

■ I+C: CREATIVITY AND THE PRODUCTION OF CONTENT

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■ I+C: PRODUCCIÓN DE CONTENIDOS

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The desire for the real in documentary representation



The identifications that in the fiction film are dismissed as vicarious, illusory and ideologically dangerous are, in documentary, both permitted and proper to its project. This paper explores the ways in which the documentary film offers *mises en scènes* of desire and of imagining that enable identification even while, or rather, because the documentary film asserts itself as real.

Documentary film, like photography, satisfies not only our desire for reality represented, but also the wish to find that moment which is not only real, not only factual, but true. Indeed, the distinction these terms instantiate also locates a desire, namely, for a certainty of the knowable, and of the world as testable, producing a split between two domains: one of proper -- true -- knowledge, and a second domain of improper -- untrue -- fabrications. Such a "wish to know" (Freud's "epistophilia") the truth of the world both seeks an answer and is a questioning: is this really so, is it true? The splitting produced by this opposition between true and false inaugurates an uncertainty and becomes the locus of anxiety about not only

the truth of the world, but also of our own truth, the truth of our existence. I am drawing on the understanding offered by psychoanalysis to explore the specific ways that documentary engages this questioning address, and the interrelation that thereby arises of desire, knowledge and identification in its sounds and images.

Central to documentary is its representation of *the* world (Bill Nichols), its presentation of the sounds and images of reality. These are organised, Michael Renov has suggested, in relation to four kinds of aims:

- To record, reveal, preserve – a copying of the world
- To persuade or promote
- To analyze or interrogate
- To express

How does documentary address us with its facts, and with its desire to represent true reality? The sociologists Merton and Lazerfeld writing in 1944 argued that USA World War Two propaganda documentaries should engage viewers with knowledge. Through their interviews, 'We observed at once an interest in detailed circumstantial facts. Facts are in the saddle.... Facts, not the propagandist, speak.' What is our fascination with facts? Do facts speak for themselves? They suggested that a radio programme on merchant shipping convoys which explained in great technical detail how the speed of the convoy is determined by the slowest boat thereby implied a further, and subjective, meaning, that the merchant marine willingly put the collective good over individual good. (Paul Lazerfeld and Robert K. Merton, "The Psychological Analysis of Propaganda", in *Hollywood Writer's Congress*, 1943, pp 377-378.)

Knowledge is thus also a matter of identification, namely, of identifying as a subject who knows, and as a subject who comes to know -- both seeing for oneself the truth of reality, and an identification with the seen, the objects of knowledge and of the camera's observation -- other people, other subjects. Documentaries invoke and require identification; this is a cognitive process, and a matter of knowledge, for we must be able to identify their facts and recognize their meanings; in this we are positioned by the documentary's discourse of reality, identifying as the subject addressed.

Knowledge, as Michel Foucault demonstrated so well, isn't just there, rather it is what is recognized as knowledge by a community, that is, as having a specific or specified use-value



for a community, such as the knowledge of the effects of different plants -- efficacious or deleterious, or the understanding of light, or knowledge of poetry, or politics. Documentary film presents our society's discourses -- medicine, madness, science, democracy, but it also *figures* them, in images and sounds which exceed the linguistic statement, and sets them play as a series of statements about the world, and in the world.

Knowledge is independent of the subject as an objective understanding of the world, while at the same time, paradoxically, it is always for a subject, since it only exists in so far as it is known by some one, in the same way that Charles Sanders Peirce defined the sign as always implying an addressee.

The knowing of knowledge, which we speak of as something we possess, is both instrumental -- we know how to change a flat tire -- and something which has value and currency as a commodity that, for example, I trade in as an academic, for it is acquired only by learning. The coming to know of knowledge is, by contrast, a process. The world as a knowable entity, "reality", is constructed by the subject through its encounter with externality in a mastering that is also an acknowledgement of its mastery over us, as something we submit to. The tools humanity has fashioned are honed not just to fit reality but also to transform it, in an imagining of the world otherwise. Indeed the history of human endeavour is of our successful defiance of the apparent barriers of material reality -- of oceans traversed, skies penetrated, space conquered.

Knowledge, by making the material world "make sense", is at the same time a construct that wards off the emptiness of meaning of contingent reality. Science declares the knowability of the world, foreclosing the real as meaninglessness, and as such is, Jacques Lacan says, it is a form of sublimation.

Our relationship to knowing is not only rational and objective, however, but is as well an emotional engagement with the seen and heard that is often also called identification. How does documentary engage us in identifying? Documentary informs us of the world, offering us identities in the images and stories of other lives that it presents and that become fixed as known and knowable through its account and explanation of the world it shows. It thereby reassures us that our own, different, identities are equally knowable, engaging our desire for the certainty of our knowable and known identities.

What is the role of our encounters with the imaged and explained lives of others in documentary, and is it distinct from fiction? In documentary people speak to us, we are engaged by their address, that is, by how it positions us as addressees. Through its stories, documentary presents *mises en scènes* of desire, of possible outcomes for the contingent reality shown that engage us as desiring subjects. Storytelling, whether in literature, theatre, or film, is also one of the discursive practices of imagination through which we may envision ourselves as subjects of desire, of feeling. In documentary too we encounter the behaviours by which we may be recognized by ourselves and by others as subjects of (as well as subject to) an imaging and imagining through which we enact being, and our being for another, that is, our desiring, and this (in Freud's terms) whether as ambitious or erotic. It is a form of discourse through which we undertake that "care of the self" Foucault explored in his final volume of *The History of Sexuality*, of performing oneself within the world of one's others.

This will be explored through a consideration of the reality tv format *Wife Swap*. This documentary format puts couples together in terms of being opposites, performatively (in the sense of Jean Rouch's cinematic work) setting the scene for potential conflict, arising from the marked differences of approach to family life of the couples, as each wife first performs the tasks set down by her counter-part, and then takes charge of the home – housework, children, and husband – on her own terms. The learning curve this introduces for both the husbands and the children of each family produces the entertainment, as we see their reaction, hostile or pleased, which can never be wholly controlled, wholly a premeditated performance and thus makes possible moments of self-revelation, which we make take to be the "truth" of the person. At the same time it also displays possible modes of behaviour we might follow, or reject, while opening us to a series of wishes – that she or he be more considerate, less demanding, be willing to try different food, or just eat together as a family, etc.

The interrelation of objective knowledge and subjective understanding is explored in an examination of *Disaster at Hillsborough* (made by Yorkshire Television, UK, and broadcast in the UK documentary series "First Tuesday", in 1990. Produced by Chris Bryer and Roger Finnigan. A dvd version is available from Films Media Group: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, USA.), about the death of spectators as a result of overcrowding at a football match. The truth of the cause of the deaths is explored on the one hand through the images of scientific investigation of the time-line of the disaster, and diagrams of the stadium, the

placing of spectators, the architecture, the numbers of people, etc, and the views of the expert analysts. On the other hand we *hear and see* survivors talking not of their own survival but those they couldn't save, and we understand the disaster no longer as a series of facts about a stadium and policing of crowds, but as scene of human action and reaction.

Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Parts*, 2006, presents the stories of lives caught up by the natural disaster of Hurricane Katerina as a result not of its directly hitting New Orleans, but of the failure to maintain effectively the levees that protect the city from the surrounding water, and the failure of government to deliver help and support to the victims of the flooding. Through its montage of interviews with survivors filmed some three months later, and footage of the disaster from the news agencies, the film engages us in coming to know not facts but the experience of the consequences of facts made on the ground, that is, of those of who suffered 'the facts'.