INTRODUCTION *to* DOCUMENTARY

FOURTH EDITION

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9
WHAT ARE THE OBSERVATIONAL AND PARTICIPATORY MODES OF DOCUMENTARY?

The Observational Mode

Expository and performative modes of documentary often sacrifice direct engagement with specific individuals to construct formal patterns or compelling perspectives. The filmmaker gathers the necessary raw materials and then fashions a meditation, perspective, or proposal from them. What if instead of planning everything out in advance, the filmmaker simply observes what happens in front of the camera without overt intervention? Would this not be a new compelling form of documentary?

Developments in Canada, Europe, and the United States in the years after World War II culminated around 1960 in various 16mm cameras, such as the Arriflex and Auricon, and tape recorders, such as the Nagra, that could be easily handled by one person. Sounds and images, recorded separately by these devices, could be synchronized together without the use of studio settings, bulky equipment, or cables that tethered recorders to the camera. The camera and sound operators were free to move about a scene and record what happened, as it happened and where it happened, and yet still keep sound and image perfectly synchronized. This made the observational and participatory modes far more possible than ever before.

Many filmmakers now abandoned control over the staging, arrangement, or composition of shots and scenes that were common to the poetic and expository modes. (The poetic mode is taken up in the next chapter.) Instead, they chose to observe lived experience spontaneously. Honoring this spirit of observation in postproduction editing as well as during shooting resulted in films, when made in the purest observational spirit, with no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music or sound effects, no intertitles or other graphics, no reenactments, no behavior repeated for the camera, and no interviews. What we saw was what there was—or so it seemed in *The Young Fighter* (1953), Leo Hurwitz's pioneering and not yet fully realized mix of voice-over and synchronous, observational footage of a boxer training for a fight; *Primary* (1960); *Les racquetteurs* (Michel Brault and Gilles Groulx, 1958), about a group of Montrealers enjoying various games in the snow; portions of *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), which profiles the lives of several individuals in the Paris of 1960; *The Chair* (Robert Drew, 1962), about the last days of a man condemned to death; *Dont Look Back* (1967), about Bob Dylan's tour of England in 1965; *Monterey Pop* (DA Pennebaker, 1968), about a music festival featuring, among others, Otis Redding, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Jefferson Airplane; *High School* (1968), and *Gimme Shelter* (Albert and David Maysles, 1970), about the Rolling Stones' infamous concert at Altamont, California, where a man's death at the hands of the Hell's Angels is partially caught on camera.

9.1. Frederick Wiseman's work stands out as some of the most purely observational of observational documentaries. Without voice-over, added music, titles, interviews, or archival footage, he nonetheless conveys a distinct point of view. His early works tend to have a strongly sociological flavor as he examines public institutions, like high schools or the welfare system; his later works have a more poetic tone as he renders what it feels like to enter into a specific culture or place. This image is of a rehearsal of *The Nutcracker*. Wiseman joins it with other shots to convey the distinct rhythms of ballet and the repetition so vital to rehearsal. *La danse* (Frederick Wiseman, 2009). Courtesy of Zipporah Films.

Observational filmmaking recalled the work of the Italian neorealists but without a fictional scenario. We look in on life as it is lived. Social actors engage with one another, ignoring the filmmakers. Often the characters are caught up in pressing demands or crises of their own. This requires their attention, drawing it away from the filmmakers and the fact of being filmed. As in fiction, the scenes tend to reveal aspects of character and individuality. We make inferences and come to conclusions on the basis of the behavior we watch as unseen witnesses. The filmmaker's retirement to the position of observer calls on the viewer to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done.

The observational mode poses a series of ethical considerations that involve the act of observing others go about their everyday affairs. Is such

an act in and of itself voyeuristic? Does it place the viewer in a necessarily less ethically comfortable position than in a fiction film? In fiction, scenes are specifically contrived for us to oversee and overhear, whereas documentary scenes represent the lived experience of actual people we happen to witness. This position “at the keyhole” can feel uncomfortable if a pleasure in looking seems to take priority for the filmmaker over the chance to acknowledge and interact with those seen. This discomfort can be even more acute when the person is not an actor who has willingly agreed to perform as part of a fiction.

9.2. This film focuses not on an institution but a place, Jackson Heights, a part of New York City with a highly mixed population. Wiseman again simply observes what happens on a day-to-day basis, but he orchestrates his observations into a mesmerizing portrait of social encounter and purposeful interaction. In this scene, we join a transgender support group as members discuss their concerns. *Jackson Heights* (Frederick Wiseman, 2015). Courtesy of Zipporah Films.

For some, the Maysles brothers’ portrait of Edith and Edie Bouvier Beale in *Grey Gardens* (1975) prompted just this sort of acute discomfort. The two women, scions of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis’s family, live in a huge but dilapidated mansion in the fashionable Hamptons outside New York City. They are at ease with the camera and spontaneous in their interactions but seem to have no idea that others will judge their eccentric, reclusive, highly codependent lifestyle to be bizarre and even unhealthy.

How can the filmmakers simply observe and pass along what they film if what we see becomes fodder for diagnoses of illness or judgments of dysfunction? Did they have no ethical obligation to confront these concerns more directly? Did they obtain informed consent? Could they? Do they in fact do so in ways that are evident from the quality of their interaction and the trust the women place in them? Debate about this film continues to this day.

The impression that the filmmaker is not intruding on the behavior of others also raises the question of unacknowledged or indirect intrusion. Do people conduct themselves in ways that will color our perceptions of them, for better or worse, in an attempt to satisfy a filmmaker who does not say what it is he or she wants? Does the filmmaker seek out subjects because they possess qualities that may fascinate viewers for the wrong reasons? This question often comes up with ethnographic films that observe behavior in other cultures that may, without adequate contextualization, seem exotic or bizarre, more part of a "cinema of attractions" than science. Jean Rouch's *Les maîtres fous* (1955) has been a lightning rod for such debate with its graphic scenes of tribesmen entering a trance state and conducting a ritual in which they do things that some might consider repulsive. Are they being treated as a spectacle or are they represented with a respectful but unblinking lens? Has the filmmaker sought the informed consent of participants and made it possible for such informed consent to be understood and given? To what extent can a filmmaker explain the possible consequences of allowing behavior to be observed and represented to others, especially across cultural boundaries?

Frederick Wiseman, for example, requests consent verbally when he shoots but assumes that when he shoots in tax-supported, public institutions, like high schools, hospitals, or welfare departments, he has a right to record what happens and never grants participants any control over the final result. Even so, many participants in *High School* (1968) found the film fair and representative, although most critics have considered it a harsh indictment of school regimentation and discipline. A radically different approach occurs in *Two Laws* (Alessandro Cavadini, Carolyn Strachan, 1981), about the violation of Aboriginal land rights, where the filmmakers did not film anything without both the consent and collaboration of the

participants. Everything from content to camera lenses was subject to discussion and mutual agreement.

Because the observational filmmaker adopts a peculiar mode of presence on the scene in which he or she appears to be invisible and nonparticipatory, the question also arises of when the filmmaker has the responsibility to intervene. What if something happens that may jeopardize or injure one of the social actors? Should a camera operator film the immolation of a Vietnamese monk who, knowing that there are cameras present to record the event, sets himself on fire to protest the Vietnam war? Should the camera operator refuse or try to dissuade the monk? Should a filmmaker accept a knife as a gift from a participant in the course of filming a murder trial and then turn that gift over to the police when blood is found on it, as Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky do in their film *Paradise Lost* (1996)? And, as we've discussed in chapter 3, what should Andrew Jarecki have done after he inadvertently recorded Robert Durst gloating over his ability to convince the film crew of his innocence in multiple murder cases in *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* (2015)? These last two examples move us toward unexpected or inadvertent forms of complicity rather than observation that may well alter the filmmaker's relation to his subject as well as pose legal and ethical questions.

Observational films exhibit particular strength in giving a sense of the duration of actual events. They break with the dramatic pace of mainstream fiction films and the sometimes hurried montage assembly of images that support expository or poetic documentaries. Uninterrupted long takes, in fact, serve as indexical records of elapsed time and of all the action that occurs during that time in front of the camera, whether 16mm or cell phone, a feature that has proven crucial in many instances of police violence.

Even when edited, observational footage can convey a sense of lived time compellingly. When Wiseman, for example, observes the making of a thirty-second television commercial for some twenty-five minutes of screen time in *Model* (1980), he conveys the sense of having observed everything worth noting about the shooting. His twenty-five minutes of screen time, however, condenses what were hours and hours of actual shooting time for the commercial. A similar effect occurs in *Free Solo* (2018) as we spend extended screen time following Alex Honnold's ascent up El Capitan. The screen time condenses considerably the four hours it actually took him to

climb but still conveys what it feels like to climb rapidly and assuredly, with death awaiting the slightest mistake. Such coverage represents observational filmmaking at its best.

Similarly, when David and Judith MacDougall film extended discussions between their principal character, Lorang, and one of his peers about the bride price for Lorang's daughter in *Wedding Camels* (1980), they shift our attention from what the final agreement is or what new issues might arise because of it to stress the feel and texture of the discussion itself: the body language and eye contact, the intonation and tone of the voices, the pauses and "empty" time that give the encounter the sense of a concrete, lived duration.

MacDougall himself describes the fascination with lived experience as something that is most vividly experienced as a difference between rushes (the unedited footage as it was originally shot) and an edited sequence. The rushes seem to have a density and vitality that the edited film lacks. A loss occurs even as structure and perspective take shape.

> The sense of loss seems related to positive values perceived in the rushes and intended by the filmmaker at the time of filming but unrepresented in the completed film. It is as though the very reason for making films is somehow contradicted in the act of making them. The process of editing a film from the rushes involves both reducing the overall amount of screen time and cutting most shots to shorter lengths. Both these processes progressively highlight particular meanings. Sometimes filmmakers appear to recognize this when they try to preserve some of the qualities of the rushes in their films, or reintroduce those qualities through other means. (David MacDougall, "When Less Is Less: The Long Take in Documentary," *Film Quarterly* [1992–93], 215)

An uninterrupted long take has enormous evidentiary value because it is a document rather than a documentary. Once the filmmaker highlights "particular meanings" through editing, as MacDougall puts it, the discursive value of the footage shoots up as a form of address, but its evidentiary value —proof positive of exactly what happened—decreases. We saw how this applies to the footage of police brutality that spurred the Black Lives Matter

movement. The presence of a camera or cell phone on the scene testifies to its presence in the historical world. This affirms a sense of engagement with immediate, intimate, and personal interactions as they occur.

Editing can still generate the impression of fidelity to what occurred; the result can pass on events to us as if they simply happened when they have in fact been constructed to have that very appearance. It remains the viewer's task to sort out what particular meanings the filmmaker seeks to convey through editing and other forms of reframing, recognizing that the result is no longer a temporal reproduction of a piece of reality but a representation of it.

Another example of guiding events toward particular meanings is the masked interview. In this case, the filmmaker works with his or her subjects before shooting to establish the general purpose of a scene and then films it in an observational manner. Alternatively, the filmmaker interacts by posing questions but cuts their part of the interview from the film entirely. As the subject speaks to the camera, it may seem as if it is a spontaneous monologue captured by the camera rather than an interview. We see examples of this tactic in *Jesus Camp* and *After Tiller*. David MacDougall has used the first approach—encouraging social actors to cover certain ground before a scene starts—quite effectively in several films. An example is the scene in *Kenya Boran* (David MacDougall, James Blue, 1974), where, without paying heed to the camera but in accord with the general guidelines established before shooting began, two Kenyan tribesmen discuss their views of the government's introduction of birth control measures. Almost all contemporary filmmakers who rely on interviews meet and talk to their subjects first, often rehearsing what will be said on camera to ensure, at the very least, that it is terse and coherent. Of practical value, it also provides an opportunity to shade a perspective or emphasize a tone in accord with the filmmaker's needs.

A more complex example is the event staged to become part of the historical record. Press conferences, for example, may be filmed in a purely observational style, but such events would not exist at all if it were not for the presence of reporters and their cameras. This is the reverse of the basic premise behind observational films—that what we see is what would have occurred were the camera not there to observe it. DA Pennebaker sidestepped this problem in *Dont Look Back*, as did Allison Klayman in *The*

Brink, by observing interviews with Bob Dylan and Steve Bannon, respectively, that were conducted by others. It is as if their cameras are not there, but we still observe an event staged and conducted because a (different) camera and interviewer were there.

This reversal took on monumental proportions in one of the first observational documentaries, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935). After an introductory set of titles that set the stage for the German National Socialist (Nazi) Party's 1934 Nuremberg rally, Riefenstahl observes events with no further commentary. Events—predominantly parades, reviews of troops, mass assemblies, images of Hitler, and speeches, a lot of speeches—occur as if the camera simply recorded what would have happened anyway. Yet very little would have happened as it did were it not for the express intent of the Nazi Party to film this rally. Riefenstahl had enormous resources placed at her disposal, and the look of spaces and the choreography of events were carefully planned to facilitate their filming, including the repeat filming of portions of some speeches at another time and place when the original footage proved unusable. (The repeated portions are reenacted so that they blend in with the original speeches, hiding the additional construction that went into their making.)

9.3. Godmilow's film, like many documentaries of music concerts, observes a public performance; in this case, she records two one-man plays by Ron Vawter. Given that such events are understood to be performances in the first place, they allow the filmmaker to avoid some of the accusations that the presence of the camera altered what would have happened had the camera not been there. *Roy Cohn / Jack Smith* (Jill Godmilow, 1994). Courtesy of Jill Godmilow.

9.4. Godmilow makes use of editing to create a distinct perspective on Ron Vawter's performance as gay underground filmmaker Jack Smith and right-wing, anticommunist (and closeted gay) lawyer Roy Cohn. By intercutting the two separate performances, she draws increased attention to the contrasting ways in which the two men dealt with their sexuality during the 1950s. *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* (Jill Godmilow, 1994). Courtesy of Jill Godmilow.

Triumph of the Will demonstrates the power of the cinema to represent the historical world at the same moment as it participates in the construction of that world. Such participation, especially in the context of Nazi Germany, carries an aura of duplicity. This was the last thing observational filmmakers like Robert Drew, DA Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, and Fred Wiseman wanted in their own work. The integrity of their observational stance successfully avoided it, for the most part, yet the underlying act of being present at an event but filming it as if absent, as if the filmmaker were simply a "fly on the wall," invites debate as to how much of what we see would be the same if the camera were not there or how much would differ if the filmmaker's presence were more readily acknowledged. That such debate is by its very nature undecidable continues to fuel a certain sense of mystery or disquiet about observational cinema.

The Participatory Mode

The participatory mode also appeared around 1960 as a result of the new ability to record sync sound on location. Here filmmakers overtly interact with their subjects rather than unobtrusively observe them. Questions grow into interviews or conversations; involvement grows into a pattern of collaboration or confrontation. What happens in front of the camera becomes a measure of the interaction between filmmaker and subject. The filmmaker's interactions and the voice that emerges from them give us a distinctive window onto the world.

When we view participatory documentaries, we expect to witness the historical world as represented by someone who actively engages with others rather than unobtrusively observing, poetically reconfiguring, or persuasively reassembling what others say and do. The filmmaker steps out from behind the cloak of voice-over commentary, steps away from poetic meditation, steps down from a fly-on-the-wall perch, and becomes a social actor (almost) like any other (almost like any other because the filmmaker retains the camera and with it a degree of power and control that can itself become a focus for the film).

The participatory mode has antecedents in other media and several disciplines. Radio has long featured direct interactions between talk show hosts and guests, a form that migrated readily to television before taking

root in cinema as well. Journalism, in any medium, also expects reporters to go into the field to conduct their investigations, interview subjects, gather evidence, and make reports. In addition, social sciences, such as sociology and anthropology, have long promoted the study of social groups by means of direct interaction and investigation.

Anthropology, for example, remains heavily defined by the practice of fieldwork, where an anthropologist lives among a people for an extended period of time, learns the language and customs, and then writes up what she has learned. Such research usually calls for some form of participant observation. The researcher goes into the field, participates in the lives of others, gains a visceral feel for what life in a given context is like, and then reflects on this experience, using the methods of anthropology or sociology. "Being there" calls for participation. "Being here" allows for observation and reflection. That is to say, field-workers do not "go native," internalizing local customs as their own. Instead, they retain a degree of detachment that differentiates them from those about whom they write. Anthropology has, in fact, consistently depended on this complex act of engagement and separation between two cultures to define itself. Empathy and identification are part of the process but within limits that maintain a measure of distance.

Documentary filmmakers also go into the field; they too interact with others and speak about or represent what they experience. The social science practice of participant observation, however, like the classic arrangement of rhetorical discourse to make a convincing case, has not become a paradigm. The methods of social science research have remained subordinate to the more prevalent practice of telling a story and engaging an audience rather than producing a more detached report on what was learned. In fact, biography, autobiography, history, essays, confessions, and diaries are more popular models for participatory documentaries than the social sciences.

As in the performative mode, the filmmaker's presence and perspective often contribute significantly to the film's overall impact. The goal is not to distill objective observations from a period of fieldwork but to immerse us in the interactions and recorded events that are the focus of the film. Some filmmakers more or less parachute into a new environment so that what they respond to are first impressions, a sense of puzzlement or wonder at what they encounter, rather than the distillation of an extended period of

preparation and research. Dennis O'Rourke's 1988 film, *Cannibal Tours*, is a prototypical participatory film in this sense. He joins a group of tourists aboard a cruise up the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, where villagers await them to recount tales of cannibalism and other tribal practices. O'Rourke offers a quite trenchant representation of the tourists' sometimes morbid and often ethnocentric fascination with "primitive" people, people who, in O'Rourke's film, appear far more balanced and even-handed in their relation to strangers. What the tourists do not reveal for his observation, he draws out by means of interviews.

By contrast, *Tulsa Burning: The 1921 Race Massacre* (Stanley Nelson, Marco Williams, 2021) uses a wide range of interviews to present an account of what happened that led to the destruction of "Black Wall Street," a prosperous Black enclave in Tulsa during a devasting attack by white residents a century ago. The interviews are with experts who reconstruct the chronology and provide perspective on the events, aided by director Stanley Nelson's use of archival photographs. The participatory quality is not with those involved in a one-hundred-year-old event but with those who can speak tellingly about it. The film is a powerful example of the interview-plus-archival-footage format frequently adopted to revisit historical periods and events. This format is discussed further below.

Like *Cannibal Tours*, *American Factory* asks what can we learn from face-to-face interviews with Chinese and American workers that capture the on-the-spot feel for what it is like to hear people speak about their present situations as they live them, on the factory floor, part of an experiment in shifting Chinese manufacturing offshore to the Unites States. Such moments are embodied examples of what life is like in a specific situation and how participants express their feelings about it. The power of such moments derives in large part from the immediacy of the encounter between filmmaker and subject.

An unusual form of encounter occurs in several of films by Errol Morris. Driven less by immediacy, empathy, or identification with subjects, Morris adopts a detached curiosity that allows subjects to expand on their perceptions and objectives at length. He even invented a complex system, the Interrotron, that has interview subjects look directly at a screen that holds Morris's image while a camera, behind the screen, records the subject looking directly into the screen rather than at Morris himself. Meanwhile,

Morris faces another screen and camera that could be in a different space entirely as he interviews them. The gain is that subjects look directly into the camera, and therefore appear to look directly as us, the viewers. The loss is that the filmmaker no longer shares the same social space as the subject; instead it is mediated by a set of cameras and screens. It fits well with a recurring theme of self-deception among subjects since they think they are engaging the filmmaker when they are only looking at an image of him, something like the subjects in Plato's allegory of the cave.

Self-deception is, in fact, a compelling subject for documentary in general and Morris in particular. Fred Leuchter, the subject of *Mr. Death* (1999), for example, a self-professed expert on "more humane" methods for executing those condemned to death by the state, deludes himself into thinking he has proven that the death chambers at Auschwitz never used poison gas to kill people; Joyce McKinney, in *Tabloid* (2010), appears to convince herself of her true love for a Mormon man whom she literally kidnaps and "saves" by turning him into her sex slave; Donald Rumsfeld, former secretary of defense, deludes himself in *The Unknown Known* (2013) that his obfuscations effectively disguised his cold-blooded approach to torture after 9/11. Steve Bannon appears self-assured of his fascist ideology and ability to build extremist movements in *American Dharma* (2018), even though his dismissal from the Trump White House and his inability to create a coalition of right-wing splinter groups in Europe suggest otherwise.

Some filmmakers, like Morris, leave the viewer with work to do in coming to an assessment of their subjects. Morris's apparent detachment leaves uncertainty about his stance vis-á-vis the often disturbing implications of what his subjects say. In contrast to Morris's detachment, we experience the representation of quite intense encounters in films such as *Nobody's Business* (1996), about filmmaker Alan Berliner's struggle to understand his blunt but evasive father, or *Tarnation* (2003), about the filmmaker Jonathan Caouette's efforts to understand what made his mother mentally ill and his own childhood a nightmare. More than social science fieldwork, these films draw on the diary, confession, or essayistic traditions for their model. Equally striking is Nick Broomfield's first-person investigation into the deaths or disappearances of well over a hundred women of color in south-central Los Angeles in *Tales of the Grim Sleeper*

(2014). He does not blend invisibly into this African American community at all but succeeds in building trust, finding confidants, and gathering stories that illustrate the deep racial divide between the local police and the community—a divide that may have allowed the man eventually arrested and accused of the multiple murders to avoid arrest for twenty-five years.

Participatory documentaries like *Chronicle of a Summer*, *Portrait of Jason* (Shirley Clarke, 1967), *Tabloid* (2010), or *Citizenfour* (Laura Poitras, 2014) a profile of Edward Snowden, who revealed a massive program of domestic surveillance by the National Security Agency (NSA), raise questions about the ethics and politics of encounter. These are encounters between one who wields a movie camera and one who does not, one with the power to shape what's recorded after the fact and one who can only shape what happens in the moment. How do filmmaker and social actor respond to each other? Does a sense of respect and trust despite disagreement emerge as it does so vividly in *Minding the Gap*? Or is there a feeling of deception, manipulation, or distortion at work from either side as there often is the films of Errol Morris? How do the filmmaker and her subjects negotiate control and share responsibility, as *Two Laws* does so pointedly and Michael Moore does with so much less so? How much can the filmmaker insist on testimony when it is painful to provide it, as Claude Lanzmann does in *Shoah* (1995), his over nine-hour study of the Holocaust, when he insists that Abraham Bomba, a barber, describe what it was like to shave the heads of women he knew were about to enter the deadly gas chambers at Treblinka? What responsibility does the filmmaker have for the emotional aftermath of putting others on camera, as Stanley Milgram did surreptitiously in *Obedience*? What goals join filmmaker and subject and what needs divide them? How do we viewers respond?

9.5. Werner Herzog uses footage of grizzly bears shot by Timothy Treadwell to reflect on man's relation to nature and Treadwell's relation to sanity. Treadwell records his thoughts in footage he shoots of himself without any assistance as he camps in the wilderness. Herzog then adds his own voice-over commentary to Treadwell's footage as well as introducing interviews with others. Treadwell's extraordinary footage, shown here, frequently places him in the same frame as wild grizzly bears, miles from civilization. The indexical power of deep-focus, long-take shots lends an overwhelming authenticity to his footage. *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005). Courtesy of Lions Gate Films / Photofest.

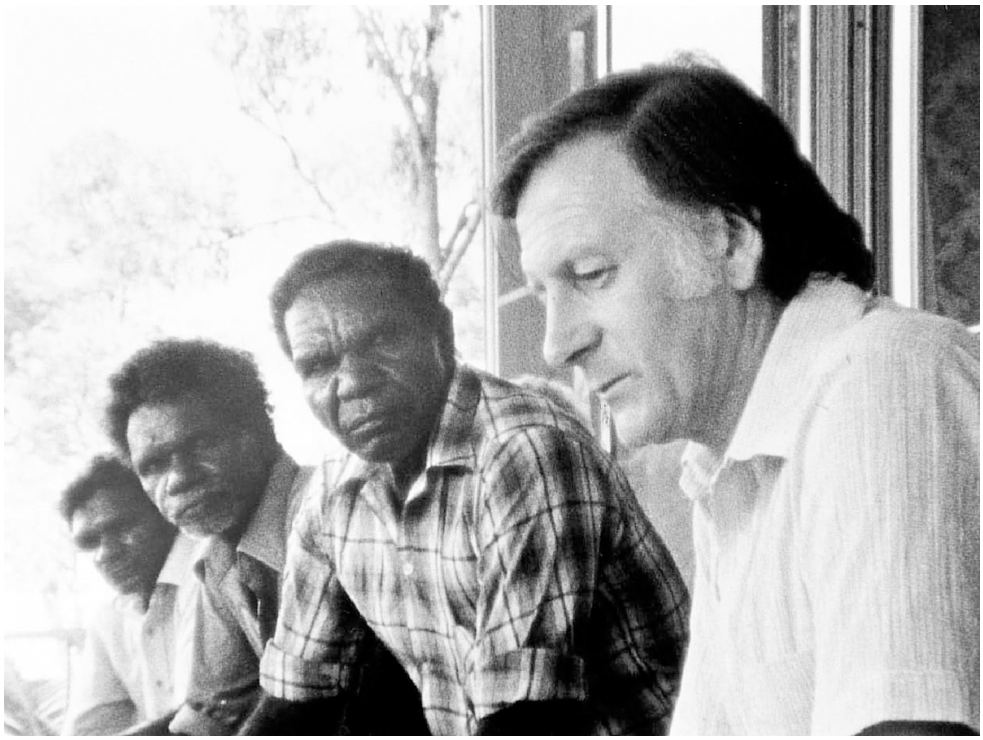
We expect that what we see and hear reflects back on the quality of the encounter between filmmaker and subject. The possibilities of serving as mentor, critic, judge, interrogator, collaborator, or provocateur arise. In *People I Could Have Been and Maybe Am* (2010), Boris Gerrets uses his cell phone as a way to meet strangers on the streets of London and record his encounters. He develops intimate friendships with two people in particular. He becomes, briefly, the lover of a woman from Brazil and the confidant of a homeless alcoholic who has lost his family, and one of his legs, to drug addiction. The relationships take on a depth and complexity that attest to his vivid participation in their lives and to their impact on him. The use of a cell phone almost erases the sense of a power imbalance between camera and subject. Far from being above the fray, as it were, Gerrets is deeply embedded in what happens; he is affected as much as anyone by the very act of filming.

Many find the ambush interview, practiced on CBS's *60 Minutes* and refined into a major ploy by Michael Moore in several of his films, an example of an ethical borderline. To catch someone who is unprepared and perhaps ill-equipped to engage in an interview can signal disrespect. In many cases, the targets of Moore's ambushes seem to deserve what they get: Dick Clark, who owns the restaurant where a welfare mother barely earns enough to cover the costs of her daily commute and day care for her children, hastily beats a retreat rather than try to explain himself to Moore in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), but Charlton Heston cannot flee his own home after he lets Moore inside. A rising sense of discomfort comes over many viewers as they realize Heston's faltering responses in defense of the right to bear arms are due to his Alzheimer's disease, making Moore seem insensitive and disrespectful rather than tough-minded. Moore does a similar thing in *Roger and Me* (1989), when he snares Miss Michigan to quiz her about economic conditions in Flint. Moore makes Miss Michigan, who is clearly unfamiliar with the specifics and is not someone who pretends to have any authoritative knowledge of plant closings and the global economy, look foolish. For some, the insensitivity to her as a person makes his irreverent interview style appear callous.

9.6. *Citizenfour* (2014) poses questions of the filmmaker's relation to her subject pointedly because Edward Snowden, seen here, is a fugitive for having revealed classified US documents about surveillance and Laura Poitras is creating a portrait of him, not as a criminal but as a morally responsible human being. His action might be understood as civil disobedience, but Poitras is more concerned with his character than his politics, although those are clear. This is a photograph taken for the film and used to design a poster. It captures the modesty of Snowden that Poitras wanted to convey through his downturned head and the straight-ahead camera angle rather than the low angle used to suggest heroes or the high angle used to suggest guilt, failure, or inadequacy. Courtesy of Praxis Films.

Participatory documentary frequently stress the actual lived encounter between filmmaker and subject in the spirit of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer*; Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985); Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1985); Jon Alpert's *Hard Metal Disease* (1984), as the filmmaker meets with workers exposed to cobalt dust that the mining company employing them insists is harmless; Martin Scorsese's very open-ended discussion with Bob Dylan about his career in *No Direction Home* (2005); or the Dutch/Peruvian filmmaker Heddy Honigmann's emotional reunion with many of her oldest friends when she

knows a terminal illness will soon bring her life to a conclusion in *No Hay Camino* (2021).



9.7. The MacDougalls have evolved a collaborative style of filmmaking with the subjects of their ethnographic films. In a series of films made on Aboriginal issues, of which *Takeover* is a prime example, they have often served as witnesses to the testimonial statements of traditions and beliefs that Aboriginal people offer in their disputes with the government over land rights and other matters. The interaction is highly participatory, although the result can seem, at first, unobtrusive or observational because much of the collaboration occurs before the act of filming. *Takeover* (David and Judith MacDougall, 1981). Courtesy of David MacDougall.

The filmmaker's presence takes on heightened importance when the emotional stakes are raised, from the physical act of getting the shot that figures so prominently in *Man with a Movie Camera* to the political act of joining forces with one's subjects, as Jon Silver does at the start of *Watsonville on Strike* (1989), when he asks the farmworkers if he can film in the union hall, in defiance of the union boss. In other cases, the filmmaker's presence takes on a highly personal and sometimes poignant quality, as in *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* (1994), in which Deborah Hoffmann, the filmmaker, struggles to cope with her mother's descent into dementia; in *Finding Christa* (1991), as filmmaker Camille Billops wrestles with her decision to locate the daughter she gave up for adoption some

twenty years earlier; in *Catfish* (2010), where a filmmaker/subject romance blooms even though the very identity and intentions of some of the characters remains a puzzle until the end; or in *Dick Johnson Is Dead* (2020) as the filmmaker struggles to celebrate and deepen her bond with her father in his old age.

The participatory mode of filmmaking is what Rouch and Morin termed *cinéma vérité*, translating into French Dziga Vertov's title for his newsreels of Soviet society, *kinopravda*. As "film truth," this idea emphasizes the truth of a filmed encounter, of what happens in that moment, rather than absolute or untampered truth. We might call this "dialogical truth," the truth that emerges from interactions among people, a term that arose in relation to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. What victims and perpetrators of apartheid policies said in public brought emotions, insights, and truths into the open that had remained out of sight, sometimes suppressed from full awareness by the speaker and those who heard what was said.

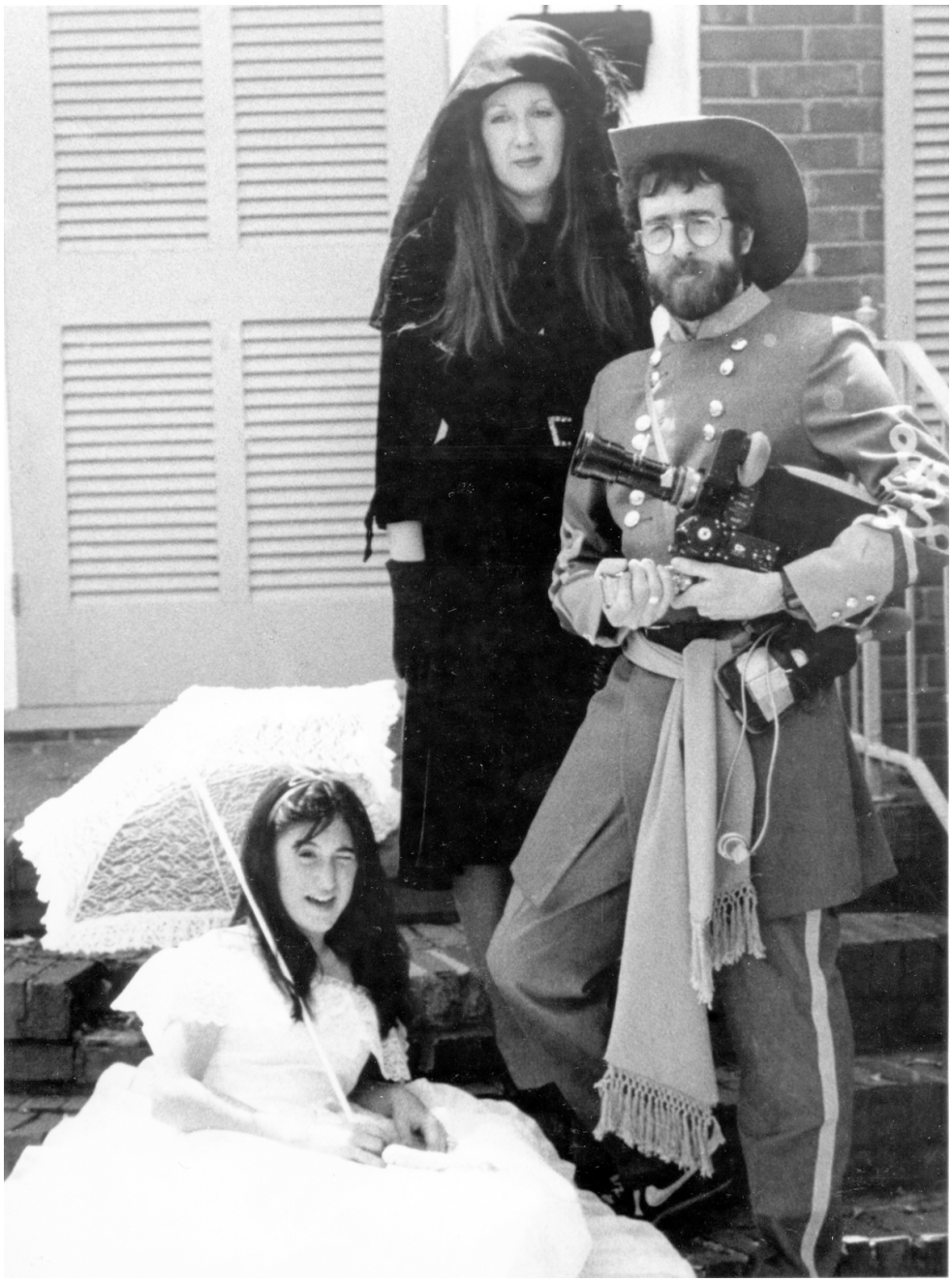
What we see in encounters before a camera is what happens when filmmakers participate with others in shaping their interactions through conversation, interviews, requests, provocations, or other means. Jean-Luc Godard once claimed that cinema is "truth twenty-four times per second"; participatory documentary makes good on Godard's claim. We see—often vividly, sometimes poignantly—how the filmmaker and subject negotiate a relationship, how they regard one another, what forms of power and control come into play, and what levels of revelation or rapport stem from this encounter. The participatory mode or cinema verité sometimes only gives us what someone wants us to think about them, a calculated act of public relations, but it can also reveal truths that seldom emerge by any other means.

Chronicle of a Summer, for example, involves scenes that result from the collaborative interactions of filmmakers and their subjects, an eclectic group of individuals living in Paris in the summer of 1960. In one instance, the filmmakers ask, off-camera, for Marcelline Loridan, a young woman who later married Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens, to speak about her experience as a Jewish deportee who was sent from France to a German concentration camp during World War II. The camera follows her as she walks through the Place de la Concorde and then through the former

Parisian meat and produce market, Les Halles. She offers a moving monologue about her experiences but only because Rouch and Morin choreographed the scene with her and gave her a tape recorder to carry. If they had waited for the event to occur on its own so they could observe it, it never would have happened. They pursued this notion of collaboration still further by screening parts of the film to the participants and filming the ensuing discussion. Rouch and Morin also appear on camera, discussing their aim to study "this strange tribe living in Paris" and assessing, at the end of the film, what they have learned.

This prototypical model for participatory filmmaking demonstrates new truths emerging before the camera that might not have ever emerged otherwise, in contrast to the "what you see is what you would have seen had the camera not been there" impression created by most observational documentaries. Bear in mind that a single film can include moments of both.

Filmmakers who seek to represent their own direct encounter with their surrounding world, as Michael Moore or Agnès Varda do, and those who seek to represent broad social issues and historical perspectives through interviews and archival footage, as Emile de Antonio in *In the Year of the Pig* or Stanley Nelson in *Attica* do, constitute two large tendencies within the participatory mode. They differentiate, loosely speaking, into essayists and historians. They also correspond to the two rhetorical types of discourse on what really happened (the historical) or on what someone or something is really like (the commemorative). The essayists stress their own subjective responses to an aspect of our shared reality, whereas the historians stress a story that can be told about our common history. As viewers, we experience the voice of the filmmaker caught up in situated engagement, negotiated interaction, and emotion-laden encounter. These qualities give the participatory mode of documentary filmmaking considerable appeal as it roams among a wide variety of subjects, from the most personal to the most historical. This mode often demonstrates how the personal and political intertwine to yield representations of the historical world from a specific perspective that is both contingent and committed.



9.8. In this still, director Ross McElwee adopts the pose of a Confederate officer, but for the bulk of the film, he simply records his journey through the American South, looking, ostensibly, for love. The film is a classic example of an essay film in which the filmmaker's personal perspective shapes not only what we see but how we see it. The most memorable scenes involve interactions between McElwee and various women as they discuss his search for love. *Sherman's March* (Ross McElwee, 1985). Courtesy of First Run Features.

In *Not a Love Story* (1981), for example, Bonnie Klein, the filmmaker, and Linda Lee Tracy, an ex-stripper, discuss their reactions to various forms

of pornography as they interview participants in the sex industry. In one scene, Linda Lee poses for a nude photograph and then discusses how the experience made her feel. The two women embark on an exploratory journey in a spirit similar to Rouch and Morin's, a journey that is partly confessional/redemptive in an entirely different sense. The act of making the film plays a cathartic, redemptive role in their lives; it is less the world of their subjects that changes than their own.

Similarly, in Jay Rosenblatt's extraordinary longitudinal film, *How Do You Measure a Year?* (2021), he films a brief interview with his daughter, Ella, each year from when she is a toddler to a young adult. We witness her maturation and the evolution of the father/daughter relation as time compresses from roughly two decades to less than thirty minutes. The depth of their love and appreciation for each other gains in density as the dialogue between them unfolds. It is also an extreme example of metonymy as a rhetorical device since these brief moments of dialogue each year stand for all the other moments that remain unseen.

Some filmmakers draw out a broad historical perspective by how they edit interviews together. The connections that Emile de Antonio makes between interviews replaces voice-over commentary entirely. Similarly, Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson's *Summer of Soul (. . . Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)* (2021), about the six-week long Black music and culture festival in Harlem in 1969, relies entirely on interviews with attendees and participants to paint a picture of what this remarkable event was like. Meanwhile, Tonja Hessen Schei's exploration of the dangers of artificial intelligence, *iHuman* (2019), dwells on events in the present moment and uses a wide range of interviews coupled with both evocative CGI and location filming to convey a sense of the dangers AI poses. All of these films eschew voice-over commentary in favor of building a through line by the editing of interviews.

In some cases, such as Marcel Ophuls's *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970), on French collaboration with Germany during World War II, the filmmaker serves as a researcher or investigative reporter. In such cases, the filmmaker's voice emerges from direct, personal involvement with the people filmed. Ophuls makes his own personal involvement in the story central to its unfolding. Another example is the work of Canadian filmmaker Michael Rubbo, whose *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* (1970) explores

the ramifications of the Vietnam war among the civilian population of Vietnam. Another is the work of Nick Broomfield, who adopts a brash style in films like *Kurt and Courtney* (1998). Exasperated with Courtney Love's evasiveness about her possible complicity in Kurt Cobain's death, Broomfield films his apparently spontaneous denunciation of her at a ceremonial dinner sponsored by the American Civil Liberties Union.

In other cases, we move away from the investigative stance to take up a more responsive and reflective relationship to unfolding events that involve the filmmaker. This latter choice moves us toward the diary and personal testimonial. The first-person voice becomes prominent in the overall structure of the film, as we saw in *For Sama* and *Film about a Father Who*. The filmmaker's participatory engagement with unfolding events holds our attention.

It is Emiko Omori's effort to retrace the suppressed history of her own family's experience in the Japanese American relocation camps of World War II, for example, that gives form to *Rabbit in the Moon* (1999). Marilu Mallet offers an even more explicitly diary-like structure to her portrait of life as a Chilean exile living in Montreal married to Canadian filmmaker Michael Rubbo in *Unfinished Diary* (1983), as does Kazuo Hara to his chronicle of the complex, emotionally volatile relationship he revives with his former wife as he and his current partner follow her over a period of time in *Extreme Private Eros: Love Song 1974* (1974). The film includes a mind-boggling scene in which Hara films his former wife giving birth on the floor of her apartment.

On a larger scale, five of Patricio Guzman's films attest to his personal involvement in Chilean political struggle before, during, and after the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet from 1973–1990. His *The Battle of Chile* (1978) is a classic example of on-the-scene, participatory filmmaking as he films the struggle to defend democracy in which he is directly involved. Four subsequent films, *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997), *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010), *The Pearl Button* (2015), and *Cordillera of Dreams* (2019) reflect back on the dictatorship and the carnage it caused in relation to urban life and the desecration it brought to the Atacama Desert, the Chilean coastline, and the Chilean Andes respectively. Through his dialogues with survivors, rebels, artists, and poets, Guzman paints a vivid, personal picture

of the price exacted by a heartless dictatorial regime and the resolve to triumph over it.

Not all participatory documentaries stress the ongoing, open-ended experience of the filmmaker. The filmmaker may wish to introduce a broader perspective, often one that is historical in nature, as in *Tulsa Burning* or in *The Velvet Underground* (Todd Haynes, 2021), which situates the titular band in the context of the 1960s art and music scene. How? The most common answer involves the interview and the archive. The result often takes the form of a compilation film and recounts history from above (about major figures and events) or from below (about the experience of ordinary people in relation to a historical event). The filmmaker selectively compiles elements from the vast archive of previously shot footage to accompany the voices of those who were there or who know about what happened. This archive-plus-interview form has become a staple of the television documentary, especially on PBS. *Victory at Sea* (1952), an NBC TV series about the naval battles of World War II, was among the first and benefited from a memorable musical score by Richard Rodgers. More recent films about World War II, such as Erik Nelson's *Apocalypse '45* (2020) and William Farley's *I Wanted to Be a Man with a Gun* (2021), offer fresh perspectives and new voices but still use the archive-plus-interview format. In these cases the reflections are by soldiers who look back on their involvement in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and their harrowing experiences during the liberation of Europe, respectively.

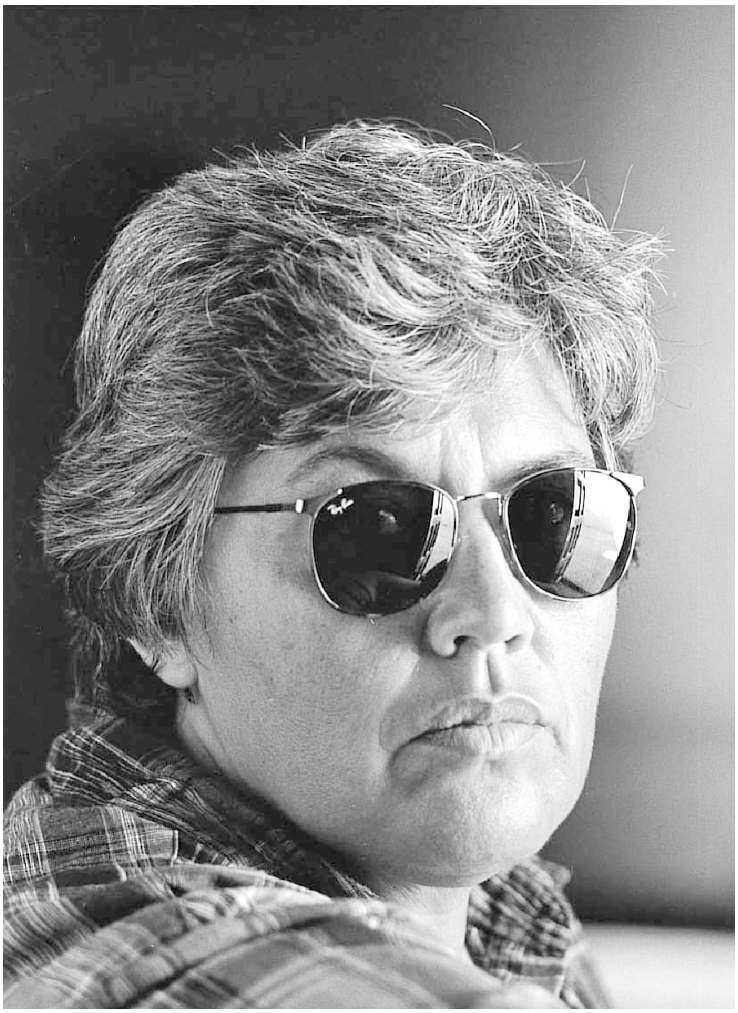
9.9. Terry Zwigoff adopts a highly participatory relationship to cartoon strip artist R. Crumb. Many of the conversations and interactions clearly would not have occurred as they do had Zwigoff not been there with his camera. Crumb takes a more reflective attitude toward himself and a more probing attitude toward his brothers as he collaborates with Zwigoff's desire to examine the complexities and contradictions of his life. *Crumb* (Terry Zwigoff, 1994). Courtesy of Superior Pictures.

9.10. These two women filmmakers (Susana Muñoz and Lourdes Portillo) adopt a highly participatory relationship with the mothers who risked their lives to stage public demonstrations

during Argentina's dirty war. The sons and daughters of these women were among the "disappeared" whom the government abducted, and often killed, without any notice or legal proceedings. Muñoz and Portillo could not shape the public events, but they could draw out the personal stories of the mothers whose courage led them to defy a brutally repressive regime. *Las madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (Susana Muñoz and Lourdes Portillo, 1985). Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.

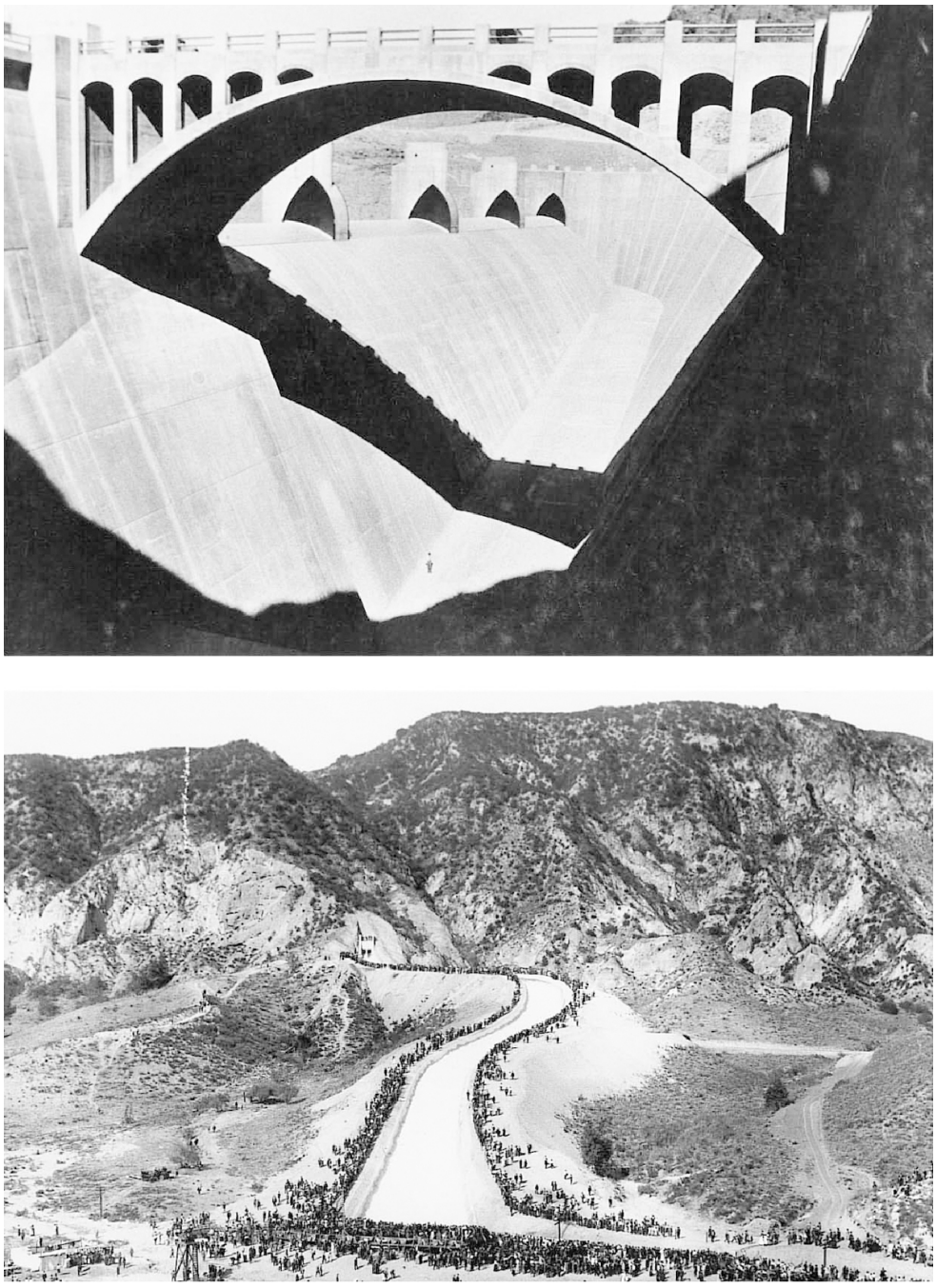
Films such as Esfir Shub's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) rely entirely on archival footage reedited to tell a social history, just as Peter Jackson's story of the Beatles rehearsing for the *Let It Be* album, *Get Back*, is composed entirely of archival footage to tell a more local history. His *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018) is an even more remarkable achievement in that Jackson builds the film entirely from archival footage shot during World War I, which he colorizes with extraordinary precision and combines with segments of interviews recorded with veterans well after the war. We never see these speakers, but Jackson weaves their accounts into a powerful story of history from below. It skimps on the big picture of why and how the war was fought to stress what it felt like to be immersed in it, in the trenches and on the battlefields.

The interview stands as one of the most common forms of engagement between filmmaker and subject in participatory documentary generally. Interviews are a distinct form of social encounter. They occupy a middle ground between ordinary conversations and coercive interrogations by dint of the institutional framework in which they occur and the specific protocols or guidelines that structure them. Interviews occur in anthropological or sociological fieldwork. They go by the name of "case history" in medicine and social welfare; in psychoanalysis, they take the form of the therapeutic session; in law, the interview becomes the pretrial deposition and, during trials, testimony; on television, interviews form the backbone of talk shows; in journalism, they take the form of both the interview and the press conference; and in education, they turn up as Socratic dialogue. Michel Foucault argues that all these variations involve regulated forms of exchange with an uneven distribution of power between client and institutional practitioner. He argues that they derive from the religious tradition of the confessional as they seek to draw out information that might not otherwise be revealed, the "dialogical truth" of encounter.



9.11. Director Lourdes Portillo presents herself here as a hard-boiled private eye. The film recounts her journey to Mexico to investigate the suspicious death of her uncle. Reflexive and ironic at times, Portillo leaves the question of whether her uncle met with foul play, possibly at the hands of a relative, open. *The Devil Never Sleeps* (*El diablo nunca duerme*) (Lourdes Portillo, 1994). Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.

9.12. The filmmaker, in the course of an interview, goes in search of clues, and, ideally, the confession that will solve the mystery. Although she never obtains a confession, the sense that she might do so lends an air of narrative, film noir–like suspense to the film. *The Devil Never Sleeps* (*El diablo nunca duerme*) (Lourdes Portillo, 1994). Courtesy of Lourdes Portillo.



9.13. *Cadillac Desert* is another excellent example of a film that couples archival footage with contemporary interviews to add a fresh perspective to historical events without resorting to a voice-over commentary. *Cadillac Desert* retraces the history of water use in California and its devastating impact on the inland valleys of the state. *Cadillac Desert* (Jon Else, Linda Harrar, 1997). Courtesy of Jon Else.

Filmmakers weave different, sometimes opposing, interviews into a single story. The filmmaker's voice emerges as it brings these voices and

supporting material together. This compilation of new interviews and archival footage has given us numerous film histories: *In the Year of the Pig* (1969), on the war in Vietnam; *Eyes on the Prize* (1987, 1990), on the history of the civil rights movement; *The Celluloid Closet* (Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman, 1995), on the history of gay representation in Hollywood films; *Jazz* (2000), on the history of jazz in America; and *13th* (Ava DuVernay, 2016), a sweeping history of the use of mottos like "law and order" to imprison Black people.

The experience of gays and lesbians in the days before Stonewall could be recounted as a general social history, with voice-over commentary and images that illustrate the spoken points. (In 1969, gay patrons of the Stonewall bar in New York City battled police who tried to raid the bar; it sparked the rise of the gay rights movement.) It could also be recounted in the words of those who lived through those times by means of interviews. The Mariposa Collective's *Word Is Out* (1977) opts for the second choice. Unlike Emile de Antonio, the Mariposa Collective opts to keep supporting material to a bare minimum; they compile the history primarily from the "talking heads" of those who can put this chapter of American social history into their own words. The articulateness and emotional directness of those who speak give films of testimony such as this a highly compelling quality. The form is similar to but different from the oral history, an extended recounting of past events by participants.

Oral histories serve as primary source material and generally lack the careful selection and arrangement of the interview material into a greater whole or broader perspective. The great collections of oral histories, compiled on a wide variety of subjects, from quilt making to the Holocaust, are one form of raw material for the interview-plus-archive form of participatory documentary. Participatory documentaries are a robust form of documentary with much suppleness and power. How the filmmaker engages with or encounters others possesses endless fascination. The diverse range of participatory documentaries is testimony to the value of this mode.