James Nichols a more complex, polyvalent play. Furthermore, the filmmaker’s maneuvering of his subject into a revealing confession highlights the filmmaker’s powerful presence in shaping the interview. In *The Fog of War* Errol Morris’s deft treatment of pictorial context surpasses McNamara’s verbal testimony. Performance and perspective are muted as factors. Even though the film is grounded in a single interview, the handling of found footage, metaphorical restaging, the montage, and composition produce a polyvalent tension. Though the two-minute excerpt considered here only suggests the visual power of this film, Morris’s cinematic imagination invests his interview films with a force that testifies to the complexity of the contemporary documentary.

The documentary filmmaker is wise to draw upon the distinctive range of cinematic qualities at work in the interview. The poetic components proposed here remind us that a complex sound and image relationship is an important element in the interview and can be cultivated. These poetic categories provide a theoretical framework that highlights the documentary filmmaker’s vital options in designing a cinematic interview. Furthermore, they invite a more analytic study of the function and effect of the contemporary documentary film interview.

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