Kill the Documentary

A Letter to Filmmakers, Students, and Scholars

Jill Godmilow

Foreword by Bill Nichols

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Abandon the Conventional Documentary—Reject Realism as the Only Authentic Nonfiction Form

We are drowning in nonfiction film today, especially since the digital revolution. Many filmmakers are lazy. They entrench us in some situation or another, but they don't enlighten, provoke, or even heal us. They always say in some way: now you've been there—to some war-torn country, to some art gallery, to some famous person's home, to the shacks and tents of some poverty-stricken immigrants. Now we have met the real people who live in these situations, who perform themselves in these films (I call them social actors), and now we *understand*. Not good enough, I say.

A warning: in 1966 the filmmaker Robert Bresson, addressing Jean-Luc Godard in a 1966 *Cahiers du Cinéma* interview, warned, "I, like you, believe that the camera is a dangerous thing—meaning it's too easy, too convenient, we have to almost forgive ourselves for it."[1] With digital cameras and editing programs that you can slip into your laptop and settle onto your kitchen table, digital filmmaking is fast and easy. Easy could seem like a good thing—why not? But before you start shooting, slow down and think. If you don't, you will probably make a conventional documentary (what now can be considered an institutional mode of representation), tracking situations and presenting testimony by social actors, eliciting expert opinions, arousing your audience into a kind of concerned attention as good citizens of the world. But films like these are fictions—fictions about who the social actors are, about who the viewers are, and how that separation can be closed by watching and caring. These films overwhelm our analytical minds with *the real*.

Simply by virtue of its stance as a documentary, such a film says that only real visual and auditory facts have been assembled into this film text. Seeing is believing, right? But this seeing/believing obscures an embedded ideology and all its conceits. In particular, it obscures the us/them configuration. The first step for making a useful film is to recognize and abandon three powerful and insidious conceits pervasive in nonfiction films: the pedigree of the real, the pornography of the real, and the imperialism of the real.

THE PEDIGREE OF THE REAL

Realist documentaries are premised on the concept that, in order to change consciousness, the filmmaker must *show* a situation—the world as a *show*, thus *showable*. The world is an event that can be repeated in art, that is, in documentary film. But what does it mean to show a situation? Is a situation showable? The French critic Roger Munier writes, "Language is discourse *about* the world—photography and cinema are languages *of* the world. The world speaks through its images in an inarticulate way, and each sequence of moving icons is either illusionary or stripped of all meaning, because void of all discourse. These are mere images whose eloquence confers a power of illusion."[2]

You could call the pedigree of the real a *guarantee*—that, since all footage was shot by a trustworthy filmmaker in real life and real time, the film offers a true, useful picture of the situation. You could also call it a *warranty*, such as a full, money-back warranty, or a *certification*, in advance, that the real as represented, is yes—no doubt about it—the truthful real or, at the least, an adequate and useful representation of the real.

What does this pedigree look and sound like? Conventional documentaries almost always have a beginning, middle, and end. The "problem" is announced early on, and events are usually presented chronologically. Sound and image are aligned in perfect synchrony. In the cinema verité style, the run-and-gun shooting, shaky camera, natural lighting, diegetic sound, and long takes convey the sense that the filmmaker was there: just following the events, not creating them. The film's truth claims are based on only what took place in front of the camera without rehearsal or prompting. Anything else, we are taught, is a fabrication, especially any appearance or statement by the author/filmmaker. Thus the documentary-as-we-know-it is able to announce its neutrality and bury its ideology under its found-in-nature guise.

Regarding "the real," consider Robert Flaherty's famous 1922 documentary, *Nanook of the North* (figure 1.1). You probably already know that the romantic "primitive" star of the film, the man who performs Nanook, was actually not an "Eskimo" but an *Inuit* named Alliakariak. You might also know that while Nanook is presented in the film as monogamous, in fact he had two wives, which was common in Inuit society. Consider also that, by the time Flaherty shot his film, "Eskimo blankets" came from a department store in Toronto, the Inuit sold their skins to opportunist traders flying in from New York, and harpoons had been replaced by rifles. (Flaherty did not allow his subjects to shoot a walrus with a nearby shotgun. He insisted they use a harpoon instead.)

INUIT: many consider the term *Eskimo* to be derogatory due to its common usage by racist colonizers; the word itself possibly translates to "eater of raw meat," understood as violent and perhaps barbaric. Though some native groups still call themselves Eskimos, the 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms recognized the Inuit as a distinctive group of "Aboriginal peoples in Canada."

Contrary to the film, many "Eskimos" had seen a phonograph before 1922. The scene where a confused Nanook attempts to discover where the phonograph's music is coming from, putting the vinyl record in his mouth and biting down, was staged (figure 1.2). It's a degrading sequence, but perhaps necessary, in Flaherty's eyes, to lock in the notion that the primitive and humble Eskimo has a lot to learn from us and might someday enjoy the benefits of industrialized society, not to mention recorded music. *Nanook of the North* is a fiction film—a rousing, even inspiring enactment of ancient conceits about the wonderful, skillful primitives (who, like other Indigenous peoples, have managed to

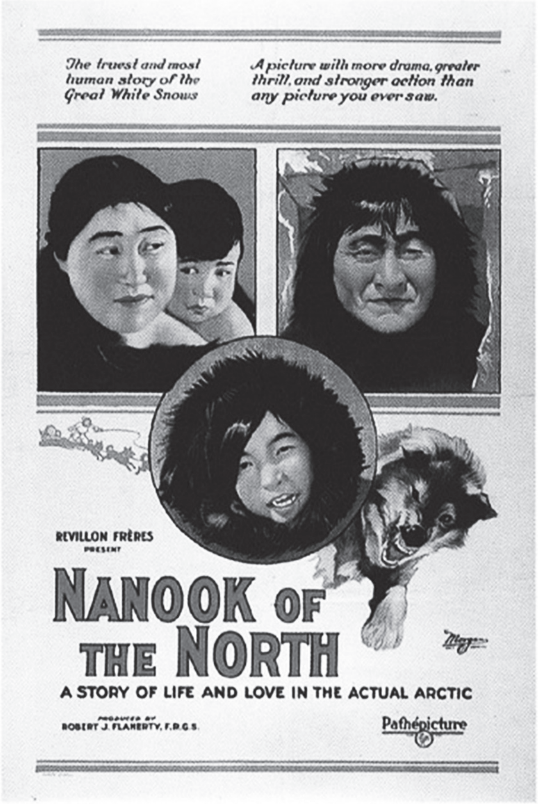
The truest and most human story of the Great White Snows
A picture with more drama, greater thrill, and stronger action than any picture you ever saw.
REVILLON FRÈRES
PRESENT
NANOOK OF THE NORTH
A STORY OF LIFE AND LOVE IN THE ACTUAL ARCTIC
PRODUCED BY
ROBERT J. FLAHERTY, F.R.G.S.
Pathépicture

FIGURE 1.1 *Nanook of the North,* Robert Flaherty, 1922

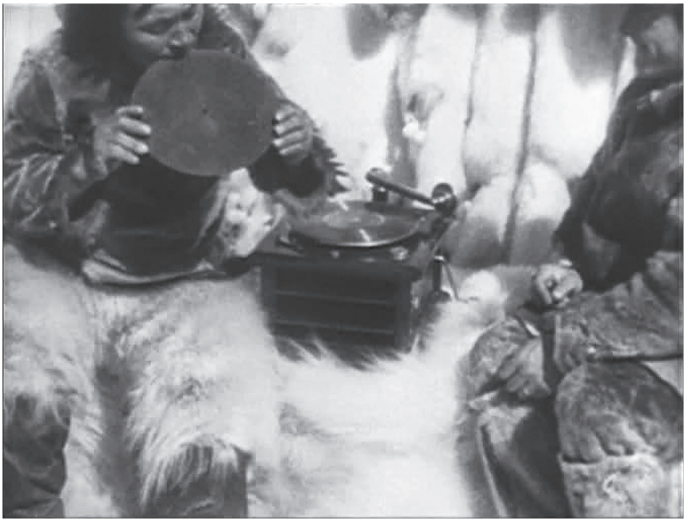

FIGURE 1.2 *Nanook of the North,* Robert Flaherty, 1922

survive our campaigns of removal and genocide). We admire the competence of the primitive Eskimo and wish him well, and maybe even, in our unconscious heart of hearts, promise to love and protect him. Flaherty's Nanook charms us. Any tall tale can be told this way.

The French filmmaker Jean Rouch offers this useful story: "My mother told me all movies were just made-up stories. 'But, I asked her, last week I saw *Nanook of the North*—was that fiction too? Ask your father, she said. My father tried to explain that there was no difference between fiction and real film. The fact was that those small dogs in the snow were very cold, and in the film the actors were very good."[3]

What we normally think of as "the real" in documentary films is a construction, made up of how well the look and the sound of the film *simulates* the actual. Documentary filmmakers should become quite comfortable sidestepping the pedigree of the real.

JG: I LIKE TO RELATE A FRIEND'S STORY . . . a useful, fictional tale. "In his late Cubist period, Picasso was painting a portrait of a woman. One afternoon, the husband of the woman came by the artist's studio to take her home. He asked Picasso to see the painting of his wife, and Picasso showed it to him. The husband studied it awhile and said, 'It doesn't look much like my wife.' Picasso considered this, then asked, 'What does your wife look like?' The husband reached into his pocket and brought out his wallet. From his wallet he took a snapshot of his wife and handed it to the painter, who studied it for a long time, then turned to the husband and said, 'I didn't realize she was so small.'"

Rouch says that *Nanook of the North* was the first film he ever saw, and that it inspired him. But study Rouch's films and you'll see that he was more inspired by his Nigerian collaborators in his films *Jaguar, Me, a Black, Petit à Petit,* and all the rest. Rouch crossed fiction and ethnography, which was called *shared anthropology* or *ethnofiction* at the time, and made what I call tales of the possible. Instead of simulating, he said *We were trying to stimulate reality . . . to provoke it*. He did.

You may already know that the Lumière brothers' famous film *Workers Leaving a Factory* (1895), considered the very first documentary, was shot three times before they got the lighting right. Wikipedia tells us, “These versions are often referred to as the ‘one horse,’ ‘two horses,’ and ‘no horse’ versions, in reference to a horse-drawn carriage that appears in the first two versions pulled by one horse, then two horses in the first retake.” Which season, what lighting, how many horses may become more important than the lives of the workers themselves going home after their labors.

With the conventional documentary, we are securely ensconced in “spectacle,” where our eyes, our ears, and our understandings can be focused on all the people we could not otherwise meet, in places we have never been, nor shall ever visit. To transport us there is to put us in a dream state—not the best place to learn something useful. Dream states are imaginary places where anything goes, including half-truths, omissions, and lies. Theoretically, there’s nothing wrong with dream states, unless the dreamers don’t know they’re dreaming.

As theorized by Joel Agee, “In the documentary dream state, we grant the effortless consent of our eyes and enjoy the power to move in and out of proximity to a given object, or to soar above it, or to change location abruptly. That we are not controlling these movements does not diminish their appeal. On the contrary, there is pleasure in being relieved of own’s volition, in being asked to dream while awake.”[4]

Sight as a mental process depends on much more than optical information received by the eye. Memory is central to vision in that what we see is in large part seen because we already know it for what it is. The “new” is very difficult to see until organized into our visual conventions. Optical stimuli only become information when they “make sense to us,” when we recognize them again. Hilary Roberts writes, “Whatever its ambiguities and possible pornographic appeal, the photograph is compelling enough, convincing enough, to shock disinterested observers into wanting to know more of the event it purports to depict.”[5]

The soundtrack of a *conventional documentary* puts us in the represented time and space of the image, bringing the image to life in this (ongoing) moment. Without any soundtrack, a silent film would simply be a recovery act of people and things once photographed—back then. Though we can follow a silent narrative, we are never in that represented time and place where and when it’s happening. In a film with synchronized sound, we are in the living, breathing time and space of the film’s representations—with the farmer and his corn field, with the refugees in their boats.

When considering the pedigree of the real, never forget that every film, all films, are written—no different than any other text. They are plotted. They are designed, either while shooting or in the editing room. Yet the conventional documentary pretends that it hasn't been plotted and designed. Here's my favorite definition of the doc by the Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha: "Documentary, because reality is organized into an explanation of itself."[6] She is saying that the reality footage, what's included and what's not, what's been conveniently ignored or repressed, has been organized into the appearance of a whole. Isn't there's something fishy about that? Don't play that game.

I would argue that the only reality in/of a film is the reality of the spectator's experience and the importance of that experience in their lives—not the ability of film to capture reality "out there" for us "back here."

THE PORNOGRAPHY OF THE REAL

As I wrote earlier, pornography is the objectifying of a graphic image, reducing it to some essential aspect of itself so the person depicted can be commodified, circulated, and consumed without regard to its original status as a person.

Just as the pornography of the *Playboy* centerfold no longer represents a "female person" but a fetishistic object for sexual excitation and/or for magazine sales, so the overcirculation of nature close-ups of "wild animals" in advertising turns the cougar, chimpanzee, or polar bear into consumable friends that can promote the sale of clothes made of natural fabrics. The overcirculation of images of war, such as the naked nine-year-old Vietnamese girl on fire with napalm fleeing down a road, becomes both an exciting memory of the war and an emotional trigger for generalized human grief, as opposed to an actual understanding of the issues of the Vietnam War. (The Vietnamese call it the *American War* or the *Resistance War Against America*).

Pornography produces inert objects, matter without spirit, from those who were once, in fact, living, feeling beings. Charming, courageous, skillful Nanook becomes consumable. *Nanook of the North* is charming pornography.

The conventional documentary can and often does operate as a *Playboy* centerfold does. Rather easily, it can deliver up for our pleasure the excitement, the visual tits-and-ass of climate destruction, corrupt corporate power, or the constraints on teenage girls in any number of Muslim countries. It can deliver pornography of the "welfare mother." Or the pornography of a farmer whose land has become toxic because it gets its water from a river full of pig manure from a nearby CAFO (concentrated animal feeding operation). Or the pornography of that famous network television documentary *Hunger in America* (1968), which presents, one after another, newborn babies almost too weak to live because of their mothers' insufficient diet: one African American baby, one Native American baby, one Hispanic baby, and one baby of poor white sharecroppers. At birth, one of these babies is too weak for the doctors to save. She or he dies on camera, before our eyes. Viewers gasp, hold their breath, blink, and feel extremely sad. As viewers, we're constructed as those who care very much about this sudden death and the shame of these parents—as those who would fix the problem *if only we could*. This is poverty porn. Or trauma porn. Or welfare porn. Or Black-family-Hispanic-family-Native-American-family-poor-white-family porn. But watching this film is like an express ticket to personal exoneration. "We watched and we cared" seems sufficient. The problem is no longer ours.

But how is it that watching victims of slavery, crime scenes, or extreme hunger on film can be pleasurable? There's this sort of deep, hardwired thing in us that seems to draw us to carnage. One useful proposition: "We eat chilies and bitter greens, and drink bitter tonics and bitter coffee, for the same reason that we ride roller coasters and watch horror films: to fool the body into thinking it's in danger, and then enjoy the adrenal ride," says psychologist Paul Rozin.[7]

To watch war death, babies dying, or social struggle in Hong Kong in nonfiction cinema offers a kind of benign, pleasurable masochism. A conventional documentary gives all that a name, a face, and a place. The film's plea for empathy and then the promotion of emotional resolution underscores and legitimates our pleasure in witnessing the abject, the tormented, the distressed, the miserable, and the afflicted. All these films come to some sort of resolution. *Hunger in America* shows us how government-supplied food stamps are reducing the hunger problem. Another film, *Harlan County, USA (1976)*, about a coal miners' strike in Kentucky, can finally draw to a close when the miners' strike against the Duke Power Company succeeds. Such pleasure. Such proof of our fellow feeling, our humanity—all delivered directly to us in the comfort of your local cinemas, your living room, bedroom, or, now, even your cellphone.

The problem with such resolution is that although the immediate situation may have had a satisfactory and gratifying ending that deserves celebration, the outstanding, multiple issues and circumstances of the situation are repressed. The four families of *Hunger in America*, unable to provide food for their families through their own labors, have to purchase food using only the monetary equivalent of what a family that size would receive in the U.S. federal government Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Today, in 2020, that is $194.00 per person per month, or $6.37 per day. The situation of the undernourished babies is not produced by a lack of ready cash but by inadequate education and poorly paid labor. This documentary has nothing to say about that. Instead, *Hunger in America* calls out for our compassion and our pity.

The critic Freddy Bauche writes, "Pity is the sister of resignation and the very basis of moral dishonesty: it provides every individual who is too cowardly to engage in revolt with a weighty, yet specious alibi."[8] In James Baldwin's essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," about Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he writes, "Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty . . . the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mark of cruelty."[9]

The essential gesture of the traditional nonfiction film is to produce *us-watching-them* in an effortless way—not traveling to where they are, not learning their language, not smelling their food, and, most important, not being in their time. There are a million variations of us-watching-them in the seemingly innocent contexts of photographic accuracy and unmediated truth for our education and the elevation of our senses, so that we can be good, knowledgeable citizens.

The conventional documentary offers special opportunities for the liberal middle class. Why? Perhaps because middle-class viewers are secretly self-conscious and possibly ashamed of their privileged position, because they are educated and value knowledge, and because they have the means and the time to watch. The middle class goes to the documentary to get more comfortable in their own skin, to experience the momentary satisfaction of concerned citizenship. For the length of the film, the middle-class spectator is transfixed in an elevated sense of citizen-self.

This is something historian and journalist Thomas Frank (*What's the Matter with Kansas?*) calls the "liberal class virtue-quest." He writes about the middle class imagining themselves in "the international goodness community."[10] The liberal documentary offers our goodness community an imitation of politics through a kind of fraudulent intimacy. As filmmaker Martha Rosler pointed out decades ago, "a film addressed to the liberal spectator has the effect of naturalizing the asymmetry between an audience and the disempowered victims. It naturalizes and sustains."[11] I tell my students that the unspoken, unconscious (but essential and necessary) viewer response to the documentary filmmaker can be characterized this way:

> Thank you for this information.
> Thank you for a chance to meet these interesting people and learn and care about their situation.
> And (sotto voce or whispered to oneself) Thank God that's not me!

Empathy, the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference, is the mainstay of the liberal documentary. Empathy permits one to feel psychologically enhanced, that is, to feel morally ennobled with an expanded sense of self. But empathy can make the moral compass go wonky. It can and does cause us to elevate individuals over groups, so that we care more about these ten slaves than those thousands in bondage, or these two teenage basketball players instead of the uneducated, underpaid, and impoverished Black communities in this country that produced them. (Just for scale, consider this note from a recent edition of the *New Yorker*: "The brains of sperm whales are six times larger than our own, and are endowed with more spindle neurons, cells associated with empathy and speech."[12] I like to hypothesize about sperm whales watching *Hoop Dreams*. They would probably weep for the loyal mothers of the basketball boys.)

By embracing the pornography of the real and calling for our empathy, the conventional documentary is the perfect medium for personal exoneration. Consider *Hoop Dreams* (1994), the film by Steve James for the independent Kartemquin production group in Chicago, and what it tells us about the Black working poor in the ghettos of Chicago, and why, for these families, it seems that only with superior basketball skills can young Black boys rise up and out of poverty. No other route is examined. *Hoop Dreams* initiates us to feeling that we

1. fervently care about the education of Black boys in the ghettos;
2. maintain high hopes for these Black boys through their demonstrated skills in competitive high school basketball;
3. wait patiently to see if these boys will make their supportive mothers proud;
4. hope that the boys are good enough to get a scholarship to one of the top ten basketball schools, and then maybe a chance at the NBA, then untold wealth for them and their families.
5. However, finding the focus and determination to stay in school and keep your mind on the game and grades (and not on girls and clothes and drugs) is hard for African American kids, and when it doesn't work out for these sweet sons (especially in the exploitative system of professionalized amateur athletics), the least we can know and feel is that they tried, and we can continue to hope that someday, miraculously, just maybe, one (or even two) of these deserving African American kids, those who have gotten a bit more education than they would have without basketball skills, might be able avoid the pitfalls of the Black inner-city life that brought their fathers and brothers down so low and finally climb out of the underclass to comfort and security. Someday.

The narrative is a linear story form, which involves an introduction of characters and setting, presentation of a disturbance, puzzle, or lack, a goal-oriented line of causally linked situations and events, followed by a resolution of the disturbance or a solution to the puzzle. An essential, reduced narrative containing all important narrative elements could be characterized thus: two men set off across a valley, had many adventures, met and overcame many obstacles, and returned home safely. Of course, they returned home safely, so that viewers can go home relieved and satisfied.

Most narrative docs run away from loss and tragedy. The narrative *Hoop Dreams* needs to reward we viewers for our patient attention. Though it can't quite achieve closure, resolution, or redemption—neither protagonist quite makes it to the NBA and endless wealth—nevertheless, the film suggests that it still seems worthwhile investing in the NBA dream. This is a weak resolution considering our now weary eyes and souls, and our emotional investment for 171 minutes in the personal struggles and basketball careers of young William Gates and Arthur Agee. We are left dreaming/hoping that perhaps the next two kids can get into a top basketball university, the NBA, and fame and riches, making their parents proud. When you're making your documentary, avoid the lure of narrative. You need your viewers to think on, and further . . . to think better, past the drama, to the realities of the situation and its causes.

Narrative filmmaking, and especially narrative documentary filmmaking, demands returned-home-safely closure. Closure closes off the possibility of change, which must occur outside the film. No redemption in nonfiction. It isn't true or useful. Simply put, it's dishonest.

Hoop Dreams offers the audience an ideal opportunity for personal exoneration and absolution. The film offers tacit forgiveness for our past and current racism and economic oppression. After all, we viewers didn't create the hood. We didn't *personally* deliver the crack cocaine that led the boys' fathers into addiction. We didn't encourage their parents' failures. These things somehow just happen to Black folks in inner-city Chicago.

As for class, the same goes for race. David Halperin speaks of "the remarkable ease with which socially authorized individuals can communicate certain 'truths,' about a gay person, a black person, a Muslim, an Asian, a Native American, a working-class person, an immigrant, or any other marginal subject. If the message is already waiting at the receiver's end, it doesn't even need to be sent; it just needs to be activated."[13]

These films never hint that our racist history produces the underclass and all its dilemmas. Even after 246 years of brutal Black slavery and roughly 99 more years of Jim Crow, then the mandated segregation of public schools and transportation, and the segregation of restrooms, restaurants, swimming pools, libraries, and drinking fountains, the redlining of housing, then police brutality and mass incarceration—we are nevertheless exonerated because we watched this film and cared about these two boys' futures, delighting in their basketball skills and feeling compassion for their mothers . . . for three hours of our valuable time. The appeal for empathy is intense. But should watching *Hoop Dreams* absolve us from our political inaction? Are we active enough in our political lives to support and protect these mothers and their sons? Not yet, for sure.

Hoop Dreams offers intensely competitive basketball, famous people, dramatic pleasure (will either one or both make it to the NBA?), and a front row seat to observe the abject, the cast-off, the unwanted, the miserable in excruciating detail. Could you call this pornography? I do.

The film lacks the will to address the problems of African American inner-city life or the guts to speak about a complex issue with any rigor. That cowardice cloaks the racialized economic/social problems of the inner-city with "hoop dreams" and produces nothing for its audience but the pleasure of being transported via an exciting, safety-belted ride through Black Southside Chicago. These well-meaning Kartemquin filmmakers have the right to make any film they want, and we have the right to see past it, find it lacking and irresponsible—part of a dreaming world and not a real world.

The primary action of the conventional documentary is seduction. It asks you to go there to that landscape and, once fascinated with what you find there, to keep watching, anxious for more, and finally find some kind of resolution of the problems presented. The doc asks you to enjoy, weep, celebrate, have pity, gasp, perhaps dread, and finally be released from care when the credits roll and you can go back home and go to bed. Instead, documentary film ought to *decolonize* us, help us to become a more responsible, aware, self-conscious audience, capable of thought and action.

JG: I'VE READ RECENTLY THAT, BY THE TIME THEY'RE IN FOURTH GRADE, children growing up in low-income communities are already three grade levels behind their peers in high-income communities. About 50 percent of students in low-income communities will not graduate from high school by the time they're eighteen years old. Those who do graduate will perform on average at an eighth-grade level. What does *Hoop Dreams* say to that?

My friend Ava Tomasula y Garcia, a labor organizer in Chicago's working-class and immigrant neighborhoods, always asks herself, "Who would this person be, if not for . . . If this person were not 'illegal,' who would they be? If this person were not incarcerated, who would they be? If this person were not standing in an unheated warehouse, folding cardboard pizza boxes for twelve hours at a time, who would they be? If this person were not fighting for fifteen years of stolen wages, scraping by on lousy pay, with a dread of termination should any complaint be raised."[14]

A conventional documentary never asks questions like these. Rather, it actively limits the possibilities of its viewers' conclusions—and their imaginations. We need forms of nonfiction that rupture the fixed identity politics that blind us and spark the kind of intellectual and ethical understanding that compels one to take responsibility, that compels one to act.

A useful film should confront what the cartoonist and graphic novelist Art Spiegelman once described as our particular, peculiar *social imaginaire*: He wrote, "We Americans, poor fish, have a perpetually recurring case of amnesia, trying to wriggle off the hook when it comes to facing our history as a Rapacious Capitalist Empire. We prefer to think of ourselves as wide-eyed innocents with perpetually renewing hymens."[15]

The conventional documentary-as-we-know-it facilitates the hymen-renewing process, or, at the least, it's the Vaseline. It weakens the political imagination of both maker and spectator, making it virtually impossible to speak of or listen to useful ideas. Watching a documentary is like being in a chauffeured car where nothing—not even driving—is required of you. You just sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride, knowing that by the end of the film your attention will be rewarded by a new, informed, caring sense of self.

Gertrude Stein once said, "I am I because my little dog knows me."[16] I say that we are ourselves because the cinema knows us—and produces us. The conventional documentary, in particular, *knows us* by imagining and projecting our values, our cares, our sense of community, our citizenship, our righteousness. It creates our identities in crude, familiar dreams of self, and we've grown comfortable wearing those toxic skins.

I've lost track of the author of this sentence, but offer it here as I could not say it better, or quicker: "Actually traditional documentaries are exploiters of the truth, operating in the rhetorical medium of 'common sense' . . . making judgments that it suggests are shared by an entire class, an entire nation or the entire human race . . . without reflection." "Without reflection" says it all.

THE IMPERIALISM OF THE REAL

In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said argued that it is the job of the *artist-in-exile* to undo the substrate of ideological exceptionalism that undergirds U.S. imperialism. Said contends that

> "imperial power is constructed on a bedrock not only of force but of culture as well. Culture provides the crucial underpinning, justification and validation of empire. . . . The U.S. carries out its imperial policies behind the facade of democracy and freedom. Culture and politics produce a system of control that includes a hierarchy of representations and images that dominate the imaginations of both the oppressor and the oppressed."[17]

Most conventional documentaries produce a common mindset, an egotism that eternally places the citizen/viewer at the center of the universe, looking out into the represented world, discovering the problems of other peoples. It's a kind of cultural imperialism, as if our new knowledge exempts us from having had any part of the damage we find there. The documentary's primary mode—a description of them, there, and then—leaves us exempt from criticism and, of course, from action. Unreceptive to interrogation, the documentary cannot tolerate new ideas or fill the baffling silences we may find. Instead, imperialism proceeds apace. (Between 1950 and 2000, the U.S. government has overthrown sixty democratically elected governments, dropped bombs on over thirty nations, and attempted the assassination of over sixty foreign leaders. Millions have died in undeclared wars. One out of five U.S. children doesn't get enough food to eat.)

Carl Sagan, the American astronomer, astrophysicist, and science communicator, has said, "For me, the most ironic token of [the first human moon landing] is the plaque signed by President Richard M. Nixon that Apollo 11 took to the moon. It read, "We came in peace for all Mankind." As the United States was dropping seven and a half megatons of conventional explosives on small nations in Southeast Asia, we congratulated ourselves on our humanity. We would harm no one on a lifeless rock.[18]

One might wonder how neoliberal capitalism can produce and circulate (and honor with an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature), a film like Errol Morris's *The Fog of War*: *Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003). The film serves as a deferential platform for Robert McNamara, the United States secretary of defense from 1961 to 1968 and chief architect of the U.S. war in Vietnam. It offers him an opportunity to personalize his own battered revisionist history of that war. It clearly identifies the war crimes McNamara orchestrated, but never mentions his complete underestimation of the Vietnamese intense and unwavering will for national liberation, which accounts for the U.S. defeat after ten long years of fighting and bombing. Perhaps unwittingly, it functions as an attempt to end our *Vietnam Syndrome*, to explain away the first U.S. war that ended in complete defeat and killed more than fifty-eight thousand U.S. soldiers.

VIETNAM SYNDROME RATIONALE: the North Vietnamese were well versed in guerrilla warfare, sabotage, atypical and asymmetric battlefield moves, infiltration, etc., but their unsustainable casualty count would not have survived a protracted engagement in the absence of major American political interference and Communist-funded antiwar propaganda in the United States, which eroded popular support for the conflict.

The Fog of War is a distracting, imperfect attempt to soften the blow of that defeat in Vietnam, while arousing our curiosity and sympathy for the man, Robert McNamara, who orchestrated and rationalized it. It elicits a kind of respect and understanding for this sad character. It restores America's best intentions and innocence—the narrative that the U.S. is a unique force for good in the world. McNamara, held harmless in this version of events, has become our wise teacher while U.S. imperialism and its current and future military adventures rush on.

I like Mark Fisher's term *capitalist realism* to describe our current political-economic-cultural situation. Capitalist realism expresses the impossibility of imagining an economic system different from what we have now, where it is impossible to imagine a coherent alternative. "In this world, where ultra-authoritarianism and capital are by no means incompatible, but an absurd and deadly concoction that persists, where internment camps and franchise coffee bars can co-exist . . . where only senseless hope makes sense, and where superstition and religion, the first resorts of the helpless, proliferate."[19]

CAPITALIST REALISM might be a most apt replacement for the word *documentary*, or documentary-as-we-know-it. Alas, most of these docs operate without any sense of a world after now . . . after the present. The embedded now/realism of these docs seems to make it impossible to project or struggle into a future

What can be done? To be what Said calls an *artist-in-exile*—an ethically grounded artist—is to refuse to use cinema to manage the world for the middle class, so that documentary consumers can sidestep their guilt and fear of the dark. Rather, I am proposing a nonfiction film that doesn't colonize its viewers by a specific kind of address and an unspoken appeal to their liberal class position. We need new original knowledge that will encourage the imagination, without which every attempt to change the world is doomed to failure. And we need inspiration.

Consider some of the following specific strategies to release the documentary-as-we-know-it's clutch on the nonfiction film.

For starters, never situate your viewer in the there/then of what is represented. Instead of putting us within it, put us *à côté de,* next to it, by examining its underpinnings, its ideological premises, its various representations. When we are not in it, but rather next to it, we can see its smooth conceits. Don't put us "there"—there in McNamara's mind or there in 1972 in Vietnam. If we are there, we are positioned to forgive McNamara's failures and to feel compassion for his sad dilemma.

In her article on *Las Hurdes* (also known as *Land Without Bread*), Vivian Sobchack quotes Luis Buñuel from a lecture at the University of Mexico:

> I will let Frederick Engels speak for me. He defines the function of the novelist (here read filmmaker) thus: The novelist will have acquitted himself honorably of the task when, by means of an accurate portrait of authentic social relationships, he will have destroyed the conventional idea of those relationships, shattered the optimism of the bourgeois world, and forced the reader to question the permanency of the prevailing order, even if the author does not offer us solutions, even if he does not clearly take sides.[20]

The useful postrealist film could help us break out of our imperialist chains. It could shatter *the optimism of the bourgeois world and force the reader to question the permanency of the prevailing order.* Sad to say, this useful film of yours probably won't get served up on Netflix, or any other profit-producing platform. It won't be nominated, most likely, for an Academy Award. Economic forces reward imperialistic documentaries that reinforce our economic system. Postrealist films undermine that system and thus are not welcomed into the celebrated fold.

Imagining how to break down that system through new forms of nonfiction film helps us to identify the *imperialism of the real,* expose its worldview, recognize its limits, and weaken its presence and power. How otherwise could films speak to us? There are other ways, and that's what this letter is about. A useful film must disrupt and destroy the "you" that the conventional documentary has nurtured for so long.

In 2002, I wrote in an article,

> The documentary filmmaker should always, somehow, as Buñuel did in *Land Without Bread*, be setting into operation a second track of meaning, a track about ourselves, so that we, watching the film, don't melt into pure disembodied spectators, spectators who seem to have no designs of our own upon the world, no personal interests, no class interests, no national interests. My own strategy for making the second track—and it means something different in every case—is to reframe the footage somehow. To reframe the footage means to renegotiate it, and in the renegotiating, to raise all possible questions about its representations.