

Foreword

Cinema theory has often been written from the spectator's viewpoint. The film, videotape or TV program is seen as a finished work. I will attempt to frame a theory from a documentary maker's viewpoint, and include the process that leads to the spectator's viewing.

Another trend in cinema theory has been to focus on the particularities of one medium, usually film. Recent technological developments are blurring the traditional boundaries between film, video and television; for example, most films are now seen on TV. In an era of hybrid media, I find it more fruitful to discuss motion pictures in general ("movies" for short), including film, video, television and possible future media (instant film, holography).

My subject is the recording of events with a camera and microphone. The method is that of an indirect commentary of Heidegger's essay The Question of Technology, accompanied by references to footage in the documentary tradition.

In what follows we shall be questioning concerning technology. Questioning builds a way. We would be advised, therefore, above all to pay heed to the way, and not to fix our attention on isolated sentences and topics. The way is one of thinking.

Heidegger¹

Every documentary maker talks about the change that does or does not occur when someone is recorded. Two examples come to mind, one on film, the other in writing. At the beginning of a shot in Film Diary, Jane Pincus is seen saying to her husband, "Everytime you start to film I can feel myself changing." Warrington Hudlin writes, about films about blacks done by whites, "So as the white filmmaker seeks to impose some terms for understanding his Black subjects, the subjects, as the saying goes, 'change the joke and slip the yoke.'"²

I would like to begin with that other metamorphosis: the change that occurs in the movie-maker when the camera and microphone are turned on. This event is doubly hidden from the movie. The person who records is invisible because he or she is on the other side of the lens; moreover, that which occurs before and after the take is not recorded by definition--it can only be inferred.

Yet, increasingly, movies emerge that reflect the movie-maker inside the movie; these recordings of the recording event take many shapes today: a minimalism and formalism in "art" movies, "new" journalism in magazine formats, autobiography in documentary, even TV news has adopted the cut-away of a TV news camera as an editing convention.

Focus on the movie-maker as he or she records. What happens? Strange gestures and tics abound. One camera man I know repeatedly licks his upper lip as he shoots; others frown, squint, smile. Tension is often apparent--or, at the very least, a zen-like concentration is expressed by an imperious poker face. Keeping the camera steady requires stamina and a peculiar R. Crumb gait. Recording is usually exhausting.

Indeed, much of documentary recording occurs as work. And movie-makers often display serious and professional behavior while recording. Money is involved. Responsibility is required for equipment that is fragile and expensive. A constant attention to levels, focus, framing, and light becomes second nature. In this context the camera is a tool, and the recorder a worker. A job gets done.

The recording event is but a small fraction of this job. Hours are spent preparing the equipment, waiting, carrying and putting away. Recording itself is often the culmination of a complex and tedious process. Typically, everyone wants to record and no one wants to lug equipment. Recording becomes the extraordinary moment in an ordinary job. Movie-makers returning without anything "in the can" are a sorry-looking lot.

There are two edges to this intensity of the recording moment. Recording becomes both a crisis and a performance. In documentary, it is often difficult to decide to record an event. This may, and often does, result in a preoccupation with extraordinary events. Beginners often display a nervous and constant motion; they are anxious to get everything in. There are those who rise to the occasion. Yet the occasion remains a crisis.

I think of the man who holds his camera above his head as he follows

Kennedy through the throng in Primary, pauses to pan across a group of adoring women, then follows Kennedy through some handshakes on to the stage. The event is extraordinary.

There is also the virtuoso, for whom the camera is an instrument. Every camera person has experienced the magic of a recording when event and camera work seem to respond to each other, when everything's working right. The experience is thoroughly enjoyable, although ^{one} ~~it~~ sometimes feels like the morning after at the editing table.

It is correct to call the camera a tool, but the word does not do justice to the richness of the recording experience. Something is left out. There are many movies made by camera people who are not working in any ordinary sense.

Mekas shooting is like a poet finding a line, on the street, in Central Park, or at a breakfast table in Marseilles. Noren is the only camera man I know who ejaculates while he is filming--in Kodak Ghost Poems. In Visit to Monica, Leacock is positively leisurely as he films his shadow on a path, or a plate of spaghetti al dente. Arbuckle is playful as she scurries toward and away from the camera of The Arbuckle Sisters. Poetic, orgasmic, leisurely, playful. These recording attitudes are rarer than the professional composure. Yet they too must be accounted for.

Although recording has traditionally been a work-like activity, some contemporary documentaries suggest that the whole gamut of human situations should occur in recording. One can now imagine movies where the camera person weeps, meditates, shits, and kisses. To define the attitude the camera person has is to limit the kinds of movies that can be made.

What happens, then, to the camera person when he or she starts recording? I am tempted to answer: anything can happen. The camera person is just plain human, like the rest of us. A similar consideration must be applied to the camera: it is a tool for the pro, an instrument for the virtuoso, a toy for the playful. It depends.

Everyone knows the two statements that answer our question. One says: Technology is a means to an end. The other says: Technology is a human activity. The two definitions belong together. For to posit ends and procure and utilize the means to them is a human activity.

~~Heidegger~~

It is in the interaction of man and tool that technology lies. The question is rephrased: what is the process of recording documentaries? Consider it a technological event. Recording a documentary differs from painting a landscape, reporting for a newspaper, even photographing, by its technology. Heidegger invites us to approach this technological event with categories that are traced back to Aristotle: matter, aspect, bounds, and maker. The four "causes."

Matter: Hardware

Recording reproduces events on film and tape. The recent and rapid emergence of video tape along side film has generated what can only be called the Great Film/Video Debate. Which is better? The answer must be:

both. The two categories have become too broad to be useful.

Film and video have become heterogeneous. A Super-8 camera is closer to a VHS camera than to a 35mm camera. For matter entails hardware. The width of the gauge determines not only the resolution but also, more critically, the price and size of the camera.

The recording equipment permeates the recording event, it gives it a mood and tone. Compare a one-person recorder to a two-person crew, a noisy camera to a silent one, a heavy rig to a light one, the presence and absence of cables, a six-hour battery to a half-hour one. Every detail of the equipment has its impact.

Most of the dancing takes in Jazz Dance are less than ten seconds long. This limit was imposed by the hand-rewind crank of the camera. The movie's stunning quality is due to a shooting style that matches the short take. A series of beautiful moments has been gathered.

The camera person develops a special relationship to the recording equipment. Like a man and his dog, they resemble each other. Money has to be mentioned here. Expensive equipment makes for a more serious camera person. Yet a playful person will use the same camera differently from a serious one. Using the camera is a process of accommodation, of mutual determination of tool and task.

The impact of technology is sometimes detrimental to documentary recording. The "dark ages" of the documentary genre occurred in the period of non-synchronous sound. Many visually interesting movies were destroyed by a didactic and disembodied sound track. The resulting tension between image and sound often led to a double irony that is absent from earlier

* Leacock's terms

silent films. A classic example is Bunuel's Land Without Bread. In one scene we are shown a group of children playing and laughing, only to be told by the British commentator that what we are really seeing is "the mirthless grins" of "idiots."

Presently, everyday events and events that last a long time are readily documented with a cheap and light camera. The Bolex film camera and the video portapak have yielded different kinds of movies than more expensive or less accessible equipment. Of course, it's just as accurate to say that movie-makers interested in ordinary events have been attracted to gauges and camera that were cheaper and lighter, at the sacrifice of some quality. One need only mention Mekas and Wegman. Does the user mold the tool or the tool condition the user? Once again we must answer: both. But the tools are what is changing.

Thus the history of documentary is a story of cameras and microphones, as well as the people who used them. Although film technology has stabilized in the last ten years, there is no foreseeable resting place for video technology at present. The immediate future will bring solid-state and digital video recording, faster film stocks and perhaps instant film. Each new technological development will redefine the documentary genre, as movie-makers adapt to improved tools.

Aspect: Shooting Events

The recording reproduces images of light and sound over time. Documentaries are moving images of events, and only indirectly of people and things. Time passes in every take. The documentary maker delimits and defines an

event every time he or she turns the camera on or off.

In Life and Other Anxieties Pincus lays his camera on the ground at David Hancock's interment. The shot defines the funeral as a gentle and quiet event. It is also a portrait of the anonymous group of Hancock's friends, a landscape picture and a child wandering into the frame. Time passes. People move away. The shot ends.

Even this bare take requires a choice of vantage point. The distance of the camera is critical for the mood of the shot. A closer camera would have recorded something completely different. The choice of vantage point defines the event in space, as the decision to record defines it in time. Camera work is a continual attention to these choices.

Bounds: Documentary's Claim

Imagine two viewers of Brandy in the Wilderness (a "fake" or fictional documentary). One is aware that the people on the screen are actors, the other isn't. When the credits appear, this person feels duped. The movie takes on a different character. The images are, of course, the same, only the claim that is made about them has changed. More specifically, the claim made about the recording event is different. Similarly, after a documentary screening, there is frequently a person in the audience who will ask whether it was "scripted."

What is the claim that is made about documentary recording? For the claim is clearly not about the recorded moving image; we don't need to be told the content of the image; we see it. The claim seems to be that the events recorded were not created for the camera. And yet this formulation

does not account for the great degree of intervention involved in some documentary recording.

A typical interview requires a process reminiscent of a Hollywood studio. Three point lighting, going over the questions with the interviewee, make-up is used, and there are sometimes several takes of the same question. An interview is clearly an event created for the camera; indeed there would be no event without the camera! The crucial distinction seems to be that the interview is presented as an interview and not as an event the camera person happened to chance upon.

Thus we might say that documentary recording claims to show its own recording process. This claim is expressed negatively in the recording. It isn't a matter of showing everything (slates, bad camera work, research, etc. . .) but rather a claim that nothing crucial to the recording process is hidden (bribes, professional actors, context of misleading statements, etc. . .). In "cinema verite" this led to rules: (1) don't ask anybody to repeat anything; (2) no interviews.

A claim is something that can be disputed. It is common for documentary movie-makers to argue about the "authenticity" of a scene. But it is the adherence to this claim that distinguishes documentary recording from fiction.

Imagine a long documentary about the making of a short fiction film. The documentary could very well include all of the shots ^{of} ~~in~~ the fiction film, but, to be a documentary, there would have to be at least one shot that showed the recording process.

Maker: Gathering

The documentary maker carefully considers the aforementioned "causes": matter, aspect, and bounds. He or she is responsible for gathering together these elements in a recording event. In documentary recording, one is constantly reminded of the need for this gathering, by the failure of one of the elements.

Equipment failure is frequent, but more frustrating are the limitations of working equipment. Movie cameras have yet to reach the limit of the perceptible spectrum, and the maker often sees events that are invisible to a camera. Since much of our private life occurs indoors, this has limited the kind of events that were documented until recently. Early documentaries took place, for the most part, outdoors. One of the earliest is Flaherty's Nanook of the North. In one sequence, four people (and some puppies) are seen bedding inside an igloo. Anecdote has it that a half igloo was built expressly for the scene. The opening remains hidden from the camera. These four undoubtedly freezing people are one of the first documentary images of the private life inside the home.

The maker often situates the camera in the wrong place at the right time, and vice versa. The basic problem is deciding which event should be recorded. Recording occurs in a world full of events, and it is the documentarian's task to delimit one that merits recording. This is a matter of watching, and of luck. There is risk involved in documentary recording. In Tread, the camera follows a dancer who leaves the stage. The camera is left framing an empty stage. Just at the right moment, a new dancer enters the frame.

The intrusion of the recording process on the event recorded is a complex problem for the documentary maker. A blatant referencing to the camera (such as occurs in Panola) is less problematic than the more subtle effects of recording. For the documentarian is put in the awkward position of evaluating someone's sincerity.

At the beginning of Broomfield and Churchill's Tattooed Tears, a prisoner is seen engaging in a long, repetitive argument with a prison guard about the quality of the prison food. It is a powerful scene, yet one can't help wondering whether the presence of a camera crew with a light created an incident that would not have normally occurred.

The maker, then, is constantly gathering the matter, aspect and bounds as he or she records. Matter, aspect, bounds and maker are all together at the occasion for the recording event.

But in what, then, does the playing in unison of the four ways of occasioning play? These let what is not yet present arrive into presencing. Accordingly, they are unifiedly governed by a bringing that brings what presences into appearance. Plato tells us what this bringing forth is in a sentence from the Symposium (205b): 'Every occasion for whatever passes beyond the nonpresent and goes forward into presencing is poesis, bringing-forth.' 4

~~Heidegger~~

In recording, a moving image appears. In documentary, this image reproduces what is present before the movie-maker. There is something eerie here. A popular superstition has it that cameras absorb a part of

the soul of the subject. It is perhaps more fruitful to say that a smaller new soul is created.

We are talking magic. Documentaries present us the world, make present the world. It is not reproduction that strikes us. It is the presence of someone or something within an event. What is magical is to meet people in a movie, to have them come forward present to us. Yet this presence is a different one, it is brought forth automatically, it has been fashioned by a camera. It is an image, yet this image is of a different kind than a statue, a poem, or a painting. It is a technological image.

How does the technological image differ from the poetic one? To answer this, return to the "matter" of movie-making, to film and videotape. The hardware of film and video was depicted as an evolving diversity. Now consider the unity underlying film and video recording.

Matter:
Information

Recording is the reproduction of the patterns of light and sound events. In reproduction there is an automatic encoding of light patterns onto an encoding medium; the chemical configurations of film and the varying charges of the electronic pick-up tube are a code for the light image. It is the automatic encoding of the world that makes all cinema a documentary medium par excellence; even the staging of a Hollywood set is a real event, reproduced faithfully.

How are light and sound encoded into a technological image? The nature of the code is information. It is because the film and video images both encode information that they can reproduce each other. A film chain translates from one code to another. Information quantifies the world, transforms the continuity of the world into discrete bits. ^{It is} Quantity ^{that} unifies the different codes of information. Information is uniform. The process of

reproduction is unchanging, the same process records a mountain and a person. Every object is equal before the camera. Every visual event can be recorded. It is in this sense that information transforms the world into a standing-reserve.

Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve.⁵

In this perspective, the coming convergence of video and computer is a natural merging of two information systems. The future seems to promise an increasingly intricate information network, where movies, books, music and other media are distributed through one technology.

The distance between the information and the event imaged is huge.

Aspect:
Representation Consider the experience of meeting someone in person after having seen them in a movie. ** There is recognition, but it is not the usual kind. Then a shock occurs. What was image becomes flesh. One is confronted with the difference between the memory of an image and the fullness of a presence. And invariably one must amend, fill in the memory of the image with new and contradictory facts.

Yet this shocking clash of image and presence would be impossible if one did not somehow already know the presence through the image. The contradiction results from the comparison of two similar things.

The presence is not reproduced in the moving image, it is represented.*

In documentary recording, what is reproduced is light and sound events.

* Metz refers to the representational aspect of movies as "diegesis".
** This experience is not uncommon. Although few of us have seen Garbo, many people may have seen a politician, or even a local TV celebrity.

The encoding medium, be it film or video, has no code for the presence of a person. It is through the automatic reproduction that representation occurs, yet there is nothing automatic about representation. The quality of the reproduction is determined by the amount of information about light and sound that is recorded. The quality of the representation is brought forth by the recording event, *and the spectator.*

Represent means "to stand for." And indeed, the moving image stands for the presence imaged. It is its proxy. Thus the spectators look at the configuration of moving dots and sounds, and they say to themselves, "that's so and so." They watch the dots and sounds change their configurations, and they say to themselves, "so and so's talking." Yet these facts could be obtained by other means, such as a viewer's verbal description or a series of photographs. There is more to this bringing forth of the recorded image.

Bounds
Revelation

The presence is not merely represented, it is sometimes revealed. We are now at the core of recording's magic. People and things are revealed to us in documentary movies through the events they are represented in.

In the beginning of Mom, Rance's father is seen chasing a moth at home. The moth retreats to a lampshade. Father gets a newspaper and folds it as a weapon. After a few tries he kills the moth, rips off a piece of the newspaper, folds the dead moth inside, then carries paper and moth to the bathroom, where he drops both into the toilet. He flushes the toilet, leaves the bathroom and smiles at the camera. The take ends.

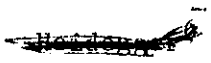
A very ordinary event is represented, but an extraordinary revelation takes place. We learn more about Rance's father and his home in this take than we would in any interview. Many facts are represented here: the

father wears a suit, he feels awkward, he is persistent, tidy, organized, etc. . . . But these facts do not do justice to the feeling of a presence, a living man. In this scene, we meet Rance's father.

There are many such moments of revelation in the history of documentary. A few have been mentioned here. In every case, documentary recording becomes poesis, the bringing-forth of the presence of the world. In revelation a person, a thing, an event is met as a presence. What is extraordinary is that this unique presence is brought through the uniform and automatic technology of recording. What is extraordinary is that information should bring forth presence.

Documentary recording was characterized earlier as claiming to show its recording process. Although correct, this view conceals the true goal of documentary: to reveal the world.

The Greeks have the word aletheia for revealing. The Romans translate this with veritas. We say 'truth' and usually understand it as correctness of representation.



We might add, the French call it "verite." According to this demanding etymology "cinema verite" would mean the cinema of revealing.

Footnotes

1. Martin Heidegger, The Question of Technology in Basic Writings, David Krell (ed.) (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 287.
2. Warrington Hudlin and George Cunningham, "Black Filmmakers, Black Audiences, and Public Television Programming," delivered at Rockefeller Foundation conference on telecommunications, June 6-9, 1979, New York.
3. Martin Heidegger, op. cit., p. 288.
4. Ibid., p. 293.
5. Ibid., p. 298.
6. Ibid., p. 294.

Bibliography

- Aristotle, Physics. In Richard McKeon (translator), Basic Works, New York: Random House, 1941.
- Barnouw, Documentary. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Bazin, What is Cinema?. Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1967.
- Benjamin, Work of Art in Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In Hannah Arendt (ed.), Illuminations, New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- Cavell, The World Viewed.
- Heidegger, The Question of Technology.
- Mast and Cohen, Film Theory and Criticism. New York: Oxford U. Press, 1974.
- Mekas, Movie Journal. New York: Collier Books, 1972.
- Plato, The Republic. New York: Basic Books, 1968.

Movieography

Ant Farm, Media Burn, The Eternal Frame.

Arbuckle, The Arbuckle Sisters.

o Broomfield + Churchill Tofood Team
o Bunuel, Land without Bread

Brakhage, Window Water Baby Moving.

Cohen, Joe and Maxi.

Drew Associates, Primary.

Flaherty, Nanook of the North.

Frank, Conversations in Vermont.

Kreines, The Complaint of Steve Kreines as Recorded by his Younger Brother Jeff.

Leacock, Visit to Monica, Tread

Mekas, Walden, Reminiscences on a Journey to Lithuania.

Moss, Absence.

Negroponte/McElwee, Space Coast.

Noren, Kodak Ghost Poems.

Paik, Tribute to John Cage, Guadalcanal Requiem.

Pincus, Panola, Life and Other Anxieties, Film Diary.

Rance, Mom.

Rivers, Shirley.

TVTV, Four More Years.

Wegman, Selected Works

TV footage of national news, local news