6   How Can We Differentiate among Documentaries? Categories, Models, and the Expository and Poetic Modes of Documentary Film

MODELS AND MODES IN DOCUMENTARY FILM: THE NEED TO CLASSIFY

In chapter 1 we defined documentary as a form of cinema that speaks to us about actual situations and events. It involves real people (social actors) who present themselves to us in stories that convey a plausible proposal about or perspective on the lives, situations, and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a proposal or perspective on the historical world directly, adhering to known facts, rather than creating a fictional allegory.

Helpful though this definition is for documentaries in general, it scarcely begins to distinguish different types of documentary. Many documentaries violate any specific definition and mockumentaries deliberately blur the border zone between fiction and documentary in any case. There are no laws and few genuine rules when it comes to creative expression. What actually counts as a documentary remains fluid, open to debate across institutions, filmmakers, audiences, and the films themselves. Institutions, from television channels to foundations that support specific types of documentary film; filmmakers, from the extraverted Michael Moore to the self-effacing D. A. Pennebaker; films, from the searing *Night and Fog* (1955) to the hilarious *Super Size Me* (2004); and audience expectations that range from "show me the truth" to "entertain me" all co-exist. Favored styles come and go. Institutional opportunities and constraints, technological innovations,

creative inspiration, and evolving audience expectations constantly change the landscape of what counts as a documentary and what constitutes its horizon of possibility.

Rather than regret the failure of documentary films to comply with any one, single definition, and rather than lament the ability of any one definition to identify all the possible types of documentary, we can accept this fluidity as cause for celebration. It makes for a dynamic, evolving form. Fluid, fuzzy boundaries are testimony to growth and vitality. The amazing vigor and popularity of documentary films over the last 25 years is firm evidence that fluid boundaries and a creative spirit yield an exciting, adaptable art form.

This said, distinctions can still be made. New documentaries continue to bear strong resemblances to previous documentaries. In fact, it is possible to note a number of tendencies, or modes, such as the poetic and expository modes, at work in documentary. The modes were sketched out in chapter 1 and receive fuller consideration here and in the next chapter. These modes identify the different ways in which the voice of documentary manifests itself in cinematic terms. They differentiate documentaries in terms of formal, cinematic qualities. These qualities have existed as potential resources for decades, but in different proportions and with different emphases. Most films incorporate more than one mode, even though some modes are more prominent at one time or place than another. These modes serve as a skeletal framework that individual filmmakers flesh out according to their own creative disposition. But before we break down documentary representation into a number of modes, it is useful to take a brief, more distant view of documentary film as one component of cinema in general.

How we categorize and divide up a domain of experience is seldom a purely objective act in which we follow the natural fault lines given to us by a preexisting world. Science, which deals with the natural world, can classify in this way, but when what we want to classify is the product of our own human activity, natural fault lines quickly disappear. In relation to documentary film these categories belong to a continuing dialogue among institutions, filmmakers, films, and audiences rather than to the natural world. They evolve, change, consolidate, and scatter in unpredictable ways. The needs they meet at one moment may no longer be met in another. Filmmakers are usually among the first to

notice this as they seek new ways to tell stories and convey their point of view. Categories and concepts often play catch-up, trying to give coherence to the extraordinary array of works created by human activity.

## DOCUMENTARY FILM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP
TO OTHER KINDS OF FILM

From an adequate distance, we might see film clustered into fiction and nonfiction films that can be represented by two overlapping circles or spheres (Table 6.1).

Exclusively in the left-hand circle is fiction per se. Here we find the majority of fiction films that are readily identifiable as works that conjure up an imaginary world populated by actors who play assigned roles (characters). These characters appear to go about their business as if the camera that beholds them were in no way part of their world. What they say and, even more, what they do may be incredible, fantastic, seemingly impossible, and hence amazing, but it all unfolds as if such occurrences were a plausible part of the world the characters inhabit.

Exclusively in the right-hand circle is nonfiction, which includes documentary film, informational or "how to" films, scientific films, surveillance footage, and more. Here we find the majority of documentary films that are identifiable by (1) their representations in sound and image of a preexisting, historical world, (2) their reliance on social actors who present themselves rather than take on assigned roles, and (3) the intricate relationship that may arise between the interaction of the filmmaker and the film's social actors who clearly co-exist in the same historical world. It is from this interaction that the film's story, proposal, or perspective frequently arises.

In both circles, nestled in the zone of overlap, are forms that borrow from both traditions and get classified as one or the other according to the goals and purposes of the analyst. Most critics consider neo-realism fiction because the performers, even if not trained actors, play assigned roles; the films possess a clear narrative shape, and the restrained, understated style gives little sense of a documentary voice. These qualities, however, are also present in observational documentaries, as we shall see, but these films are routinely counted as documen-

TABLE 6.1. The Relation of Fiction to Nonfiction

neo-realism

reenactments

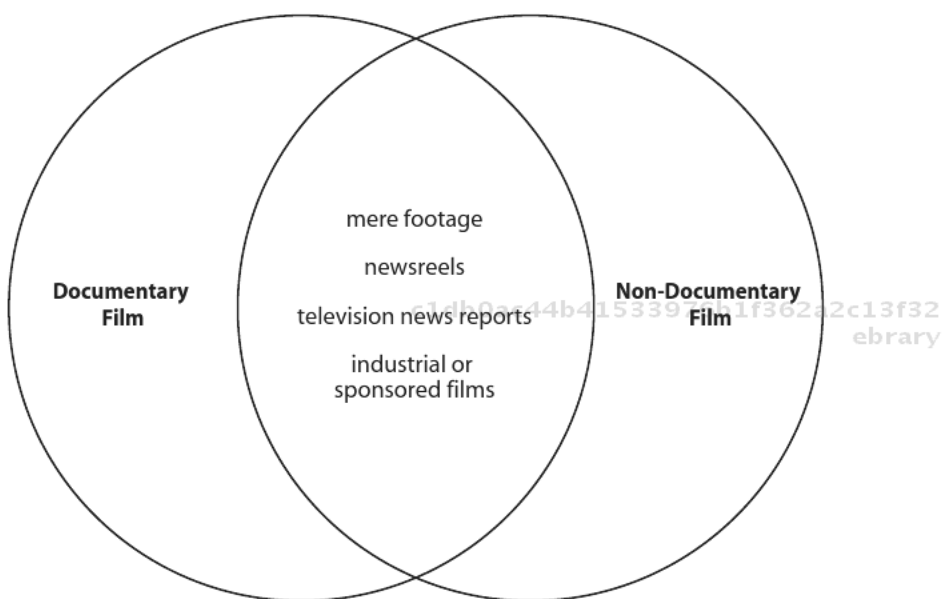**Fiction**

mockumentaries

docudramas

Non-Fiction
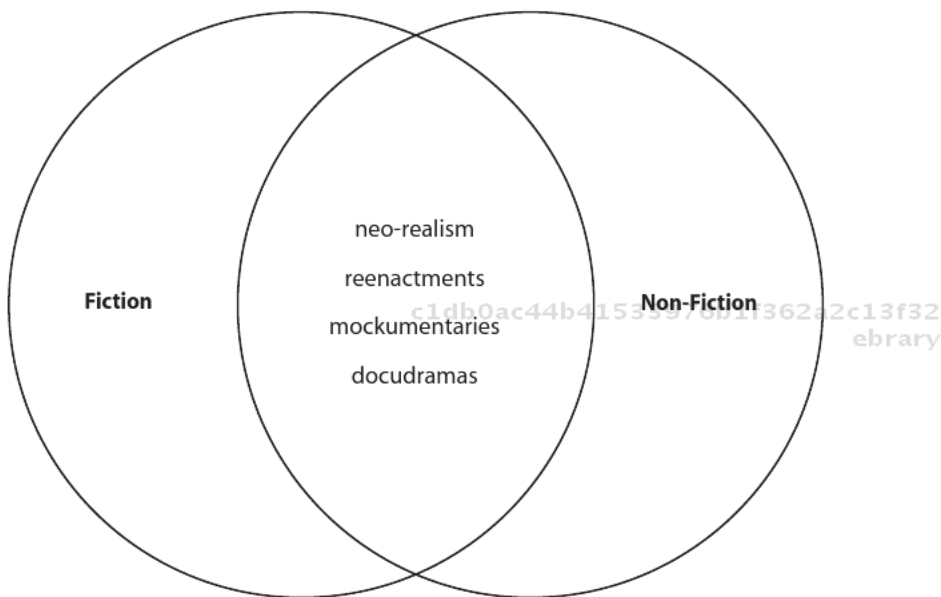
taries because the stories they tell seem to be primarily of the social actor's own making.

In contrast to neo-realism, reenactments, mockumentaries, and docudramas, although they adopt many fictional techniques and are generally considered fundamentally fictions, get roped into discussions of documentary. This is because reenactments typically occur as one part of a documentary or informational film and take much of their meaning and value from that larger context. Mockumentaries clearly engage in a teasing dialogue with documentary conventions and audiences' expectations, and docudramas draw much of their plot structure and character depiction from actual events.

Once we shift our attention to the nonfiction side of the diagram in Table 6.1, we find that it, too, breaks down into two overlapping categories: documentary and nondocumentary films, which Table 6.2 illustrates.

In the zone of overlap are those forms that can be treated in either documentary or not documentary, depending on the critic's goals and

TABLE 6.2. The Relation of Documentary to Nondocumentary Films

Documentary Film | Non-Documentary Film

mere footage

newsreels

television news reports

industrial or
sponsored films

purpose. Mere footage is raw footage, often a single shot or take such as surveillance footage or Abraham Zapruder's famous Super 8 footage of President John F. Kennedy's assassination. By itself mere footage lacks any pronounced voice or perspective but it can easily be drawn into either a documentary or nondocumentary work. Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), a narrative fiction, strives to present Zapruder's footage as scientific evidence of a conspiracy (and multiple assassins). Going in the opposite direction, Jean Painlevé made scientific recordings of aquatic life, mere footage, into captivating documentary poems such as *The Sea Horse* (1934). His films are often considered scientific documents, but numerous museums also include them in their collections of documentaries.

Industrial or sponsored films usually address a very limited clientele or openly promote a specific business or product. Advertisements, which may have some documentary elements, are highly promotional. Their partisanship urges the purchase of a product, a more limited goal than most documentaries, although they share many of the same rhetorical techniques. Sponsored films such as Robert Flaherty's *Loui-*

siana Story (1948), sponsored by Shell Oil, carry less pointed messages (the film is about a young Cajun boy; that his traditional world and the world of oil extraction can co-exist was sufficient message for Shell). Here sponsorship is akin to that of governments when they underwrite documentaries: the film promotes a perspective or way of seeing the world more than a specific act of consumption.

Documentaries are not documents. They may use documents and facts, but they always interpret them. They usually do so in an expressive, engaging way. This lends documentaries the strong sense of voice that nondocumentaries lack. This voice distinguishes documentary films. We sense a voice addressing us from a particular perspective about some aspect of the historical world. This perspective is more personal and sometimes more impassioned than that of standard news reports. Television news adheres to journalistic standards that have a strongly informational bias although they are far from free of qualities of voice. Bias, framing the context within which to present information, assumptions about who counts as an expert or authority, and choices of words and tone can all push news reporting toward the documentary camp while journalistic standards of objectivity and accuracy pull in the direction of the informational film.

Nondocumentary films such as scientific films, surveillance footage, and informational or "how to" films exhibit a minimal sense of voice: they function more like documents than documentaries, conveying information in a straightforward, often didactic manner. They speak about aspects of the world with a high degree of transparency or indexicality. This is what lends evidentiary value to what they show: the footage retains a highly indexical relation to preexisting situations and events such as footage of animal behavior or a spaceship launch. Clarity and simplicity are often at a premium in scientific films, whereas expressivity, style, and sometimes ambiguity are prized qualities in documentary films.

MODELS FOR AND MODES OF DOCUMENTARY FILM

If we accept these general categorizations as a useful starting point, remembering that they could be redrawn, for other purposes, in other ways, we can then ask, Once a documentary tradition came into being,

what categories help us characterize different types of documentary films?

This book proposes two major ways of dividing up documentaries:

- Preexisting nonfiction models. Documentaries adopt models such as the diary, biography, or essay. Documentary film belongs to a long, multi-faceted tradition of nonfiction discourse that continues to evolve (essays, reports, manifestos, blogs, etc.). Erik Barnouw used some of these models to categorize documentaries in his international history, *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film*. (Barnouw treats "documentary" and "nonfiction" as synonyms.)
- Distinct, cinematic modes. Documentaries adopt modes such as the expository or observational mode. Documentaries select and arrange sounds and images in distinct ways, using specifically cinematic techniques and conventions. These forms did not preexist the cinema. Many have since carried over to television, digital production, and the internet. Like the cinematic techniques developed in the early cinema, which helped define the contours of the narrative feature film, the modes help define the shape and feel of the documentary film. They identify the qualities that distinguish an expository documentary from an observational one, for example, regardless of whether the film uses the diary, report, or biography as its model.

The emphasis here will be on the modes of documentary, but one additional point needs clarification: we can classify any one documentary in either of two ways:

- What model it adopts from other media
- What mode it contributes to as cinema.

The classifications are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are complementary: together, they give us a better sense of the structure of any one documentary film.

Table 6.3 provides a list of some of the primary nonfiction models from which documentary draws and of the six cinematic modes that characterize the bulk of documentaries. (The film examples listed under the heading "Nonfiction Models" also appear in the right-hand column, "Documentary Modes," according to the documentary mode to which they belong most strongly and vice versa.)

TABLE 6.3. Some Major Models and Modes for Documentary Film

NONFICTION MODELS	DOCUMENTARY MODES
Investigation/Report (assemble evidence, make a case or offer a perspective)	**Expository** (speak directly to viewer with voice over)
Bus 174	Afrique, je te plumerai
Control Room	Chile, Obstinate Memory
Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room	The Civil War
Gunner Palace	The Corporation
Harvest of Shame	Dead Birds
Real Sex (HBO series)	Grass
	Grizzly Man
	Harvest of Shame
	An Inconvenient Truth
	Les Maîtres Fous
	The March of the Penguins
	Nanook of the North
	Night and Fog
	Night Mail
	The Plow That Broke the Plains
	The Power of Nightmares
	The River
	Roger and Me
	Seven Days in September
	Sicko
	Stranger with a Camera
	Super Size Me
	Unfinished Diary
	Victory at Sea

TABLE 6.3. *(continued)*

NONFICTION MODELS	DOCUMENTARY MODES
	Why We Fight series
	Wild Safari 3D: A South African Adventure (an IMAX film)
Advocacy/Promotion of a Cause (stress convincing, compelling evidence and examples; urge adoption of a specific point of view)	**Poetic** (stress visual and acoustic rhythms, patterns, and the overall form of the film)
The Corporation	*The Bridge*
An Inconvenient Truth	*Koyaanisqatsi*
Night Mail	*The Maelstrom*
The Plow That Broke the Plains	*Rain*
The Power of Nightmares	
Sicko	
History (recount what really happened, offer an interpretation or perspective on it)	**Observational** (look on as social actors go about their lives as if the camera were not present)
The Civil War	*Control Room*
An Injury to One	*Gunner Palace*
Night and Fog	*High School*
Seven Days in September	*Jesus Camp*
Victory at Sea	*The Last Waltz*
	Metallica: Some Kind of Monster
	N!ai: Story of a !Kung Woman
	Primary
	Salesman
	Up the Yangtze
	Wedding Camels

NONFICTION MODELS	DOCUMENTARY MODES
Testimonial (assemble oral history or witnesses who recount their personal experience)	**Participatory** (filmmaker interacts with his or her social actors, participates in shaping what happens before the camera: interviews are a prime example)
The Fog of War	*Bus 174*
Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo	*Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*
The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter	*The Fog of War*
Shoah	*Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*
The Women's Film	*The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*
Word Is Out	*Nobody's Business*
	Real Sex (HBO series)
	Sherman's March
	Shoah
	Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill
	The Women's Film
	Word Is Out
Exploration/Travel Writing (conveys the distinctiveness and often the allure of distant places, may stress exotic or unusual qualities)	**Reflexive** (calls attention to the conventions of documentary filmmaking and sometimes of methodologies such as fieldwork or the interview)
Grass	*Man with a Movie Camera* (not in the models column; see text below for discussion)
The March of the Penguins	*Reassemblage*
Nanook of the North	*Stranger with a Camera*
Up the Yangtze	
Wild Safari 3D: A South African Adventure (an IMAX film)	

TABLE 6.3. *(continued)*

NONFICTION MODELS	DOCUMENTARY MODES
Sociology (the study of subcultures: normally involves fieldwork, participant-observation with subjects, and both description and interpretation)	**Performative** (emphasizes the expressive quality of the filmmaker's engagement with the film's subject; addresses the audience in a vivid way)
High School	*Chile, Obstinate Memory*
Jesus Camp	*Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*
Primary	*Finding Christa*
Salesman	*The Gleaners and I*
Stranger with a Camera	*An Injury to One*
	Tarnation
	Tongues Untied
	Waltz with Bashir
Visual Anthropology/Ethnography (the study of other cultures; similar to sociological fieldwork with language acquisition usually added; reliance on informants to provide access to the culture studied)	
Dead Birds	
Les Maîtres Fous	
N!ai: Story of a !Kung Woman	
Reassemblage	
Wedding Camels	
First-Person Essay (a personal account of some aspect of the author/filmmaker's experience or point of view; autobiography is similar but stresses individual development)	
Chile, Obstinate Memory	
Nobody's Business	
Roger and Me	
Super Size Me	

NONFICTION MODELS	DOCUMENTARY MODES
The Bridge	
Koyaanisqatsi	
The Maelstrom	
Rain	
Diary/Journal (daily impressions that may begin and end somewhat arbitrarily)	
Afrique, je te plumerai	
The Gleaners and I	
Sherman's March	
Unfinished Diary	
Individual or Group Profile/Biography (recounts the story of a person or group's maturation and distinctiveness)	
7 Up (and successors: *7 Plus Seven* to *49 Up*)	
Grizzly Man	
The Last Waltz	
Metallica: Some Kind of Monster	
The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill	
Autobiography (a personal account of someone's experience, maturation, or outlook on life)	
Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter	
Finding Christa	
Tarnation	
Tongues Untied	
Waltz with Bashir	

A few points about this table call for elaboration.

- First, the categorizations reflect individual judgment rather than precise measurement. Many films can be classified in relation to multiple models and modes. To emphasize this, *Stranger with a Camera* (1999) appears under the expository and the reflexive modes and *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997) appears under the expository and the performative modes. Similarly, *Night Mail* (1936) has a strongly poetic quality to its voice-over commentary (written by W. H. Auden) and might be discussed as a film beholden to poetry and the poetic mode rather than advocacy and the expository mode. *Nanook of the North* (1922) corresponds to anthropology as well as exploration since it has served as a touchstone for many discussions and debates within visual anthropology and ethnographic film. Its emphasis on the character Nanook also argues for biography as a model. These are valid choices. They stress specific qualities, just as placing *Nanook* within the observational mode stresses Flaherty's remarkable patience and willingness to let events unfold in their own time, even if it took Flaherty's active hand to set up events like the seal hunt or igloo building. Different viewers respond more or less strongly to different aspects of the same film and classify it accordingly.
- The expository mode contains the most examples by far. This is partly a result of the specific films chosen as examples, but it also suggests the prevalence of this mode. Expository documentaries arose at the start of the documentary tradition and remain prominent today, even if some of the films listed here could be associated with other modes as well. This mode gives priority to the spoken word to convey the film's perspective from a single, unifying source. This, in turn, facilitates comprehension.
- Films like *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005) and *Sicko* (2007) demonstrate how one mode can combine with other modes especially in the use of interviews. We can stress the guiding role of the direct address commentary in *Sicko*

(expository mode) or the interviews and what they reveal in *Enron* (participatory mode). In each film interviews are quite central. In *Enron* they provide some of the most crucial information and demonstrate how public interviews and comments by company officers hid rather than revealed the truth, which interviews with others make clear. In *Sicko*, the interviews generate considerable insight, and humor, thanks to Michael Moore's use of mock naïveté and guerilla tactics to catch interviewees off guard in ways other techniques never would. Stressing Michael Moore's own role as commentator argues for a primarily expository emphasis as his voice guides us through the complexities of health care and how to provide it. Such commentary has become a trademark signature in his films. Both expository and participatory modes are clearly present in each film. Which prevails depends, in large part, on what aspects of the film we want to explore further. Neither is right or wrong in any fundamental sense.

This practice of mixing modes holds true for many films. It does not mean that the categories are inadequate so much as that filmmakers frequently adopt a fluid, pragmatic approach to their material, blending different models and modes to achieve a distinct result. This is quite different from an "anything goes" approach in which the filmmaker invents structures and patterns on the spot, without recourse to precedent. As is true of other arts, those filmmakers who are familiar with previous work and aware of the basic characteristics of different models and modes typically exhibit a fluidity and grace in their ability to use a wide range of conventions and techniques to create a style, and voice, uniquely their own.

- The reflexive mode is clearly under-represented. This, however, is not too surprising if we consider that many reflexive documentaries call attention to the formal conventions of the documentary film itself. In other words, they question the principles that underlie the other five modes rather than the various models drawn from other media like the printed word. There is no reason why they might not also be reflexive in relation to the nonfiction models, though,

drawing attention to the conventions of the diary, biography, or visual anthropology, for example.

Stranger with a Camera, however, does prompt a reflexive awareness of anthropological and sociological assumptions involving fieldwork. The film dwells at length on two individuals: Canadian filmmaker Hugh O'Connor, who went to film Appalachian residents in the late 1960s, and Hobart Ison, the local resident who shot and killed Mr. O'Connor. The filmmaker, Elizabeth Barret, reflexively questions how massive cross-cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes led to this tragic end. In doing so she peels away many of the assumptions viewers might have about impoverished citizens and entitled filmmakers to prompt deeper consideration of the underlying issues of social representation.

Similarly, *Reassemblage* (1982) looks at aspects of West African culture but does so primarily to question the traditional assumptions of anthropological methodology. Other reflexive films such as *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929; not listed in the models column) draw attention to the filmmaking process itself and how filmmakers construct a distinct perspective on the historical world cinematically. Its maker, Dziga Vertov, was adamant about not adopting preexisting models. He sought to forge new ones unique to the cinema. His film, therefore, does not fall under any of the models listed in the left-hand column even though there are traces of sociology, poetry, and the first-person essay in it.

- The expository and poetic modes often harvest, glean, or compile images from the world with relative indifference to the specific individuals or situations captured in order to shape proposals or perspectives on a general topic. The sense of any extended engagement between the filmmaker and the subject is frequently modest, at best. *The River* (1937), for example, contains numerous shots of specific people and places as it tells the story of how the Tennessee Valley Authority tamed the Mississippi and brought electrical power to a vast region. Some of these people and places may be named, in passing, but their personal history and individual relation to the film's

goals remain scantly addressed. The classic poetic film *Rain*
(1929), adopts a similar attitude: we see scores of people caught
in a summer shower in Amsterdam but none of them emerge
as characters with names and personalities. The poetic power
of the film lies elsewhere.

 Images culled from other films yield a compilation film
that joins these fragments together in a distinct way. The ac-
tual interaction between the filmmaker and the social actors
is usually of nominal concern since the images contribute to
the big picture proposed by the film. Images are harvested and
assembled into a whole greater than the individual parts. This
is true of the great majority of the shots in the *Why We Fight*
series (1942–1945) because the films advocate U.S. involvement
in World War II rather than tell the story of specific individuals.
The filmmaker's relation to those who appear before the camera
generally holds less importance than the overall proposal or
perspective shaped from the resulting images.

- The observational, participatory, and performative modes
  work differently. The relationship between the filmmaker
  and the person filmed becomes more direct, personal,
  and complex. The viewer senses that the image is not just
  an indexical representation of some part of the historical
  world but also an indexical record of the actual encounter
  between filmmaker and subject. The sense of extended
  engagement between filmmaker and subject is often acute.
  The individuality of specific social actors, people, matters
  greatly. The filmmaker enters into the social actor's world
  through interviews, conversation, provocation, or other
  forms of encounter and has the power to alter that world.
  Something is at risk in the encounters. We realize that the
  filmmaker exists on the same plane of human existence as
  his or her social actors rather than on the more detached
  plane of commentator or poet. Discussions of ethical conduct
  in documentary often revolve around the nature of these
  interactions. (Ethical discussions also involve questions of
  distortion, misrepresentation, and deception that span all the
  modes.)

DOCUMENTARY MODES AND THE FILMMAKER'S VOICE

Like every speaking voice, every cinematic voice has a style or "grain" all its own that acts like a signature or fingerprint. It attests to the individuality of the filmmaker or director or, sometimes, to the determining power of a sponsor or controlling organization. Television news has a voice of its own just as Fred Wiseman or Chris Marker, Esther Shub or Barbara Kopple do.

Individual voices lend themselves to an auteur theory of cinema, while shared voices lend themselves to a genre theory of cinema. We routinely group fiction films into subcategories known as genres such as melodrama and horror, westerns and science fiction. Genre study considers the qualities that characterize these various groupings of films. In many instances, documentary can be treated as a genre similar to the western or gangster film, with conventions and expectations that routinely inform it. Chapter 1 addressed documentary at this level to a considerable degree. But to fine-tune our discussion, we need to differentiate among different types of documentary films. It is to this end that the notion of models and modes comes into play. The models are not specific to the cinema, whereas the modes are. These modes, in fact, deserve extended discussion because they form the conceptual backbone of most documentary film production.

These six modes establish a loose framework of affiliation within which individuals may work. They set up conventions that a given film may adopt, and they provide specific expectations viewers anticipate having fulfilled. Each mode possesses examples that we can identify as prototypes or models: these prototypes seem to give exemplary expression to the most distinctive qualities of that mode. A prototype cannot be duplicated verbatim, but it can be emulated as other filmmakers, in other voices, set out to represent aspects of the historical world by using a prototype that they inflect with their own distinct perspectives.

The order of presentation for these six modes appears to correspond roughly to the chronology of their introduction. This is not literally true since performative and reflexive tendencies were evident from the outset. The greatest temporal divide is before and after 1960, roughly. This is when portable synchronous sound recording became a reality and the observational and participatory modes gained promi-

nence. They differ quite vividly from the expository and poetic modes because the filmmaker's actual physical presence in a given historical moment takes on new and profound importance.

The different documentary modes may seem to provide a history of documentary film, but they do so imperfectly. Not only were most of them present from the outset, a film identified with a given mode need not be so entirely. A reflexive documentary can contain sizable portions of observational or participatory footage; an expository documentary can include poetic or performative segments. The characteristics of a given mode give structure to a film, but they do not dictate or deter-mine every aspect of its organization. Considerable latitude remains possible. The modes do not constitute a genealogy of documentary film so much as a pool of resources available to all.

A performative documentary can exhibit many qualities common to poetic documentaries, for example. The modes do not represent an evolutionary chain in which later modes demonstrate aesthetic supe-riority over earlier ones and vanquish them, although a temptation to make such claims often arises. Once well established through a set of conventions and prototypical films, a given mode remains available to all. Each mode expands the sense of the possible in documentary representation. Expository documentary, for example, goes back to the 1920s but remains highly influential today. Most television news and reality TV shows depend heavily on its quite dated conventions, as do almost all science and nature documentaries, biographies such as the A&E *Biography* series, and the majority of large-scale historical documentaries such as *The Civil War* (1990), *Eyes on the Prize* (1987, 1990), *The People's Century* (1998), or *The War* (2007).

To some extent, each mode of documentary representation arises in part through a growing sense of dissatisfaction among filmmakers with other modes. New technological possibilities often play a signifi-cant role. The observational and participatory modes of representation became highly attractive once lightweight 16mm cameras and por-table but high-quality sync tape recorders came onto the scene in the 1960s. Similarly, the advent of digital cameras and recording devices, computer-based editing programs, and the internet have spawned a wave of documentary work that promises to alter many basic assump-tions about the form. From cell phone video recorded in the heat of a

highly volatile moment to spoofs of popular culture icons and almost nonstop video diaries, these new technologies are expanding the sense of the possible in dramatic ways.

As an example, an official White House "photostream" exists on Flickr.com, a website devoted to the display of images. The photos are captioned and often tell stories about the president's activities. In 1963, Robert Drew organized an observational study of the White House during the peak of the struggle to desegregate schools in the South: *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment* (1963). It provided a behind-the-scenes view of the confrontation between President Kennedy and Governor George Wallace of Alabama. Critics praised its access to the corridors of power and its insider-like ability to get behind the scenes. Now these activities become a daily update on Flickr by the White House itself, the story content and image of the president a carefully crafted result of those who once rarely allowed outsiders to view the inner workings of the White House in any detail at all. It is a small indication of how new technology and creative minds constantly alter the documentary landscape.

The desire to come up with different ways of representing the world contributes to the formation of each mode, as does a changing set of circumstances. New modes arise partly in response to perceived deficiencies in previous ones, but the perception of deficiency comes about partly from a sense of what it takes to represent the historical world from a particular perspective at a given moment in time. The seeming neutrality and "make of it what you will" quality of observational cinema arose at the end of the quiet fifties and during the heyday of descriptive, observation-based forms of sociology. It flourished as the embodiment of a presumed "end of ideology" and as a fascination with the everyday world. It had less obvious affinity with the social plight or political anger of those who occupy the margins of society.

Similarly, the emotional intensity and subjective expressiveness of performative documentary took fullest shape in the 1980s and 1990s. Its deepest roots are among those groups whose sense of commonality had grown during this period as a result of identity politics. This form of political, often militant organizing on a basis other than class affirmed the relative autonomy and social distinctiveness of marginalized groups. These films rejected techniques such as the voice-of-God com-
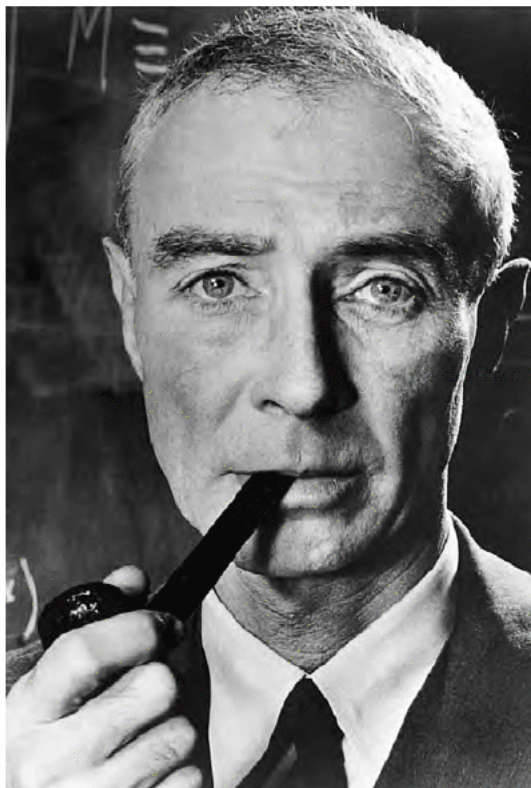
The Day after Trinity (Jon Else, 1980). Post-1960s reconsiderations of cold war rhetoric invited a revision of the postwar record. Film-makers such as Connie Field in *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* and Jon Else in *The Day after Trinity* recirculate historical footage in a new context and give it new meaning. In this case, Else reexamines Robert J. Oppenheimer's hesitancies and doubts about the development of the atomic bomb as a lost, or suppressed, voice of reason during a period of near hysteria. Oppenheimer himself was accused of treason. *Photo courtesy of Jon Else.*

mentary not because these techniques lacked humility but because they belonged to an entire epistemology, or way of seeing and knowing the world, no longer deemed acceptable. Tired of hearing others speak about them, members of these groups set out to speak for themselves.

We do well to take with a grain of salt any claims that a new mode advances the art of cinema and captures aspects of the world never before possible. What changes is the *mode* of representation, not the quality or ultimate status of the representation. A new mode is not so much better as it is different, even though the idea of "improvement" is frequently touted, especially among champions and practitioners of a new mode or new technology. Every change brings a different set of emphases and implications. But every new mode or new way of making and distributing work will eventually prove vulnerable, in turn, to criticism for limitations that some type of alternative promises to overcome.

New modes signal less a better way to represent the historical world
than a new way to organize a film, a new perspective on our relation
to reality, and a new set of issues and desires to preoccupy an audience.

We can now say a bit more about each of the modes in turn.

THE POETIC MODE

As we saw in chapter 5, poetic documentary shares a common ter-
rain with the modernist avant-garde. The poetic mode sacrifices the
conventions of continuity editing and the sense of a specific location
in time and place that follows from such editing. The filmmaker's
engagement is with film form as much as or more than with social
actors. This mode explores associations and patterns that involve tem-
poral rhythms and spatial juxtapositions. Social actors seldom take on
the full-blooded form of characters with psychological complexity and
a specific view of the world. People more typically function on a par
with other objects as raw material that filmmakers select and arrange
into associations and patterns of their choosing. We get to know none
of the social actors in Joris Ivens's *Rain*, for example, but we do come
to appreciate the lyric impression Ivens creates of a summer shower
passing over Amsterdam.

The poetic mode is particularly adept at opening up the possibil-
ity of alternative forms of knowledge to the straightforward transfer of
information, the prosecution of a particular argument or point of view,
or the presentation of reasoned propositions about problems in need of
solution. This mode stresses mood, tone, and affect much more than
displays of factual knowledge or acts of rhetorical persuasion. The
rhetorical element remains underdeveloped but the expressive quality
is vivid. We learn in this case by affect or feeling, by gaining a sense
of what it feels like to see and experience the world in a particular,
poetic way.

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *Play of Light: Black, White, Grey* (1930), for
example, presents various views of one of his own kinetic sculptures to
emphasize the gradations of light passing across the film frame rather
than to document the material shape of the sculpture itself. The effect
of this play of light on the viewer takes on more importance than the
object it refers to in the historical world. Similarly, Jean Mitry's *Pacific*

Pacific 231 (Jean Mitry, 1949). The locomotive begins its journey in a
roundhouse and is soon hurtling down the rails. Mitry's film is one
of the cinema's great tributes to the railroad, a vehicle, like film, that
swiftly transports us to distant places. *Courtesy of Photofest.*

231 (1949) is in part a homage to Abel Gance's *La Roue* (1923) and in
part a poetic evocation of the power and speed of a steam locomotive
as it gradually builds up speed and hurtles toward its (unspecified)
destination. The editing stresses rhythm and form more than it details
the actual workings of a locomotive. The film's poetic power is all the
more apparent when we compare it to the Lumière brothers' *Arrival of
a Train* (1895). *Pacific 231* builds a vivid sense of the dynamic rhythms
of an extended journey that is completely lacking from the long take
of a gradual but dramatic arrival in the earlier film.

The documentary dimension to the poetic mode of representation
stems largely from the degree to which modernist films relied on the
historical world for their source material. Some avant-garde films such
as Oskar Fischinger's *Composition in Blue* (1935) use abstract patterns of
form or color or animated figures and have minimal relation to a docu-
mentary tradition of representing *the* historical world rather than *a*

world of the artist's imagining. Poetic documentaries, though, draw on the historical world for their raw material but transform this material in distinctive ways. Francis Thompson's N.Y., N.Y. (1957), for example, uses shots of New York City that provide evidence of how New York looked in the mid-1950s but gives greater priority to how specific shots can be selected and arranged to produce a poetic impression of the city as a mass of volume, color, and movement. Thompson's film continues the tradition of the city symphony film and affirms the poetic potential of documentary to see the historical world anew.

This sense of the affective tone of lived reality takes considerable prominence in animated documentaries, many of which have strong poetic qualities even if they also address a specific event or type of experience. Sylvie Bringas and Orly Yadim's moving account of Tana Ross's experience of the Holocaust as a little girl, *Silence* (1998), is told largely through animation. The haunting, ghostly quality of the animation stresses the unspoken and unspeakable history that her family carried forward but did not acknowledge. It takes on a half-life of its own, felt and experienced obliquely rather than directly, just as the animation evokes the world of the death camps and the surreal illusions of Theresienstadt, which the Nazis used as a "show camp" to create the impression that prisoners were well treated, with memorable power.

In a similar spirit, Jonathan Hodgson's *Feeling My Way* (1997) uses animation to evoke the highly subjective world imagined by the film's narrator as he travels to work. Nothing is quite real but everything bears an uncanny resemblance to reality. The narrator, "John," applies categories and labels to what he sees, but these seem to do little to reduce the affective power of a world that teems with mystery and, sometimes, threat. When he finally arrives at work it is to pass through a door labeled "Parallel Universe." The question becomes: is the parallel universe what we would understand as reality or is it yet a wilder variation on the subjective world we have just experienced? These films and many others like them use animation to achieve poetic goals mixed with autobiographical, diaristic, and performative models and modes.

The poetic mode began in tandem with modernism as a way of representing reality in terms of a series of fragments, subjective impressions, incoherent acts, and loose associations. These qualities were often attributed to the changes wrought by industrialization generally

Rain (Joris Ivens, 1929). Images such as this convey a feeling or impression of what a rain shower is like rather than convey information or an argument. This is a distinct and distinctly poetic perspective on the historical world. Pursuing such a perspective was a common goal of many who would later identify themselves more specifically as documentary or experimental filmmakers. *Photo courtesy of the European Foundation Joris Ivens.*

and the effects of World War I in particular. The modernist world no longer seemed to make sense in traditional narrative, realist terms. Breaking up time and space into multiple perspectives, denying coherence to personalities vulnerable to eruptions from the unconscious, and refusing to provide solutions to insurmountable problems had the sense of honesty about it even as it created works of art that were puzzling or ambiguous in their effect. Although some films explored more classical conceptions of the poetic as a source of order, wholeness, and unity, this stress on fragmentation and ambiguity remains a prominent feature of many poetic documentaries.

Un Chien Andalou (Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali, 1929) and L'Age d'or (Luis Buñuel, 1930), for example, give the impression of a documentary reality but then populate that reality with characters caught up in uncontrollable urges, abrupt shifts of time and place, and

more puzzles than answers. Filmmakers like Kenneth Anger contin-
ued aspects of this poetic mode in *Scorpio Rising* (1964), a representa-
tion of ritual acts performed by members of a motorcycle gang, as did
Chris Marker in *Sans Soleil* (1982), a complex meditation on filmmak-
ing, memory, and postcolonialism. (At the time of their release, works
like Anger's seemed firmly rooted in an experimental film tradition,
but in retrospect we can see how they combine experimental and
documentary elements. How we place them depends heavily on the
assumptions we adopt about categories and genres, models and modes.)

By contrast, works like Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934), on the
untouched beauty of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) despite the inroads of com-
merce and colonialism, Bert Haanstra's *Glass* (1958), a tribute to the
skill of traditional glass blowers and the beauty of their work, or Les
Blank's *Always for Pleasure* (1978), a celebration of Mardi Gras festivi-
ties in New Orleans, return to a more classic sense of unity and beauty
and discover traces of them in the historical world. The poetic mode
has many facets, but they all emphasize the ways in which the film-
maker's voice gives fragments of the historical world a formal, aesthetic
integrity peculiar to the film itself.

Péter Forgács's remarkable reworking of amateur movies into his-
torical documents stresses poetic, associative qualities over transferring
information or winning us over to a particular point of view. *Free Fall*
(1997), for example, chronicles the fate of European Jews in the 1930s
and 1940s through the home movies of a successful Jewish business-
man, Gyorgy Peto, and *Danube Exodus* (1998) follows the journeys of a
Danube cruise ship as it takes Jews from Hungary to the Black Sea on
their flight to Palestine and then takes Germans from Bessarabia (the
northern part of Romania at the time) as they are driven out by the Rus-
sians and evacuated to Germany, only to be relocated in Poland. The
historical footage, freeze frames, slow motion, tinted images, selective
moments of color, occasional titles to identify time and place, voices
that recite diary entries, and haunting music build a tone and mood
far more than they explain the war or describe its course of action.
The poetic quality Forgács adds to the original home movies imbues
these films with an affective dimension that stems from the blind spots
and pleasures of everyday experience rather than from the drama and
intensity of world-shaking events.

THE EXPOSITORY MODE

This mode assembles fragments of the historical world into a more rhetorical frame than an aesthetic or poetic one. It is the mode that first combined the four basic elements of documentary film described in chapter 5 (indexical images of reality; poetic, affective associations; story-telling qualities; and rhetorical persuasiveness). The expository mode addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that propose a perspective or advance an argument. Some expository films adopt a voice-of-God commentary (the speaker is heard but never seen) such as we find in the *Why We Fight* series, *Victory at Sea* (1952–1953), *The City* (1939), *Blood of the Beasts* (1949), and *Dead Birds* (1963). Others utilize a voice-of-authority commentary (the speaker is heard and also seen) such as we find in *America's Most Wanted*, *The Selling of the Pentagon* (1971), *16 in Webster Groves* (1966), John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1974), Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), and Zana Briski and Ross Kaufman's *Born into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids* (2004).

The voice-of-God tradition fostered the cultivation of the professionally trained, richly toned male voice of commentary that proved a hallmark of the expository mode even though some of the most impressive films chose less-polished voices precisely for the credibility gained by avoiding too much polish.

Joris Ivens's great film urging support for the Republican defenders of Spanish democracy, *The Spanish Earth* (1937), for example, exists in at least three versions. None has a professional commentator. All three have identical image tracks, but the French version uses an ad-libbed commentary by the famous French film director Jean Renoir, while the English versions rely on Orson Welles and Ernest Hemingway. Ivens chose Welles first, but his delivery proved a bit too elegant; it bestowed a humanistic compassion on the events, where Ivens hoped for a tougher sense of visceral engagement. Hemingway, who had written the commentary, proved the more effective voice. He brought a matter-of-fact but clearly committed tone to a film that wanted to galvanize support more than compassion. (Some prints still credit the voice over to Welles even when the actual voice is Hemingway's.)

Expository documentaries rely heavily on an informing logic carried by the spoken word. In a reversal of the traditional emphasis

Yosemite: The Fate of Heaven (Jon Else, 1988). The tension between public access and conservation is the focus of this film. Robert Redford's commentary falls into the category of voice-of-God address inasmuch as we never see Mr. Redford. To the extent that Mr. Redford's long-time advocacy for environmental issues makes him a more informed speaker than an anonymous commentator would be and that we already have an image of what Mr. Redford looks like with us from his many film roles, he also fulfills the function of a voice of authority. *Photo courtesy of Jon Else.*

in film, images serve a supporting role. They illustrate, illuminate, evoke, or act in counterpoint to what is said. The commentary is typically presented as distinct from the images of the historical world that accompany it. It serves to organize these images and make sense of them similar to a written caption for a still image. The commentary is therefore presumed to come from some place that remains unspecified but associated with objectivity or omniscience. It shows signs of intelligence and represents the organizing logic of the film. The commentary, in fact, represents the film's perspective. We take our cue from the commentary and understand the images as evidence or illustration for what is said. Television news descriptions of famine in

Ethiopia as "biblical," for example, appear proven by wide-angle shots of great masses of starving people clustered together on an open plain.

Editing in the expository mode generally serves less to establish a rhythm or formal pattern, as it does in the poetic mode, than to maintain the continuity of the spoken argument or perspective. We call this evidentiary editing. Such editing may sacrifice spatial and temporal continuity to rope in images from far-flung places if they help advance the argument or support a proposal. The expository filmmaker often has greater freedom in the selection and arrangement of images than the fiction filmmaker. In *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), shots of arid prairie landscapes came from all over the Midwest, for example, to support the claim of widespread erosion. Cutting shots from Kansas and Texas together enhanced rather than detracted from the claim that the Great Plains stood in severe danger of permanent damage.

The expository mode emphasizes the impression of objectivity and a well-supported perspective. The voice-over commentary seems literally "above" the fray; it has the capacity to judge actions in the historical world without being caught up in them. The professional commentator's official tone, like the authoritative manner of news anchors and reporters, strives to build a sense of credibility from qualities such as detachment, neutrality, disinterestedness, or omniscience. These qualities can be adapted to an ironic point of view such as Charles Kuralt's commentary for *16 in Webster Groves* or subverted even more thoroughly in a film such as *Land without Bread* (1932), with its implicit attack on the very notion of objectivity. More recently, filmmakers such as Michael Moore, Su Friedrich, Jill Godmilow, Travis Wilkerson, Alan Berliner, Trinh Minh Ha, and Patricio Guzmán speak in their own voice on the sound track. This change stresses the personal perspective of the maker and foregoes the claim to ultimate wisdom or impartial truth that is common to voice-of-God commentary. It is part of a larger change that has emphasized personal perspectives over institutional authority in documentary generally and in other forms of discourse as well.

The expository mode also affords an economy of analysis since points can be made succinctly and pointedly in words. Expository documentary is an ideal mode for conveying information or mobilizing support within a framework that preexists the film. In this case, a

Triumph of the Will (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935). The physical gap and hierarchical distinction between leader and followers again comes across clearly in this scene of Hitler's parade through the streets of Nuremberg.

The Spanish Earth (Joris Ivens, 1937). Ivens's support for the Republican cause against the Nazi-backed rebellion of General Franco followed from his political commitment to democratic and socialist ideals. His de-emphasis on hierarchy in this shot of an officer and a soldier contrasts sharply with Riefenstahl's shooting style.

film will add to our stockpile of knowledge but not challenge or subvert the categories that organize and legitimate such knowledge in the first place. Common sense makes a perfect basis for this type of representation about the world because common sense, like rhetoric, is less subject to logic than to belief.

Frank Capra could organize much of his argument for why young American men should willingly join the battle during World War II in the *Why We Fight* series, for example, by appealing to a mix of native patriotism, the ideals of American democracy, the atrocities of the Axis war machine, and the malignant evil of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito. In the black-and-white alternatives of a "free world" versus a "slave world," who would not defend a free world? Common sense made the answer simple—to the predominantly white audience thoroughly imbued with a "melting pot" belief in American values.

Some 50 years later, Capra's appeal seems remarkably naïve and overblown in its treatment of patriotic virtue and democratic ideals. For example, no minorities, no problems of social justice, poverty, or hunger intrude into the film. White Americans represent all Americans and all Americans oppose a fascist enemy. When Ken Burns

Triumph of the Will (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935). The soldier's salute, left, parallels this low-angle view of the German eagle and Nazi swastika. Like Hitler, the eagle serves as a symbol of German power. It presides over the stream of marching troops that pass below it, galvanizing their movement into a tribute to national unity.

The Spanish Earth (Joris Ivens, 1937). In contrast to the pageantry of Riefenstahl's endless parades and speeches, Ivens captures the modest quality of everyday rural life in 1930s Spain, right. This image of the town, Fuenteduena, situated near the shifting battlefront, suggests how ordinary lives are jeopardized, not galvanized, by the fascist rebellion.

retold the story of World War II in *The War*, a 7-part TV series, he learned firsthand that he could not invoke a Capraesque vision of melting pot unity so easily. An episode focusing on Sacramento, California, during the war made scant reference to the efforts of Mexican Americans and protests quickly arose. Burns, a fundamentally conservative historian and filmmaker, albeit a very talented one, beat a hasty retreat and added references to Mexican Americans but retained his overall melting pot perspective. Despite the afterthought quality, Burns's acknowledgement of a marginalized minority community that experienced discrimination and injustice makes clear that the expository mode need not serve to promote only the dominant point of view. World War II looked very different when seen from the perspective of Hispanics in Sacramento, of women confronting sexism in wartime factory work, or Japanese Americans enduring forced confinement to relocation camps. The proposals and perspectives of specific expository films may become dated far more than quickly than the mode itself. It persists and is quite probably the most prevalent mode in use today.