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WRECKAGE UPON WRECKAGE: HISTORY, DOCUMENTARY AND THE RUINS OF MEMORY

PAULA RABINOWITZ

ABSTRACT

Documentary cinema is intimately tied to historical memory. Not only does it seek to reconstruct historical narrative, but it often functions as an historical document itself. Moreover, the connection between the rhetoric of documentary film and historical truth pushes the documentary into overtly political alignments which influence its audience.

This essay describes and dissects the history and rhetoric of documentary cinema, tracing its various modes of address from the earliest moments of cinematic representation through its uses for ethnographers, artists, governments, and marginal political organizations in the present. The different uses of documentary result in a wide variety of formal strategies to persuade the audience of a film's truth. These strategies are based on a desire to enlist the audience in the process of historical reconstruction. The documentary film differentiates itself from narrative cinema by claiming its status as a truth-telling mode. However, as a filmic construction, it relies on cinematic semiosis to convince its audience of its validity and truth. By looking at the history of documentary address, this essay outlines the rhetoric of persuasion and evaluates its effectiveness.

The documentary calls upon its audience to participate in historical remembering by presenting an intimate view of reality. Through cinematic devices such as montage, voice-over, intertitles, and long takes, documentary provokes its audience to new understandings about social, economic, political, and cultural differences and struggles. The films actively engage with their world; however, often viewers respond to the same devices motivating classic Hollywood narratives. Thus the genre reinforces dominant patterns of vision.

Recent challenges to the emotional manipulations of documentary deconstruct its forms and conventions so that the films interrogate not only historical memory but their own investment in its recreation. Imaginative documentaries, such as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, foreground their partial and contingent qualities, pushing viewers to question cinematic representation and its place in historical memory. Moreover, they ask audiences to think about their place in the films' meanings as well as their responsibility to the past and its interpretations.

I

Walter Benjamin, chronicler of modernity, called for a history which could redeem the past by yanking it into the present. His figure of the Angel of History whose face turns towards the past as she is blown into the wreckage of the future might also represent the documentary filmmaker who can only make a film within the historical present, even as it evokes the historical past. Documentary

is usually a reconstruction—a reenactment of another time or place for a different audience—a graphing of history, in and through the cinematic image and taped sound, onto the present.

In 1945, as the Allied troops entered the camps of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau, cameramen were filming the eerie landscape. Some of the footage was eventually put together by the British Ministry of Information into the shocking film, *Memory of the Camps*, or in its longer sixty-nine-minute version, *A Painful Reminder*. Never released because of its graphic images of the camps, the film was originally intended for viewing by the German people as part of the denazification program. Because of its disturbing pictures of mass graves being excavated and filled with emaciated corpses by captured S.S. guards, the film was considered so inflammatory to the newly forged postwar alliances that the British government suppressed it. It languished in the archives of the Imperial War Museum until the mid-1980s when it was recovered by another generation of filmmakers and was finally seen as part of another documentary on the making of the film and on its history for *Frontline*, narrated by Trevor Howard.¹

Originally intended to be shown to the German people who were steadfastly refusing to “know anything,” the footage was meant to elicit remorse among the general population. The images are so horrific, as tractors maul the fragile skeletons, that they become strangely haunting, almost elegiac. Sidney Bernstein, Minister of Information, at a loss as to how to turn this material into a film—documentary footage is not the same as documentary cinema—recruited Alfred Hitchcock, master of narrative, suspense, and horror, to offer advice in constructing the film. The resulting establishing shot: blond children play before a bucolic bavarian cottage nestled within a forest, the camera pans through the trees to reveal barbed wire and piles of flesh and bones. This Hitchcockian touch may have provoked the official censorship of the film; it was the narrative established by the pan—the heart of darkness beating within the German people—more than the footage of the camps alone, which was potentially damaging to the postwar alliance.

At the heart of this documentary project is a cinema of memory. The mission of the cameramen was to record a historical aberration. Filming an essentially ephemeral event, a vanishing custom, a disappearing species, a transitory occurrence is the motivation behind most documentary images. Documentary films provide a stability to an ever-changing reality, freezing the images within their frames for later instructional use. *A Painful Reminder* and its history encapsulate virtually all of the issues circulating around the three terms important to my essay: history, documentary, and cinema. It suggests that images themselves, as Martha Rosler says of photographs, “are dumb”; their meaning is constructed in the web of interpretations we give them through technology—for example,

1. *Memory of the Camps* (Great Britain, 1985), Executive Producer, Sidney Bernstein; Producer, Sergei Nolbandov; Treatment Advisor, Alfred Hitchcock. For more on this moving film see Annette Innsdorf, *Indelible Shadows, Film and the Holocaust*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Eng., 1989).

sound, montage, context, and narrative.² The edited montage of the cottage and the camp, one image following another, served as “captions,” to use Walter Benjamin’s word, for each image.³

As I lay out the terms of this essay — documentary, history, cinema — I realize that there are numerous permutations possible in thinking about this intersection: the history of documentary cinema; the uses of history in documentary; the uses of document(arie)s by historians; the encoding of history in documents; the uses of cinema as documents, and so forth. According to the *OED*, history has long been defined as a narrative, while documentary (a relatively modern word, coined by Bentham in the first decade of the nineteenth century) concerns evidence. History tracks the “whole train of events connected with a country, society, person thing, etc. . . .” But a document, whose obsolete definition encompasses “teaching, instruction, warning,” is lodged in an object which “furnishes evidence or information.” The relationship is clear — history relies on documents to support its narrative. But where does documentary fit? Its (not very useful) definition “of the nature of or consisting in documents” is matched with its two rare usages — “affording evidence,” “relating to teaching.” The documentary then is meant to instruct, through evidence; it poses truth as a moral imperative. And I think it is here that we can begin to turn to the peculiar form of documentary — documentary film — that is the concern of this essay.

John Grierson’s 1926 review of Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* is generally considered to be the first use of the term documentary to distinguish nonfiction film. According to Grierson, Flaherty’s recreations of the daily life of a young Polynesian boy had “documentary value.”⁴ The film held a moral, as well as aesthetic, currency for its audience by presenting itself as truthful. Known as the father of documentary, Flaherty nevertheless relied on reenactment and restaging to achieve his moral and narrative coherence. Not unlike Sergei Eisenstein who used amateurs as actors to restage the powerful events of the Soviet Revolution, Flaherty manipulated reality to give a picture of reality. But the ideas and theories involved in documentary, as a category of cinema in opposition to fiction film, were most fully articulated in Dziga Vertov’s 1929 *Kino-Eye* manifestoes. In contrast to Eisenstein’s re-creations, however, Vertov’s filmmaking

2. Martha Rosler, “in, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)” in *Three Works* (Halifax, N.S., 1981), 82.

3. Benjamin called for writers to pick up the camera in order to instruct photographers on the importance of verbally contextualizing an image. The sequence of images in a film serves to caption the images by linking them temporally and so inevitably sculpting a narrative. See “A Short History of Photography,” *Germany: The New Photography, 1927–33*, ed. David Mellor (London, 1978), 60–76; and “The Author as Producer,” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, transl. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1978), 220–238. Susan Sontag echoes Benjamin’s discussion in *On Photography* (New York, 1977) and anticipates Rosler’s pithy remark when she describes “what no photograph can ever do — speak” (108).

4. John Grierson, unsigned review of *Moana*, *New York Sun* (February 8, 1926). Reprinted in Lewis Jacobs, *The Documentary Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1979), 25.

technique was closer to newsreel as he took his camera out onto the streets of Russia and filmed the events of daily life.

Because Flaherty relied both on acting (on replaying daily life) and on a story based on the chronology of a day's activity, his film presented the history of a subject indebted to nineteenth-century narrative forms. Vertov, on the other hand, sought to create a "new emphasis of the 'unplayed' film over the played film, [to] substitute the documentary for *mise-en-scène*, to break out of the proscenium of the theatre and to enter the arena of life itself." Tied to the postrevolutionary project of remaking social relations, cinema needed, in Vertov's terms, to break from its connections to the theatrical and make "visible the invisible, the obscure clear, the hidden obvious, the disguised exposed" by filming the mechanics of production and revolution, including the mechanics of cinema—stockpiling "the factory of facts."⁵

Actually, Vertov's championing of Kino-eye—the discovery of truth through the cinematic apparatus achieved through its "conquest of space, the visual linkage of people throughout the entire world . . . [and] conquest of time"—had its origins in the earliest public uses of cinema. "The movie camera," he notes, "was invented in order to penetrate deeper into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena, so that we do not forget what happens and what the future must take into account."⁶ His belief that the Kino-eye was a scientific improvement over the human eye echoed the first claims for cinema as an apparatus for "the recording . . . and reproduction" of movement.⁷

In the 1890s, the Lumière brothers sent teams of camera operators along with film processors and projectors across the continents both to document and display their inventions by filming the daily lives and environments of common people. One of the moneymaking schemes the Lumières devised was a quasi-simultaneous filming and projecting tour of the big cities of the Americas, Europe, and Africa. The Lumière cameramen would place their stationary cameras at a busy downtown intersection and capture the passersby on foot, horse and buggy, or trolley, then actually inform whoever stopped to watch them that they could see themselves that evening at the cinema. These images were juxtaposed with those from other parts of the world so that Egyptian pyramids rose up on Broadway, the exotic and the mundane becoming interchangeable. Credited as the fathers of newsreel and documentary cinema, the Lumières also pioneered interactive viewing, a kind of direct cinema years ahead of its institutional practice.⁸ The Lumières' cinematograph represented an im-

5. "The Writings of Dziga Vertov," in *The Film Culture Reader*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York, 1970), 370, 362.

6. Dziga Vertov, "From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye" and "Kino-Eye" in *Kino-Eye: the Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, transl. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley, 1984), 87–88 and 67.

7. This is from an early Lumière program reproduced in Georges Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma* (revised edition) (Paris, 1973), I, 290 and quoted in Stephen Heath, "Technology as Historical and Cultural Form" in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York, 1980), 1.

8. Georges Sadoul, *French Film* (London, 1958), 2–4.

portant moment in achieving the simultaneity of image and experience. If history represents a retrospective narrative, the document or newsreel appeals to presence since truth inheres in itself. The sense of immediacy-as-truth/truth-as-immediacy was central to the earliest scientific and modernist uses of the cinema.⁹ This “incredible science” (as Prince Vlod calls the cinematograph in Coppola’s 1992 film *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*) suggests that the amusement of early cinema was not necessarily its resemblance to the theatrical experience; rather it was understood as an exhibit¹⁰ designed both to document the world for itself and to instruct an audience in film reception.¹¹

As the example of the British footage indicates, the relation of documentary to history involves more than a tracing of the ways documentary emerges over time (though I will try to give some sense of that). Documentary films have made important gestures and interventions into both public and private history as well. Documentary then is historical filmmaking; but documentary crosses a number of disciplinary divides: anthropology, for one. Since 1922, when Robert Flaherty restaged *Nanook of the North’s* walrus kill, the form has been linked to ethnographic field work in a number of ways. Standard texts on ethnographic film call for an unobtrusive camera which attempts to position itself like the fly on the wall and invisibly observe the activities taking place before it.¹² But Flaherty had radically intervened into Eskimo culture in order to achieve a dramatic effect; his film, made with funding from a French fur company, recreated actual events through staged performances with techniques and tools which *Nanook* would never have used. The effect produced a spectacle of otherness wholly conforming to Western, indeed Hollywood, patterns of vision and narrative. Clearly the premises of the ethnographic film, that the medium is itself transparent and thus will give us direct insight into the “mind” of the Other, presents a special, racialized ideology about the logic of the apparatus as a construction of knowledge.¹³

9. See Lisa Cartwright, *Physiological Modernism: Scientific Cinema and the Technologies of “Life”* (Minneapolis, forthcoming).

10. For the London sequence in *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, Francis Ford Coppola used a Pathé camera to recreate the visual sensation of early cinematograph. See Manohla Dargis, “His Bloody Valentine” (interview with Coppola), *Village Voice* (November 24, 1992), 66.

11. Clearly these early examples rely solely on the image to communicate; however, it would be impossible to consider the didactic functions of the documentary film without understanding the importance to its purpose of sound technologies.

12. Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin, 1976) is the classic of its field. His injunction to shoot “whole bodies and whole peoples in whole acts” summed up the prevailing ideas about ethnographic filmmaking for at least half a century (125).

13. “The documentary film was founded on the Western middle-class need to explore, document, explain, understand, and hence symbolically control the world. It has been what ‘we’ do to ‘them.’” Jay Ruby, “The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film,” in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal (Berkeley, 1988), 71. See also Trinh T. Minh-ha’s work: *Reassemblage* (1982) and *Naked Spaces—Living Is Round* (1985) as well as *Woman/Native/Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989), especially chapter two, “The Language of Nativism: Anthropology as a Scientific Conversation of Man with Man,” and “Outside In Inside Out” in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen (London, 1988).

These trends, inherited from the earliest moments of cinema through its flowering in the silent era, were radically modified with the advent of sound. Once a narrator could oversee the visual information through voice—either as a voice over or by direct speech—documentary visuals often served as illustrations for the soundtrack. However, since the 1960s, when documentarians began to experiment with living cinema, *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema,¹⁴ documentaries again attempted to capture a pure cinematic truth. As in the earlier period, debates about how this could be achieved followed the divergent paths outlined by the Lumière, Flaherty, and Vertov. Did one simply set up a camera and shoot life as it happened? Or was the point of documentary to recast reality through the cinematic apparatus?

Direct cinema, living cinema, *cinéma vérité*, the formally radical mode of documentary filmmaking prevailing from the mid-1950s through the mid-1970s, sought to express the most intimate details of day-to-day experience—whether those events dramatized national conflicts (as in the Drew Associates path-breaking film, *Primary*), bureaucratic violence (as in Frederick Wiseman's adumbration of the dehumanizing public institutions for the mentally ill, *Titicut Follies* [1968],¹⁵ or private life (as in Craig Gilbert's *An American Family*, the twelve-part series done for PBS in 1972 about the Louds, an upper-middle-class Santa Barbara family whose divorce unfolded before the camera).¹⁶ The idea of being unobtrusive was, as everyone realized, a fantasy—if nothing else wires, microphones, camera, and lights were continually present—not to mention their operators. However, Drew insisted that by choosing wisely an event could be so engrossing for its participants that the film crew's presence had little impact on the happenings—after all, egocentric politicians or wealthy hermits were just too self-absorbed to pay much attention to them.¹⁷ Still, the control of the filmmaking process lay with the director as he (and most direct cinema was

14. These terms are often used interchangeably; however, Barnouw distinguishes among the American objectivist cinema of Drew Associates, Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, and the Maysles by referring to it as living cinema (Leacock's name) or direct cinema to distinguish it from the more interventionist filmmaking of the French director Jean Rouch. See Louis Marcorelles, *Living Cinema: New Directions in Contemporary Filmmaking*, transl. Isabel Quigly (New York, 1973); and Stephen Mamber, *Cinéma Vérité in America: Studies in Uncontrolled Documentary* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974).

15. For a complete history of the making and censoring of Wiseman's film see Carolyn Anderson and Thomas W. Benson, *Documentary Dilemmas: Frederick Wiseman's Titicut Follies* (Carbondale, Ill., 1991).

16. In one of television's ever-present self-referential moments, this became a subject of a recent episode of *Civil Wars*. A team of documentary filmmakers traces the proceedings of an "amicable" divorce, follows the law partners around exposing their foibles, and intrudes into the negotiations until it becomes apparent that each party is furious at the other and Mariel Hemingway stops the film by placing her hand over the lens.

17. For a thorough discussion of the expectations and limitations of direct cinema through a dissection of *Primary*, see Jeanne Hall, "Realism as a Style in Cinéma Vérité: A Critical Analysis of *Primary*," *Cinéma Journal* 30 (Summer 1991), 24–50. In an interview, co-editor Ellen Hovde describes the two Edie Beales of *Grey Gardens* (1975) as "very flamboyant, very theatrical, very funny, in the midst of a crisis." *The Documentary Conscience: A Casebook in Film Making*, ed. Alan Rosenthal (Berkeley, 1980), 376.

practiced by male directors) edited the footage into its final form. “It’s in *cinéma vérité*,” explains Ellen Hovde, co-editor of *Grey Gardens*, “that the editing takes on the same importance as the camera work—and camera work and editing combined *are* directing, in *cinéma vérité*.”¹⁸

One of the critiques fired at the direct cinema movement was its lack of social context—its naturalizing of the viewing process or, in Benjamin’s words, its lack of a “caption.”¹⁹ “The body represented by documentary film,” claimed Bill Nichols, “must be understood in relation to a historical context which is a referent, not an ontological ground. History is where pain and death occur but it is in representation that the facts and events gain meaning.” As “star” of the documentary, the presence of the body, especially the body in pain, signifies a truth and realness which seems to defy contextualization.²⁰ Without the filmmaker’s body present on screen, however, the camera’s view is dehistoricized, while the filmed bodies are simultaneously over-invested with meaning and deprived of agency. Thus, by repressing the sight of the filmmaker’s body, the implicitly middle-class, masculinist, and white perspectives of the filmmakers are eclipsed.

Cinéma vérité came in for various critiques by filmmakers who stressed the need for overt political commitment in their work. Without the social criticism embedded in the caption (which in cinema comes in the forms of voice-overs, intertitles, interviews, archival footage, montage, and so on), direct cinema can espouse that which it seeks to expose. The failure to challenge problematic self-representations was at the heart of the controversies over *California Reich* (1974) and *Blood in the Face* (1991), two *cinéma vérité* exposés of neo-Nazism. Both came under attack by the left for their failure to criticize their subjects. In fact, in *Blood in the Face*, the subjects were delighted that the film was being made by James Ridgeway (a respected left-wing journalist) because they knew it would get wide distribution, unlike a film made by a crew of insiders. The premise of *California Reich* is that the neo-Nazis will repel its audience—who are invited into their living room to watch a domestic scene where small children

18. Of course some women were editors also, including Ellen Hovde (see Rosenthal, ed., 374).

19. “‘The illiteracy of the future,’ someone has said, ‘will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography.’ But must not a photographer who cannot read his own pictures be no less accounted an illiterate? Will not the caption become the most important part of the photograph?” Walter Benjamin, “A Short History of Photography,” in *Germany: The New Photography, 1927–33*, ed. David Mellor (London, 1978), 75.

20. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), 265. *Representing Reality*, one of the few book-length theoretical studies of documentary film since Eric Barnouw’s classic *Documentary: A History of Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford, 1974), begins with a taxonomy—for all genre studies begin here—by examining its “modes of representation,” i.e., how a film tells its story and makes its argument. To some degree, his four types correspond chronologically to the development of documentary: expository employs the classic voice-of-god narration; observational minimizes the filmmaker’s presence; interactive presents the filmmaker actively engaged with his/her subject; and reflexive draws attention to the construction of the film. Other studies would include: Jack C. Ellis, *The Documentary Idea: A Critical History of English-Language Documentary Film and Video* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1989) and William Guynn, *A Cinema of Nonfiction* (Rutherford, N.J., 1990).

speak about growing up to kill “niggers and kikes”—by exposing their racism and anti-Semitism as the rantings of mad men and women. But the objects of the filmmaker’s ridicule use this very scene to spread their message that they are like anyone else—doting parents proudly displaying their precocious children. Simply displaying horror—skeletal remains of the Nazi holocaust or latter-day reincarnations of Nazi racism—without comment, as Sidney Bernstein had realized, is not enough; raw footage needs editing; bodies need historicizing.

This dilemma at the heart of *cinéma vérité* was what political documentarians sought to undo. For instance, ethnographers shifted towards a more interactive approach, including filming themselves filming and portraying informants as savvy actors, or actually handing over equipment to the ethnographic objects to make their own (subjective) work.²¹ This level of self-reflexivity and self-consciousness about the cinematic apparatus was meant to alter the relationship of subject and object of documentary address. The move toward cinematic self-determination by those denoted in the ethnographic film as “other,” or abused in classic Hollywood’s racist depictions of peoples of color, or excluded from “the news,” grew out of the political struggles for self-determination by colonized peoples which inspired the Newsreel film collectives to form in the late 1960s. These filmmakers responded from within the belly of the beast to the calls for a third cinema which would not represent the visual and political domination of the oppressed by the West.

In many ways the relationship between documentary and history which animated Vertov’s work has been rearticulated in the words and films produced since the 1968 publication of the manifesto by filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavia Getino, “Towards a Third Cinema.”²² Their 1967 film, *Las Horas de las Hornas*, presented a powerful resurrection of the interventionist documentary form by actively engaging it in the struggle for decolonization in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Their film employed many techniques gleaned from Brechtian theatrical forms of the epic (as well as from Vertov’s *Kino-pravda*) to tell the story of (Argentinean) national self-determination through cinematic self-reflexivity. Its impact on the emerging cinemas of the third world was profound—offering as it did a “third” way out of the commercial studio productions of Hollywood and the auteurist cinema of Europe toward a communal and populist use of the medium.²³

21. For instance, see John Marshall’s films about the !Kung, particularly, *N!ai: The Story of a !Kung Woman* (1980) as well as the work of Sol Worth and John Adair with Navaho filmmakers from the 1966 series *Navajos Film Themselves* reported in Worth and Adair, *Through Navajo Eyes: An Experiment in Film Communication and Anthropology* (Bloomington, Ind., 1972). In 1968, Canada’s National Film Board instituted its Challenges for Change/Société Nouvelle project under the direction of Colin Low to disseminate film technologies to indigenous populations throughout the nation.

22. Reprinted in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley, 1976), 44–64 and translated into a dozen languages.

23. In the United States a movement for politically-engaged cinema coalesced in the Newsreel collectives, whose logo was a pixilated image of a movie camera and a machine gun shooting the audience. Begun by a number of new left filmmakers (such as Robert Kramer) to bring the struggles of oppressed people—African-Americans, Vietnamese—into view to counter the classic newsreel format of the 1940s, the internal dynamics of these collectives quickly established a division of

Unlike the direct cinema which had dominated American documentary film-making since the Drew Associates followed Kennedy and Humphrey as each toured Wisconsin's small towns in pursuit of the presidential nomination in *Primary* (1960), Solanas and Getino advocated a cinema which intervened in history. These two poles — activist/interventionist cinema and a cinema of detached observation — appear miles apart, but the subject chosen for observation can actually elicit intervention and the activist filmmaker might find himself an observer to history. Critic Ana M. Lopez argues that what *Las Horas* unleashed was a kind of self-reflexive and analytical cinema which culminates in the Patricio Guzman and Equipo Tercer Ano film made during the 1973 coup against Allende, *The Battle of Chile*. In an infamous sequence ending the first section, Argentinean cameraman Leonardo Henricksen films his own death after he refuses to heed the commands of an army officer to cease shooting. In this horrific moment, repeated during the second part from the point-of-view of an Equipo cinematographer, the distinction between history and its representation in the documentary vanishes. The spectator becomes aware of the immediacy of the film through its star, the mortal body. However, Ana Lopez argues that unlike living cinema, *Battle of Chile* was a scripted documentary. Its filmmakers, possessing limited film stock and aware of the pressures and limitations imposed by the instability of the pre-coup months, decided to plot out the film carefully, thus enabling them to “produce what they termed an *analytical* documentary, more like an essay than agitprop.”²⁴ In preparing extensively for the film before shooting, the filmmakers undercut the apparent transparency of the cinematic process: they made a political analysis of the situation in Chile which then structured their filmmaking decisions. Thus a film which appears to record events as they unfold before the camera — history in the making — actually followed a theoretical outline as it tracked the “fifteen or twenty battlegrounds within the larger conflict”²⁵ — historiography in the scripting, if you will.²⁶

The questions documentary films raise about the transparency of the cinematic image and the status of truth imbedded in it seem particularly urgent for historians and anthropologists who often use documentary films in the

labor between experts (usually white men with professional experience) and their assistants — women and minorities. As those at the bottom of the production crew demanded training and access to equipment to be able to film their own struggles, the groups often split and eventually Third World Newsreel emerged to sponsor films by and about self-determination movements and struggles globally. See Bill Nichols, “Newsreel Film and Revolution,” *Cineaste* 5 (1973), 7–13; Michael Renov, “The Imaging of Analysis: Newsreel’s Re-Search for a Radical Film Practice,” *Wide Angle* 6 (1984), 76–82; John Hess, “Notes on U.S. Radical Film, 1967–80,” *Jump Cut* 21 (1979), 31–35; and David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, 1989).

24. Ana M. Lopez, “*The Battle of Chile*: Documentary, Political Process, and Representation” in *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, ed. Julianne Burton (Pittsburgh, 1990), 274.

25. Guzman quoted in *ibid.*, 274.

26. Compare this with the description Pennebaker gives of the “script” of *Don’t Look Back* (1967): “This is not the script from which *Don’t Look Back* was made. The film was made without a script. This is simply a transcript of what happened and what was said. . . . This is only a record of what happened.” Pennebaker’s introduction to the Ballantine book of his film quoted in Marcocelles, *Living Cinema*, 25.

classroom. Since film itself is a document, each with its own history, we might consider, as I have done in this brief and admittedly quirky historical overview, the contingent and partial truths being represented. In other words, documentary films theorize themselves as truth tellers and do so with reference to their historicity—their inclusion in a film history and their representation of another time or place. As film viewers we too bring our histories to bear on the images; documentary film can describe historical reality, demonstrate its effects, and evoke its experience for its viewers simultaneously. But it is this very immediacy which demands refusal so that we understand our own historicity in order to begin to see what we bring to the viewing process and, more importantly, what we get from it.

II

History, according to Bill Nichols, represents the excess of documentary rhetoric. It is that to which all documentaries refer and that which can never be wholly contained by the documentary: “Always referred to but never captured,” he writes, “history, as excess, rebukes those laws set to contain it; it contests, qualifies, resists, and refuses them.”²⁷ This concept of history as documentary’s excess implies an analogy between documentary and history and historiography and history: history stands according to Fredric Jameson’s reading of Louis Althusser as the “absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form.”²⁸ Documentary films, like the criticism of them, speak about themselves as contradictory texts. Full of self doubts about their status as organs of truth and reality, the films and their criticism unravel like so much celluloid on the cutting-room floor, revealing both productive and problematic sites for historical inquiry. Documentary films, long a staple of the history classroom, have generated intense critical debates as they theorize their own complicity in the making of historical meaning; yet these debates have not entered the history classroom along with the films themselves. Film’s relationship to historical meaning and history’s dependence upon, yet refusal of, film’s form leave a space for active viewing. Both construct political subjects, whose self-consciousness about their positions lends itself to an analysis of the past and of the present.

With the 1985 release of Claude Lanzmann’s nine-hour-twenty-three-minute epic documentary of remembrance, *Shoah*, the form and content of documentary wholly changed. One might call his film revolutionary, paradigmatic, in Thomas Kuhn’s sense, in that it incorporated all previous models of documentary filmmaking and radically reordered them so that all subsequent documentaries and histories of the Holocaust need to refer to this masterpiece. Of course, Lanzmann refuses the designation of documentary film. His film, he insists,

27. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 142.

28. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), 35.

is “art” because only art can ask the questions of history and memory his film attempts to answer: What is the place of visual and audio records in an event whose purpose was to erase all evidence of its occurrence? For Lanzmann the fundamental problem is constructing evidence where no documents exist.

Shoah reimagines the relationship of viewer to film by producing a historical document without references. What Lanzmann achieves is the making visible, the witnessing, of an event without witnesses: the purpose of the extermination camp was not only to annihilate a people, but to erase the evidence of its existence, to deny the power of looking and of telling. Lanzmann lets us look at the grass-covered remains of crematoria and prods his subjects to tell what their eyes looked upon forty years before: sights no one should have ever seen, sights never meant to be seen or spoken of because the observers were meant to die. Lanzmann’s film asks much of its audience but far less than he has asked of his subjects, who bare themselves before his camera because they understand their words are themselves documents, or as he calls them, incarnations. In *Shoah*, the weight of evidence lies in the spoken word and its ability to evoke visual memory as the foundations of historical justice. It is the differing testimonies of the three “actors” of his film (and of the Holocaust)—its victims, the surviving Jews; its perpetrators, the Nazis; and its bystanders, the Poles—about what they did and did not *see* which forms the document itself.²⁹

Classical Hollywood narrative sutures its spectators through psychologically-motivated characters who undergo change during the course of the movie.³⁰ Through conventions which enhance verisimilitude—such as the 180-degree rule, match-on-action, continuity editing—narrative film enlists its audience to identify with the images, especially those of the characters, on the screen. This form constructs a subject of desire.³¹ By contrast, one might suggest that the political documentary—the documentary that seeks to intervene in history—mobilizes a subject of agency, that is a subject who becomes an actor in history. This subject clearly desires too, but the desire is directed toward the social and political arenas of everyday experiences as well as toward world-historic events shaping those lives, and away from the purely psychosexual manifestations of lack and plenitude, differentiation and identification, which characterize the fetishistic forms of narrative desire. I do not want to pose a clear-cut distinction between inner and outer forms of desire; rather I want to suggest the ways in which each has been differently interpolated by narrative and documentary as each seeks to claim its status as representer of the Real.

29. The best account of the theory of testimony as historical witness in *Shoah* appears in Shoshana Felman, “The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*,” in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York, 1992), 204–283.

30. For a detailed analysis see David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York, 1985).

31. The classic accounts of this process can be found in Christian Metz’s work. Psychoanalytic semiotics has been crucial to much feminist film theorizing. See the work of Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Mary Ann Doane, and Constance Penley among many others.

In its supposedly purest form — *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema, living cinema — documentary sought to re-present reality — including the inner reality of the subject — through the precise selection of objects surveyed by the camera and the sounds recorded by the microphone: objectivity produced subjective truths. What the filmmaker saw and heard of any event was what the film viewer would ultimately see. The visible and audible renderings of real life hold a powerful claim as truth in contrast to the scripted, performed, staged, costumed, key-lit, fictionalized, in short artificial, images of classic narrative cinema. Yet narrative also makes a claim to reality — or rather, in the case of classic narrative, to verisimilitude and realism, a claim to reveal something truthful about the workings of human emotion. Thus the close-up heightens emotional intensity, the 180-degree rule sutures the viewer into the scenic space, a match-on-action maintains temporal flow, and so forth.

These two modes of presenting the real — the survey of objects and the disclosure of subjectivity — are often seen as incompatible modes of filmic address. Yet they share a number of similar features and premises and thus often coexist in the same film. Ultimately, both confirm cinema's privileged access to the real: one by exactly indexing the profilmic scene, the other by eclipsing the distance between screen and spectator. Each poses the cinematic project as a revelation of reality. What this long digression implies is that the history of cinema in general might be considered in terms of documentary film. This history would of course mean that the most far-reaching forms of cinema — Hollywood's narratives — would become less significant than film genres, but it would enable us to recognize the documentary aspects of fiction films, their investment in "the redemption of physical reality," as Siegfried Kracauer claimed, or their creation of "an aesthetic of reality," to use Andre Bazin's phrase. For a recent example, Spike Lee begins his historical drama *Malcolm X* (1992) with a stunning credit sequence by intercutting George Holliday's 83-second videotape of Rodney King's beating at the hands of four LAPD officers with a screen-filling American flag over which is heard Malcolm's inflammatory rhetoric denouncing white America. Lee's interpolation of documentary footage into a classic narrative film has many antecedents — *Reds*, *Zelig*, *Medium Cool* — dating back at least to Busby Berkeley's re-creations of urban streetlife and Depression breadlines in his otherwise zany musical comedy, *Golddiggers of 1933*.

In *Malcolm X*, Rodney King's beating brings the words uttered thirty years earlier into the present. Both the images — the flag and the beating — and the oratory are so ideologically charged that the message is delivered like a sledgehammer. The "video vérité" tape of police brutality which figured so centrally in the racial politics of 1992 is bookended with the documentary footage of Malcolm bleeding into the images of young children demonstrating in Soweto and of Nelson Mandela speaking to a schoolroom full of children. These irruptions of the real — which recur in the film in documentary footage of Martin Luther King in Selma and Birmingham — seem wildly at odds with the film's epic sweep, which places Denzel Washington's Malcolm in a series of carefully

wrought period pieces as it tracks the transformations of a nation and its hero. The symbolic logic of the thesis that Malcolm's attempts to transform his head will not work until he frees himself from the prison of his mind are signified by changes in his hair: every major change *in* Malcolm's head is accompanied by a change *on* his head. He conks his hair three times—once to begin a career as a hustler, once as he begins his years in jail, once before beginning his study of Islam. He buzzcuts his hair after his conversion in prison; and after his journey to Mecca, he returns bearded to proclaim his rejection of the teachings of Elijah Muhammed. Individual struggles to change—here represented by straightening hair, cutting hair, growing hair, outward manifestations of inner processes—are familiar motifs within classical narrative. Thus surface and depth merge and the “reality” of the documentary footage confirms the realism and historical truth of Lee's version of Malcolm's life.

To cite another example from popular culture: in *Madonna: Truth or Dare* (1991) the queen of artifice, whose career has been marked by makeovers and performances like those in the numbers from the Blonde Ambition tour which the film tracks, is also supposedly portrayed “as she really is.” This film relies on the conventions of documentary, instead of those of classical narrative, to give it the feel of “truth.” But, as Warren Beatty cynically (or so he thinks) remarks, “everything she does is for the camera.” Madonna's *verité* documentary—shot by Richard Leacock—turns the “truth” of her desire into a fictional dare. One premise of direct cinema is that eventually even the most polished public figures let down their guard in private and, like Humphrey and Kennedy during the grueling hours of the Wisconsin primary, give us a glimpse of their “true” selves. But Madonna never lets down her guard. When the camera rolls, she acts. Always performing, always changing hair color, costume, make-up, her body also produces visual evidence of change. But what inner transformations follow her chameleon-like maneuver? The same manipulations of cinematic language which Lee employs to reconcile inside and outside are undercut by Madonna's use of the medium and its genres. Her documentary truth is as constructed as Spike Lee's fictional history *Malcolm X*. Admittedly, both these films (and their makers) are highly conscious of their places in the cinematic, political, racial, and sexual histories of twentieth-century America, and they play to our knowledge about these histories, but they can do so because the two modes of address—*cinéma vérité* and narrative—rely on similar logics and conventions to tell their truths.

But what do these examples say about the subject of agency, who I claimed is the spectator of the historical or more typically the political documentary? What kind of film creates the conditions for his/her possibility? What do I mean by the subject of agency? On the most simplistic level, I mean that a film produces more than the “desire to desire,” as Mary Ann Doane suggests is typical of the melodrama; it may call its audience to action. This reaction was precisely what Bertolt Brecht claimed for his epic theater. His form called for rejecting the

Aristotelian imperatives of catharsis and closure by pushing the audience through discontinuous and disjointed effects to discomfort, and eventually to thought and action. Agit-prop relies on agitation *and* propaganda—first stir people up, make them jittery, and then give them a message. This pattern was beautifully employed in Pare Lorentz's two great films from the 1930s, *The Plow that Broke the Plain* (1936) and *The River* (1937), both financed by federal money and intended to inspire widespread public support for rural electrification and the TVA, respectively, and the New Deal generally.³² Yet like their more recent heirs, these documentaries call up emotional responses akin to classic melodrama. "A film like *Union Maids*," says Ruth McCormick, "very likely owes its popularity to the fact that it appeals to the heart more than the head."³³

The historical documentary not only tells us about the past, but asks us to do something about it as well—to act as the Angel of History and redeem the present through the past. This seems clear when the film also has an explicitly political agenda—like Barry Brown's and Glenn Silber's 1980 film, *The War at Home*, which was made to get men accused of bombing the Army Math Building at the University of Wisconsin out of jail. However, even Ken Burns's seemingly balanced PBS film, *The Civil War* (1990), which presents the words and images of other times, other places, to show the horrors of war, wants us to remember, which as Benjamin insists, is also a political act. The spectator of documentary, this subject of agency, also desires, but desires to remember and to remake history. But how is this spectator hailed by the documentary if the psychosexual processes of identification and disavowal central to narrative address are routed away from interiority and located in evidence? Primarily through an appeal to feeling over thinking.

To mark the twentieth anniversary of "America's leading magazine on the art and politics of the cinema," filmmaker and *Cineaste* editor Dan Georgakas cites a number of unsettling trends in contemporary radical documentaries which have corrupted through cliché the practice of political filmmaking. Despite the rich revival of the American political documentary between the 1960s (starting with Emile de Antonio's *Point of Order* [1964] on the Army-McCarthy hearings) and the late 1980s, Georgakas feels radical films have "indulged intellectual shortcuts or persisted in techniques blunted by overuse."³⁴ Often, he charges, what begins as a stylistic innovation quickly hardens into convention and cliché as film after film juxtaposes talking heads with archival footage to show up

32. For a history of U.S.-sponsored films see, Richard Dyer MacCann, *The People's Films: A Political History of U.S. Government Motion Pictures* (New York, 1973). During the 1930s, radical filmmakers in America organized film cooperatives to produce and distribute films about working class solidarity and antifascism. See William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931-1942* (Princeton, 1981) and Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States, 1930-1942* (Ann Arbor, 1982).

33. Ruth McCormick, review of *Union Maids*, *Cineaste* 8 (1977), 51.

34. Dan Georgakas, "Malpractice in the Radical American Documentary," *Cineaste* 16 (1987-88), 49.

the naiveté of the past, or compiles out-of-context footage in quick montages without acknowledging the complexities undergirding the original sources. Critics like Georgakas, influenced by Brecht and Althusser, challenged these films' formal complicity with bourgeois ideologies lodged in realism.³⁵ Specifically, Georgakas is critical of Connie Field's film *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (1980) for its failure to address a number of crucial issues: that in the 1940s many women believed they were entering the workforce temporarily; that the majority of "Rosies" were white ethnics from Northern cities or Southern white Protestants; that at least two of the women featured were members of the CPUSA. Fields interviewed over 700 women before she settled on the five who comprise her portrait of Rosie. These women—Jewish, black, Asian-American—hardly were typical; but more importantly, their presentation of the struggles they led within unions and against management gives the impression that they were simply strong, independent women. While this is an appealing impression to impart to young women who are the audience for the film (it is a staple of women's studies courses), it also diminishes the significance of political organizations in conducting campaigns on behalf of workers, women, and minorities.

Julia Reichert's and Jim Klein's film, *Seeing Red*, like many American films about explicitly radical movements in America—*The Wobblies*, *The Good Fight*, *Union Maids*—downplays the conflicts and contradictions experienced by the participants within the movements. Instead we hear the stories of a group of elderly men and women who are presented as cute old people giving a sanitized version of radicalism, in general, and the CPUSA, in particular.³⁶ All these films rely on a form of oral history to propel their narratives. The talking head holds a tremendous authority on screen, especially when she counters traditional mystifications about past history.³⁷ Yet talking heads, despite signifying truthfulness, can only tell a partial truth. "From a historian's point of view," writes Sonya Michel, "these privileged subjects can become problematic if a film limits its perspective by relying on them as sole or even primary informants. While oral history subjects are frequently both engaging and uniquely informative, their accounts of historical events or periods can be partial, fragmentary, idio-

35. Noel King, "Recent 'Political' Documentary: Notes on *Union Maids* and *Harlan County, USA*," *Screen* 22 (1981), 7–18.

36. Renee Shafransky, "Seeing Red: An Interview with James Klein and Julia Reichert," and *Seeing Red*, a film review by Dan Georgakas, *Cineaste* 8 (1984), 24–28. See also Jeffrey Youdelman, "Narration, Invention, History" in *Cineaste* 7 (1982), 8–15, reprinted in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal (Berkeley, 1988), 454–464 for a historical overview of didacticism in Left documentary filmmaking.

37. Julia LeSage makes this point persuasively when she argues that women's political documentaries used the female talking head for a number of strategic political reasons: to challenge with the female voice the use of the female body on screen; to reenact the consciousness-raising experience of speaking bitterness; to incorporate the audience into a collective. Julia LeSage, "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3 (Fall 1978), 507–524. See also E. Ann Kaplan, "Theories and Strategies of the Feminist Documentary," and Patricia Erens, "Women's Documentary Filmmaking: The Personal Is Political" in Rosenthal, *New Challenges* for additional defenses of the feminist uses of women as talking heads.

syncratic and sometimes — deliberately or unintentionally — misleading.”³⁸ Testimony is always a partial truth, so when filmmakers authorize their subjects to speak and thus provoke their audiences to act, it can only be a supplementary gesture towards truth. Yet the political documentary often fails to register this, presenting, like the ethnographer, the appearance of “wholeness.” Because of this, its call to a subject of agency depends on the psychosexual cinematic conventions of narrative desire.

It is partly because of its recognition of the fragmentary quality of truth that *Shoah* stands as such a powerful and revolutionary film. At one point in Lanzmann’s saga, Raul Hilberg, the renowned historian of the Holocaust, sits with Lanzmann in his office and reads a document — the *Fahrplananordnung 587* for a railway transport to Treblinka from various ghettos in Poland. This “document” is the trace of 10,000 dead Jews. Framed by a lovely snow-filled scene outside his window, Hilberg gives a lesson in reading, in the semiotics of historical analysis, that guides us in the practice of Lanzmann’s film. Reading for absences as much as presences, Hilberg discerns that this piece of paper represents all that is left of more than ten thousand men, women, and children whose lives were lost and whose accumulated wealth, seized by the Nazis, paid for their final journey to death. Reading absences, traces, and supplements, the historian and documentarian become deconstructors who take apart the lack in the historical record in the process of making new historical narratives.

Lanzmann provides lessons for recognizing the meaning of documents for history. By pushing the various speakers to disclose memories never before revealed, he demonstrates that documents themselves must be constructed. The scene of Hilberg’s Vermont study provides a respite from the horrible memories of the survivors, the perverse denials of the Poles, the lies of the Nazis, the incessant chugging of train wheels. The horrible ordinariness of this railway order becomes a record of erasure; its normalcy exceeds and unlocks the event for the careful reader, the attentive listener. Lanzmann is fascinated by Hilberg’s accounting:

*But why is this document so fascinating, as a matter of fact? Because I was in Treblinka, and to have the two things together. . . . Well, you see, when I hold a document in my hand, particularly if it’s an original document, then I hold something which is actually something that the original bureaucrat held in his hand. It’s an artifact. It’s a leftover. It’s the only leftover there is. The dead are not around. . . .*³⁹

Hilberg’s lesson comes late in the film. For much of the first few hours, like the Jews during the first years of the Final Solution, the audience remains confused. What happened in Chelmno? Who can be trusted? As the circle tightens around Auschwitz and the other extermination camps, truth is inescapable: death is everywhere; survival becomes evidence. So when Filip Muller’s Czech compa-

38. Sonya Michel, “Feminism, Film and Public History,” *Radical History Review* 25 (1981), 47–61.

39. Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust* (New York, 1985), 141–142. All quotations from the film are from this edition.

triot from Theresienstadt are finally shoved into the gas chambers, singing the Czech national anthem and the *Hatikvah*, he decides to join them. But a woman who recognizes him tells him he must leave: "You must get out of here alive. You must bear witness to our suffering . . ." (165). In the final sequence, Simha Rotten, known as "Kajik," recalls his return to Warsaw the day after the uprising: "I was alone throughout my tour of the ghetto. I didn't meet a living soul. At one point I recall feeling a kind of peace, of serenity. I said to myself: 'I'm the last Jew. I'll wait for morning and for the Germans'" (200).

"Made against its own possibility," because the Holocaust was "not only the destruction of a people, but a destruction of the destruction," *Shoah* itself becomes a historical document. The "Jews in the film don't talk for themselves; they are spokespeople for the dead." The survivors never describe how they survived, rarely use the pronoun "I"; they speak as "we," speak not for themselves but for the dead whose voices rise up from the landscape. This is the importance of the multiple languages and levels of interpretation and translation which are woven through the film: "A film without a mother tongue, a film with broken language," a film refusing totality. The film records "the look of those who have seen." It is an artifact against the erasure of history, of the "artifacts," as Raul Hilberg calls them, the traces of an event whose purpose was to erase its own record. Lanzmann calls the film "an incarnation . . . an experience" refusing to see it as archival—it is for him a highly *constructed*, physical act, a movement over time and space which will make us "the contemporaries of *their* deaths," forcing us to endure, something denied those killed in the death camps.⁴⁰

Lanzmann's role as interrogator, as witness, as translator, as occasion for the deciphering of the traces of a history under erasure, is also an occasion for the examination of the place of the historian and filmmaker in history. Lanzmann's refusal to use the by-now clichéd images of the camps recorded by the S.S. themselves or by the allies after liberation testifies to their lack. These images cannot begin to reveal the brutal stories of death and survival locked in the survivors' memories. The filmed images from the camps have become cultural icons, their very familiarity a memento of their emptiness. Rather it is the word "Treblinka" naming a railway depot that holds the powers of horror (to use Kristeva's phrase). At this place of death the train still stops.

The station placard, like all of Lanzmann's film, demands that we rethink the use and meaning of voices and images. His travels through the landscapes of Europe to resee the movement of those who looked before cautions us about our use of the images we receive from the past. As Hilberg says, they are leftovers, still holding enormous power, but open to many interpretations. *Shoah* asks that we deconstruct the historical narrative left us from the Holocaust and hear the voices of the survivors, asks us to become the contemporaries

40. All quotations are from a public lecture by Claude Lanzmann at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, April 2, 1990.

of the dead and so give them their history. Lanzmann resists calling *Shoah* a documentary—he calls it art, a constructed and imaginative work.

Jill Godmilow, director of *Far from Poland* (1984) calls for “deconstructing the documentary . . . to reformulate language—not just verbal language but visual language as well. To poke holes in the existing language, to make spaces, so that there is a possibility for imagination and action to work through it.”⁴¹ Her experience making *Far From Poland*, a staged documentary about Solidarity made wholly in the United States, forced her to rethink the codes of documentary address—codes which naturalize the world, make sense of it and reinforce its social relations by smoothing out contradictions. The desire to make “something that satisfies as *film experience*—in terms of length, interest, rhythm, moral dilemma, characterizations of good and bad, etc.” she says, “can’t dream. It can’t provoke imagination.”⁴²

This desire to dream, to provoke imagination, seems to lead the documentary away from the realm of history and truth into the realm of art and artifice. How are we to judge historical documentaries if they call themselves dreams? In documentary the viewer is asked to participate in a series of contracts—between film and its object, between filmmaker and audience, between reality and representation. In the traditional documentary—including its use for historians—the response to the film is usually confined to whether the viewer agrees or disagrees with the content. On rare occasions the “protagonist” of the film succeeds in convincing the viewer to follow its position—save the dolphins by boycotting tuna, for example—but the construction of the cinematic argument is left unexamined. In the deconstructionist documentary like *Shoah* and *Far From Poland*, the object of the film is to produce a new and disturbing knowledge of history and of its rhetoric—of both its content and its form. Like the Angel of History, we are asked to become complicit in the process of making meaning, of making history. We are made uncomfortable, not by images of cute dolphins bleeding on the deck of the tuna boat or by the emaciated limbs and swollen bellies of hungry children in Somalia, but by the codes which allow the images to make us say “Oh, how awful” and go on about our lives.

Godmilow says that before working on *Far From Poland* she could not imagine how a documentary could escape the limits of *verité*, archival footage and testimony. In *Far From Poland*, she recreates and fictionalizes Solidarity and her reactions to it, and in so doing calls up a myriad of responses to the movement depending upon one’s relationship to its image, its ideas, and their reenactment. Lanzmann’s film asks us to learn about the workings of the Final Solution from the perspective of its victims, an impossible task because its

41. Jill Godmilow, “Far from Finished: Deconstructing the Documentary, An Interview by Brooke Jacobson,” in *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change*, ed. Mark O’Brien and Craig Little (Philadelphia, 1990), 181.

42. *Ibid.*, 180 (emphasis in original).

victims cannot testify. The men and few women who speak can only tell what *they* saw—a broken picture told in broken language. These films ask us as viewers to consider our desire for historical truths, our complicity in constructing historical narratives, our investment in the historical present, and so they call into question subjectivity and historical agency: “For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”⁴³ Looking, then, is always a historical act.

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43. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, transl. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), 255.