

REPRESENTING HISTORY AND THE FILMMAKER IN THE FRAME

Trent Griffiths*

Resumo: A presença do realizador no enquadramento representa uma relação única entre o documentário e a História em que o realizador se envolve na história social através da sua experiência pessoal e enquanto autor de uma representação. O realizador no enquadramento é, também, um representante do momento histórico, ao explorar de modo reflexivo o encontro com o processo de mediação e auto-representação que caracteriza a sociedade pós-moderna.

Palavras-chave: subjetividade, auto-reflexividade, realizador no enquadramento.

Resumen: La presencia del director en el encuadre representa una relación única entre el documental y la historia, en la cual el director se involucra en la historia social a través de su experiencia personal como autor de una representación. El director en el encuadre es también un representante del momento histórico, al explorar de modo reflexivo el encuentro con el proceso de mediación y auto-representación que caracteriza a la sociedad posmoderna.

Palabras clave: subjetividad, auto-reflexividad, director en el encuadre.

Abstract: The presence of the filmmaker as a subject in the documentary frame represents a unique relationship between documentary film and history, where the filmmaker engages with social history through their personal experience of authoring a representation of it. This paper explores how the tension between the filmmaker's presence as an author and as a subject enacts a kind of self-reflexivity that recasts the possibilities of representing history through documentary film.

Keywords: Subjectivity, self-reflexivity, filmmaker in the frame.

Résumé: La présence du réalisateur dans l'image cinématographique témoigne d'une relation unique entre documentaire et histoire : le réalisateur s'engage dans l'histoire sociale à travers d'une expérience personnelle et comme auteur d'une représentation. Le réalisateur présent dans l'image est également un représentant du moment historique, en explorant de manière réflexive la rencontre avec le processus de médiation et de représentation de soi qui caractérise la société postmoderne.

Mots-clés : subjectivité, auto-réflexivité, directeur en cadre.

* PhD Candidate. Deakin University, Faculty of Arts and Education, School of Communication and Creative Arts, 3000, Melbourne, Australia. E-mail: trent.griffiths@deakin.edu.au

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To the extent that my interests determine how it is I describe the world, then my descriptions lose the capacity to objectively describe. [...] More broadly, if you can detect my personal interests you throw my authority into disrepute.

Kenneth Gergen, 1999.

If all art is ultimately about itself, self-reflexive art draws the viewer's attention to that fact.

Charles Affron, 1980 .

What does a documentary document when the filmmaker steps out from behind the camera and becomes a subject in his or her own film? What is the relationship between subjectivity and history when the filmmaker enters the frame? Filmmakers have long appeared in the frame of their own work, from the earliest actualities of the Lumière brothers and the experimental work of Dziga Vertov in the 1920s and 1930s (most notably *Man With A Movie Camera* [*Chelovek s kinoapparatom*, 1929]). The filmmaker in the frame took on new structural and epistemological significance, however, in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (*Chronique d'un été*, 1961). In that film, the filmmakers were themselves engaged as specific subjects, part of the unfolding reality the camera filmed, encountering the world they sought to represent in emotional and material ways that highlighted a tension between the filmmakers-as-authors and the filmmakers-as-subjects. Since Morin and Rouch, the presence of the filmmaker as a subject in their own frame has become increasingly characteristic of the documentary practice of practitioners as diverse as Claude Lanzmann, Werner Herzog, Louis Theroux, Ross McElwee, Jill Godmilow, Agnès Varda, Nick Broomfield,

Jennifer Fox, Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock. By emphasising the process and personal dimensions of filmmaking, these films foreground issues of subjectivity and contingency that complicates the Griersonian ideal of sober and socially instrumental documentary. The presence of the filmmaker in the frame as a subject also brings to bear the complications and possibilities of subjective authorship in relation to representing history, as well as indicating a shift in the representation of historical reality.

This paper will investigate the relationship between the representation of history in documentary film and the presence of the filmmaker as a subject within the documentary frame, personally and materially involved in both the process of representation and reality represented. Such a line of thinking, however, does not seek to reinforce a binary distinction between reality and its representation that has often characterised documentary theory and documentary address (stemming equally from the ideal of documentary technology being able to objectively ‘capture reality’ and from the so-called ‘fly-on-the-wall rhetoric of observational cinema). Rather, the subjective presence of the filmmaker in the frame emphasises how reality and representation are indivisible, mutually imbricated, and subjectively grounded. Keeping in mind the implications of this binary and drawing a distinction between autobiographical documentary and the presence of the filmmaker as one of many subjects the film focuses on (albeit a unique subject in relation to their authorial control), I argue that the filmmaker in the frame is a particularly powerful site in which the contemporary writing of history is possible.

Defining the filmmaker in the frame

Films in which the filmmaker appears as a subject within the frame form a distinct sub-genre of documentaries, a group of films that foreground issues of subjectivity and authorship in ways that challenge many of the ideals and conventions associated with the representation of reality. Across a spectrum from highly autobiographical to highly performative, the filmmaker's material engagement at the site of what Stella Bruzzi characterises as the 'collision' between reality and its representation (2006: 10) presents unique challenges and opportunities for engagement and interpretation in the domain of documentary.

Focusing on the presence of the filmmaker in the frame as a subject marks out a distinct group of films united less on the basis of formal or rhetorical conventions than in the kinds of interpretive issues they open up. This group of films are less a prescriptive or generic category than marked by a common approach to representing reality which involves an avowed material and emotional investment from the filmmaker in representing reality and a consideration of the experience of representation itself. These films open up consideration of the contingency, emotionality and circulation of documentary films in broader contexts. This approach to contemporary documentary filmmaking poses particular questions of the possibility of documenting truth, the social instrumentality of documentary, and the intersections between film and history. Questions of this kind are of course specific to particular documentaries and the reality they represent, but the dialogic nature of these films – framed explicitly as negotiations between the filmmaker and the people they represent – echoes out into a more general question of the historical significance and social instrumentality of all documentaries, whether the presence of the filmmaker is directly felt or not. In acknowledging the dual positions of the

filmmaker as an author representing reality and the filmmaker as a subject represented, the notion of documentary as record necessarily invokes the attendant notion of documentary as point of view, giving material form to the tension between representation and reality.

The presence of the filmmaker in the frame also emphasises the film as a document of the past (or recording the present that will be re-presented as past) in a particularly forceful way, highlighting the sense of ‘being there’ communicated in the sounds and images that is embodied by the filmmaker’s physical investment in the dual positions of recording and being recorded. John Grierson’s famous definition of documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson, 1979: 13) takes on particularly acute meaning when the person responsible for the ‘creative manipulation’ of reality – not only through directing the camera and shaping the profilmic scene but also through the editing of that filmed material – is also seen as a material part of the ‘reality’ that is creatively manipulated.

Grierson’s definition responded to such a notion of the inherent meaning of filmed sounds and images as a document of the past by asserting the importance of their creative treatment. Yet the scope of what is acceptable treatment outlined by Grierson over the course of his career was particularly limited. He intended to make the distinction between the longer-form work of the government film units he was involved with throughout his career (first with the Empire Marketing Board, and later the General Post Office) and more simplistic or sensationalist newsreels. His writing was dually invested with the duty of his promotional position and his romanticised vision of filmmaking as a transformative art. While ostensibly allowing for creative or emotional expression, his definition was limited by his prioritisation of documentary as an educational and socially fortifying tool. His definition came to legitimate both the socially responsible and idealistic quality of his practice (which was really more

the practice of his peers to which he provided a unifying voice) and his position within the institutional machinery of British culture in the interwar period (see Aitken, 1990: 16–20, 61). This in turn established the notion of ‘creative treatment’ as a limited range of techniques that produced socially oriented, expositional, and educational films.

Brian Winston has noted that “Grierson painted himself and the documentary into a contradictory corner” because nothing could be left of “actuality” in the wake of “creative treatment” (2008: 14–15).¹ Nonetheless, history cemented Grierson’s place as the founding father of documentary theory. So too were his dual ideals of objectivity and civic instrumentality cemented as the original boundaries around what counts as ‘proper’ documentary: striving for objectivity and informational value. The legacy of his definition – in part because of its (arguable) originary status and in part because of its institutionalisation – has framed documentary discourses ever since.

The presence of the filmmaker in the frame as a specific subject challenges many of these idealised notions of documentary. The concerns of the filmmaker in the documentary frame in this sense extend wider

1) In the first edition of *Claiming the Real* (1995, London: BFI), Winston wrote that “The supposition that any “actuality” could be left after “creative treatment” can now be seen as being at best naive and at worst a mark of duplicity” (1995: 11). This comment was criticised as being too extreme and dystopic by Henry Bretriouse and John Corner (both acknowledged in the updated edition by Winston) and by Stella Bruzzi (unacknowledged by Winston in the updated text). Upon reflection, Winston qualifies his comment, admitting that some indexical power of the documentary image persists, but nonetheless maintains that Grierson’s definition negatively complicated the documentary project for future critics and practitioners. The presence of the filmmaker in the frame brings to the fore this tension between the ideal of documentary objectively capturing reality and the subjectivity of authorship – a tension pre-empted by Grierson’s definition. However, this tension that Winston laments is also a productive site of meaning making in that it highlights how historical truth is mediated through processes of representation, and how these representations are the result of negotiations between the subjects behind and in front of the camera.

than autobiography or confession – they are an attempt to deal with broad social issues through specific personal encounters. The filmmaker in the frame brings to the surface an underlying tension between the filmmaker as an *author of reality* and the filmmaker as a *subject in reality*. Politics, economics, and the other institutions of society are transformed into personalised and embodied experiences. On the level of the film as a document of the past, the filmmaker in the frame entails the same ontological sense of the sounds and images being indexically linked to the world represented (the evidentiary sense of the camera recording reality), but the epistemological framing of those sounds and images takes on distinct weight. The sense conveyed of being there, of the camera intervening in reality as it happened, is mediated by the filmmaker's specific interventions and experiences, so the perspective conveyed is more anchored to a specific point of view than conveyed in the more general authoritative and objectively oriented sense of 'this is what happened' that characterises expositional and observational documentaries.

Documentary reflexivity and the filmmaker in the frame

Thirty years ago in 'The Voice of Documentary,' Bill Nichols advocated that filmmakers more explicitly acknowledge their interventions within the frame, seeing a more reflexive stance as crucial to documentary film being able to engage in contemporary social issues that revolve more and more around the personal being political.

[It] especially behooves [sic] the documentary filmmaker to acknowledge what she/he is actually doing [...] to fashion documentaries that may more closely correspond to a contemporary

understanding of our position within the world so that effective political/formal strategies for describing and challenging that position can emerge. (1983: 18).

Nichols' work builds upon the ideas of Jay Ruby, who in 1977 suggested that reflexivity in documentary practice was the only way to enable a sophisticated understanding of the world represented (1977: 4). Without knowledge of how the film's statements about the world are constructed by revealing each of the producer, the process, and the product, Ruby argued, the film risks simplifying rather than contributing to knowledge about the world represented. Both Ruby's and Nichols' arguments are based on the observation that most documentaries problematically assumed a verisimilitude to the world they represent and seek to hide the subjectivity and qualified perspective that underpins all documentary filmmaking. Ruby goes so far as to conclude that "documentary filmmakers have a social obligation to *not* be objective" (1977: 10, emphasis in original).

In the intervening years Ruby's call has been heeded in varyingly productive ways. The rise of reality television formats, the increasing ubiquity of recording technologies, and audience literacy with the notion of documentary performance have changed the landscape of documentary film to the point where the kind of reflexivity advocated by Nichols and Ruby – deliberately or otherwise – is routine in much of the most popular documentary work. The looks from interviewees to the filmmaker offscreen or straight into the camera, recreations shot in a non-naturalistic style, jarring juxtaposition of conflicting testimonies, first-person voiceover commentary, and the voice of the filmmaker questioning interviewees are all familiar to contemporary documentary viewers. The filmmaker's presence in the frame as a subject extends these other elements of textual

reflexivity to reveal the filmmaker's investment in the making of the film, and show that investment not as an impediment to reliable knowledge about the world represented but the lens through which that world may be understood.

The filmmaker's presence in the frame as a specific subject also takes on a different resonance than the presence of the filmmaker in the frame as a journalistic-style investigator. In the manner of John Pilger or Edward Murrow producing reports in the field, the presence of these investigatory filmmakers (or TV journalists) in the frame reinforces their credentials as a committed reporter. Through their interactions with the people they film and their commentary on the world represented, the revealing of the producer and process of documentary works as a reflexive guarantee of authenticity and reliability – indexes of the sincerity and commitment with which these filmmakers seek the historical 'truth' of the stories they report on. Arguably, however, these presences work less as the representation of a specific subject negotiating the possibilities of representation than as authorial presences representative of certain ideals of journalistic investigation, where the filmmaker's authority to represent the world they enter is given and their personal experience cast in terms of the broader social truth of the story they portray.²

John Corner points to the limitations of documentary reflexivity – a category that has traditionally encompassed the presence of the filmmaker in the frame – to interrogate the ideological investments and

2) It is important to note that the codes and conventions of journalism demand this kind of guarantee of reliability differently to discourses around documentary film, differences that have been well explored by theorists such as Jon Dovey and John Corner. While there are important differences in the way these respective codes and conventions have bearing on the construction of knowledge in different works, for the purposes of this paper the comparison focuses on the different way the committed reporter and the subjectively framed filmmaker engage with ideas of authenticity and reliability.

relationships of power involved in documentary representation. Corner argues that documentary reflexivity (as he puts it, where films ‘show their hand’ more fully) does not necessarily lead to more reliable or insightful kinds of documentary knowledge (1996: 25). Specifically, Corner notes, “A problem here is the extent to which reflexive practices work only as occasional, peripheral indicators of the problematic status of the main depiction or, conversely, are integrated into the very *production* of that depiction” (ibid., original emphasis). Because the process of unmasking can only ever be incomplete, and being reflexive can become a style that produces its own set of underlying assumptions, Corner is hesitant to place too much trust in the power of reflexivity to reveal any special kind of understanding of the representations, or guarantee of the trustworthiness of the images.

Rather, Corner suggests, there *can* be epistemic value in reflexivity acting as a guarantee of reliability but it is not always assured; the ideal of reflexivity asserting a closer alignment to objective representation is just that – an ideal. Nonetheless, while the presence in the frame of investigative journalists like Murrow or Pilger may not guarantee the transparency of their ideological position as fully as it first seems, their interactivity with the world they represent does position them as witnesses to the history unfolding in front of their cameras. Their presence in the frame is significant in asserting their “being there”, working as a kind of displaced and relativised objectivity – an “intersubjective objectivity” that relies on the voices of other historical witnesses to corroborate and give weight to the reporter’s perspective.

In the case of the filmmaker present within the frame as a specific subject – revealing their emotional and material investment in the story as a subject alongside rather than apart from the people they film – this kind of ‘intersubjective objectivity’ underpins the work in a more

fundamental way. By revealing the nature of their relationship with the people filmed, their emotional connection to the story, and their personal perspective on the situation unfolding, the filmmaker more clearly links their perspective as being negotiated with and accountable to those of the other subjects in the frame. This approach knits together a view of the historical world from a series of voices, while still acknowledging the privilege of the filmmaker as narrator. As explored in relation to *Chronicle of a Summer* and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* later in this paper, the tension between the filmmaker's presence as both author and subject embraces the complications and subjective dimensions of representation revealed through that presence, and proposes that meaning lies as much in these tensions as in the filmmaker's presence reflexively vouching for the authenticity and reliability of the film's argument.

Specifically, seeing the filmmaker as both author and as subject puts forward the authority of the filmmaker to represent the world they encounter as an open question. The audience is shown the processes by which that authority is (conditionally) assumed as a consequence of the filmmaker's personal investment in the reality represented. For example, in *Far From Poland* (1984) Jill Godmilow deliberates over her right to make a film about the political situation in Poland from her place on the other side of the world. Showing the process of representation as a process of discovery and negotiation between the authoring self and the world represented, Godmilow's deliberation not only qualifies the argument the film makes as incomplete and uncertain, but also explores the way that filmmaking itself is both shaped by and shapes the filmmaker's subjective experience.

Put in more conceptual terms, the filmmaker's presence in the frame here introduces a dimension of *self-reflexivity*. The conjunction of 'self' and 'reflexivity' in this context indicates that these films not only

adhere to the general sense of reflexivity through the filmmaker's presence highlighting the processes of production, but also that they explore the specific encounter of the authoring self with the processes of representation. Godmilow considers the way in which her own filmmaking interprets the testimonies of the people she represents, and proposes the subjectivity of interpreting reality – from both the perspective of the people filmed and from the perspective of the filmmaker – as the framework for *Far From Poland's* representation of the Polish Solidarity movement.

While critics such as Roger Ebert lamented the film's lack of access to the historical site and self-reflexive approach as a failing of the film, in considering the limitations of the filmmaker to access that reality the film offers a perspective on the Polish situation from the outside, highlighting the power of representation to shape history via the fact that the Polish government denied Godmilow access. Moments where the filmmaker is seen talking in frustration to embassy officials on the phone or asking Polish intellectuals about her own recollections of Poland resonate with this idea of history being both contested and subjective.

Of course, the figure of the filmmaker in the frame as a subject can and does enact *both* a reflexive guarantee of a kind of epistemic objectivity (in 'being there' as a witness) and a self-reflexive challenge to the possibility of objectively representing reality in any definitive sense. The key point is that the figure of the filmmaker introduces this tension, which can have productive implications for representing reality. The filmmaker's felt presence as both author and subject offers a framework for representing history on film that proposes individual experience and the negotiations of representation as important perspectives in understanding history.

The filmmaker in the frame representing history

Robert Rosenstone has argued that history in the modern age is written as much with the camera as with the pen or typewriter (1988; 1995). Yet the scope of films that Rosenstone considered relevantly ‘historical’ was limited, focusing on either serious and analytic films or films that expressionistically evoke the past as a “different way of thinking” (see Stubbs, 2013: 66). What Rosenstone’s work doesn’t account for is that it is not only the means of representing history that has changed, but also the focus of historical narratives. The kind of history being written through contemporary media practices tells the story of individuals encountering the processes of representation as much as of political landscapes and cultural movements. In documentary, these histories are still narrativised accounts of past events (or present-becoming-past events), but they are increasingly narrativised via the specific encounter of the filmmaker with the processes of representation. Stella Bruzzi has written of documentary that it is the result of the ‘collision’ between the apparatus of filmmaking and the reality it represents, and increasingly the specific nature of that collision is inscribed in the film itself, anchored in the representation of the filmmaker as a subject in the frame. The narrativisation of history takes on new dimensions – explicitly subjective, emotionally invested, and dialogically oriented dimensions – when history is narrativised through the specific experiences of the filmmaker in the frame.

Put a different way, the filmmaker’s framing of his or her own subjective experience of representation writes history in the first person, but is also directed outward from the self towards the realm of social experience. Agnès Varda explores the history of gleaning in France refracted through the lens of her self-comparison and empathy with this lifestyle in *The Gleaners and I* (2000). Werner Herzog’s reaction to the

audio recording of Timothy Treadwell's death in *Grizzly Man* (2005) lends sympathy to Treadwell's idealistic attitude towards the bears he lived and died with, rewriting Treadwell's story as more complex than as the tragic end of a misguided drifter that the mainstream media ran with at the time of his death. Jafar Panahi voicing his frustration to the camera that he cannot make the film he wants to make in *This is not a film* (*In film nist*, 2011) shows the relationship between official history and the technologies of representation as revolving around the possibility of speaking one's story. Emad Burnat maps the shifting political landscape of the Israeli / Palestinian conflict via his own experience documenting the sporadic fighting in *5 Broken cameras* (2011). In all of these films, the filmmaker engages with social history through their personal experience of authoring a representation of it, and in particular for the latter two films their perspective provides an alternative version to the institutionally written or 'official' history of the situations they engage with.

In each of these cases, the subjectivity and contingency of historical narrative is foregrounded, inviting more direct engagement with the contexts of production and reception. These films are illustrative of a broader cultural shift from empirical and verifiable knowledge (characteristic of what Bill Nichols called the 'discourses of sobriety' to which documentary has traditionally aspired) to more localised and affective kinds of knowledge. Reconfiguring Grierson's definition, the tension between the dual roles of the filmmaker-as-subject and filmmaker-as-author considers the 'creative treatment' enacted in the process of authorship as the base axis from which it is possible to consider historical reality. The subjective engagement of the filmmaker in the process of representation shows how history itself is dynamic, specific, and human. In this sense, filmmakers who represent themselves as subjects of their films as much as authors, exploring their own relationship to the camera

and the world they film, are as much writing a new kind of history as they are performing for the camera.

These filmmakers in the frame mark a unique relationship between documentary film and history. The viewer is oriented not towards interpreting a story already told, but towards witnessing history in the making – the camera doesn't just represent the distanced retelling of historical events but is instrumental in creating the conditions for the representation of emerging historical realities, predicated on the presence of the camera. Hayden White's theory of the narrativisation of historical reality highlights how important it is to consider authors of history – including documentary filmmakers – in interpreting history (White, 1987). White's theory was a response to the problem within historical discourses whereby interpretations of recorded historical events implied an absence of authorship, as though historical events could tell themselves. White argues that, like fictional events, "real events should not speak, should not tell themselves" (1987: 3). Instead he suggests that to meaningfully interpret historical narratives we need to consider a narrator within a particular socio-historical context. In particular, White argues, we need to consider the narrator's moralising impulse to author their narrative.

White explicitly links the purpose of authoring with the social and moral conditions in which the author exists, writing that "narrativity [...] is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine" (1987: 14). This argument links the meaning of historical texts with both the specific intent of the author and the specific contexts in which that text was produced and circulates. The filmmaker's presence in the frame highlights each of these contexts. And while the full extent of the filmmaker's ideological investments and the range of relevant contexts of production and reception can never be shown within any text,

the presence of the filmmaker as a subject forcefully (re)introduces these as relevant factors in the interpretation of historical meaning.

The filmmaker in the frame as representative of history

As a social discourse – one that intervenes in and contributes to the imaging and interpretation of reality – documentary revolves around history. It interprets the past by reviving it in filmic form; it records the present and renders it as a trace of the past; and it partakes in writing history by interpreting the world represented in its sounds and images through argument, rhetoric, and perspective. The filmmaker appearing in the frame as a subject engages with this intersection between the socially instrumental dimension of documentary and its narrativisation of history by emphasising the fact that documentary film *making* is a complex negotiation between the real world, the perspective of the filmmaker, and the contingencies of production. The filmmaker engages in a negotiation between reality and representation, rather than an (unattainable) resolution between reality and its interpretation through film. Stella Bruzzi argues that this negotiation defines documentary, which sits in constant conflict with the unattainable ideal of documentary being predicated on objectivity, authenticity, and reliability:

Documentary is predicated on a dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential, that the text itself reveals the tensions between the documentary pursuit of the most authentic mode of factual representation and the impossibility of this aim. (2006: 6-7).

In Bruzzi's definition of documentary, the address of specific documentary texts is interpreted in relation to the more general interpretation of documentary as a socially instrumental discourse, whether or not the specific film adheres to those ideals. Bruzzi's definition also suggests that not only is the representational ideal impossible, but that it is equally impossible for the filmmaker to have absolute control of what they are filming. Documentary making is not inert or a harnessing of some essential existing truth through film – it is a 'collision.' In other words, documentary as both a text and as a process is contingent. The filmmaker seen as a subject in the frame overtly embraces this contingency. The filmmaker is positioned at the centre of the collision between the apparatus of filmmaking and the reality it represents; the focus of the film is the specific experiences and perspective of the filmmaker, asserting a personal rather than generalised truth.

Nick Broomfield's portrait of South African extreme right-wing leader Eugene TerreBlanche in *The Leader, His Driver, and the Driver's Wife* (1991) highlights how the notion of documentary truth changes register from objective to subjective through the figure of the filmmaker in the frame. The film follows Broomfield's effort to secure a promised interview with TerreBlanche, but the leader continually stalls Broomfield in his effort to stage the interview. Broomfield turns the camera to focus on his own experience of frustration at the mounting obstacles, offering a unique look at the leader's power and influence via his ability to keep Broomfield waiting. The viewer comes to know about TerreBlanche and the state of South Africa at the time, but this knowledge is framed in terms of the subjective dimension of the filmmaker's experience of the filming process.

It is in this foregrounding of contingency and the subjective dimension of filmmaking that the filmmaker in the frame takes on new

value as a form of history. On the one hand, the presence of the filmmaker in the frame “definitively signals the death of documentary’s idealisation of the unbiased film” (Bruzzi, 2006: 198), and therefore undermines the reliability of the documentary text as an objective and verifiably accurate representation. Yet on the other hand, the specific contexts of production signalled by the filmmaker’s subjectivity and particular experience of representation emphasises the way in which these films are products of the time and place in which they were produced. Seen from inside the film’s perspective, the documentary does not point towards a reliable historical argument; as part of more diverse practices of representation however, that very perspective has historical value as a record of the sentiments and ideals of the time in which it was produced. These are not official histories but threads of a broader process of collectively writing and rewriting history from the point of view of individual social agents.

For example, Michael Moore’s approach in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) offers insight into the texture of the gun debate in America at that time as well as a clear example of one particular perspective into that debate. Reflecting on the commercial success and level of controversy and public debate the film generated (including spawning several films that attacked Moore directly), the perspective Moore represents can be seen historically as representative of a growing sentiment of increasing concern over gun violence that time. *Bowling* is an ‘historical’ film insofar as beyond offering personal opinion it also engaged with the broader political debates of the time – Moore’s aim was to intervene in the future shaping of American gun laws by bringing a certain perspective on gun violence to a wide audience. It is therefore both a film representative of history – a record of a particular sentiment at a particular time – and an example of a film engaged in the writing of history, not as a telling of objective facts but as offering passionate and polemical opinion on social issues.

As White's theory of the narrativisation of history suggests, considering how documentary films are representative of the time in which they are made is a key part of how documentary shapes and is shaped by history. These contextual issues are the focus of new film history, which emphasises the processes and individual agents that contributed to a film's production, along with an analysis of the film's formal features, thematic concerns, and contexts of reception (see Chapman et al., 2007: 5–9, and O'Connor, 1988). Without constituting a kind of new film history project in themselves, films in which the filmmaker appears as a subject are particularly relevant to this historical approach because they are films in which the specific contexts of production, the intent of the filmmaker (however clearly resolved that intent ends up being), and the imagined audience are all specifically referred to within the frame. These films are characterised by the intersection between authorship, subjective expression, and the historical world, and thus represent with particular clarity the relationship between text and social context that is the focus of this turn toward broader contexts of production and reception in new film history.

Representing history in *Chronicle of a Summer*

Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (*Chronique d'un été*, 1961) is illustrative of how the presence of the filmmaker(s) takes on historical meaning, and also stands as a pivotal film in terms of establishing the place of specific subjective voices that is such a feature of contemporary documentary work. Claire Perkins and Constantine Verevis open their editorial to the 2010 'Documenting Film-makers' issue of

Studies in Documentary Film by linking *Chronicle of a Summer* with an increase in the filmmakers' involvement within the frame:

Since the appearance of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's seminal work *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), documentary film-makers have increasingly become involved in, and interacted with, that (subject) which is in front of the camera. (2010: 105)

Alan Casebier further notes that throughout his career, Rouch promoted his own presence as the catalyst and structuring force of his film (1991: 145–146). Following Rouch's established approach, *Chronicle* is structured around the presence of the filmmakers investigating the possibilities of representing Parisian life through documentary rather than around authentically representing the everyday experience of the subjects it films.

The film came out of a particular political and cultural climate defined by a loss of faith in social institutions and a growing concern with the ethical and instrumental place of the individual in society. It portrays a society still coming to grips with its role in World War II, negotiating the cultural guilt of France's ongoing colonial interests, the economic pressures of a burgeoning middle class, increasing secularity, and a growing gulf between the concerns of the government and the desires of the people. These seismic social shifts coincided with the availability of portable film recording technology that could locate the filmmaker at street level, making the filming of spontaneous personal interactions more possible. These dual historical contexts shed light on Rouch and Morin's concern with the possibilities of cinema to not only ethnographically record the shape of Paris in 1960, but also to prompt, catalyse, and articulate new relationships between individuals, recording moments of self-realisation

prompted by the presence of a (filming) other. The film is also counter-ethnographic in that it brings together people who might not otherwise talk to each other – black and whites, bourgeoisie and proletariat, liberals and conservatives. Its simple premise – to ask a series of Parisians “How do you live?” and explore their attitudes to their political and social situation – became a much more complex investigation of the power of cinema to shape the behaviour of the people it represents.

Perhaps most strikingly, *Chronicle* shows how the process of filmmaking challenges the notion of the self, highlighting the different ways the social actors (including the filmmakers) portray and perform themselves, replaying their performances and specifically exploring how the process of filmmaking makes certain kinds of expression possible. *Chronicle* explores the question of the self’s place in society through the process of representation. Casebier also notes that the film is a telling example of self-reflexivity: “It not only is about the process of documenting a subject (hence reflexive), but it is also about the process of mediation involved in reception of the documentary (hence self-reflexive – it is about the self’s encounter with the cinema)” (1991: 145). The filmmakers’ interventions, and their ongoing negotiation of the way the film is being received by the participants in it, serve to structure the film. Morin’s bullish questioning and Rouch’s laid back conversational approach set the tone of scenes between the social actors, and their particular personal histories are evident guiding and shaping the direction of the discussions. They respond to these situations on the level of participants in the discussion as well as filmmakers.

The filmmaker’s central place in this cinematographic interrogation into everyday existence (in Paris in 1960) is evident in the opening scenes of the film when Rouch and Morin discuss their approach with Marceline, one of their main subjects. Rouch says, “A round table discussion is an

excellent idea, but I wonder if it's feasible to record a conversation naturally with a camera present?" After some debate where Marceline expresses her reservations, the three agree that Marceline's nervousness in front of the camera can be overcome, and Morin explains, "What we have in mind is a film on how people live." Yet by the end of the 'experiment,' the film is far less an illumination of how people live and more an exploration of the different performances people enact in different contexts, and how the participants often talked around their concerns rather than directly of them.

The famous final scenes – showing a rough cut of the footage being screened for the participants and then Morin and Rouch reflecting on the success of their filmic experiment – are a precise rendering of the self's encounter with the cinema for both the participants and the filmmakers. The conversation revolves around the authenticity of their performances and the different interpretations each had of the situations represented rather than the representation of Parisian life. Jacques criticises the performativity of the scenes, saying "For most, whenever trying to express themselves, they spoke in general terms. You don't do that in life."

The conversation between Morin and Rouch that closes the film sees the filmmakers reflecting on their own experience – what they have learned about the possibilities and limitations of their approach to uncover some kind of truth of how these characters live, and by implication how they see themselves as filmmakers. They confront a contradiction between how the participants viewed themselves (as acting to the point of obscuring the truth of their feelings) and their own feeling that they had uncovered a different kind of truth in the performances their subjects enacted for the camera. While Morin and Rouch do not resolve this contradiction, the conversation restates the power of the film as an exploration of the presentation of self and the capacity of the camera to provoke distinct

kinds of insight, including into their own encounter with what they have filmed.

This self-reflexive approach was both deliberate and innovative. In 1959 Morin wrote an article for the *France Observateur* entitled 'For a New Cinéma-Vérité' in which he outlines his aim to make a documentary film that would reveal the essence of human relationships, motivations, self-awareness, and self-performance via the process of filmmaking. Morin's ethnographical interest complemented Rouch's interest in 'shared anthropology,' an approach that involved the subjects of his films not only as participants but as decision makers and co-directors in terms of what is filmed and how it is conceptually framed. Rouch had seen this approach work very successfully in producing films about African communities, and together with Morin wondered if the same approach might reveal something deeper about life as it is lived in their own culture. Morin described the approach as 'research':

The context of this research is Paris. It is not a fictional film. This research concerns real life. This is not a documentary film. This research does not aim to describe; it is an experiment lived by its authors and its actors. [...] It is an experiment in cinematographic interrogation. (Morin, 2003 [1960]: 232).

Morin's disavowal of the film as 'documentary' is a reflection of both the dominant idea of documentary at the time (as predominantly informational, presenting an impersonal, objective argument equivalent to audiovisual lectures) and a self-conscious promotion of the uniqueness of their own work. Given the range of documentary work that already pushed away from the traditional expositional structure – the work of filmmakers from Vertov and Joris Ivens to Humphrey Jennings and

Robert Drew – Morin’s claim that *Chronicle* is not a documentary can be seen as disingenuous, but it also flags the intent of the filmmakers to break with convention. The crux of this break in regards to *Chronicle* is in the participation of the filmmakers.

The legacy of *Chronicle of a Summer* as a groundbreaking film is precisely because of the way it configures the possibilities of the filmmaker in the frame to explore unique kinds of vérité. The Criterion Collection summary of the film emphasises the value as an historical document with specific reference to the intersubjective approach it takes: “*Chronicle of a Summer*’s penetrative approach gives us a document of a time and place with extraordinary emotional depth” (<http://www.criterion.com/films/28394-chronicle-of-a-summer>, The Criterion Collection, n.d.). What the film documents is not only Paris in the summer of 1960, but the birth of a style of filmmaking where the filmmaker becomes a part of the unfolding reality recorded. The success of this film – both at the time and its persistence as part of the documentary canon – was fundamental to establishing an approach to filmmaking concerned with the particular possibilities of film to reflect on and critically interrogate social issues through the lens of the subject performing for the camera.

The filmmaker as a witness to history

Since *Chronicle of a Summer*, the history of documentary film has been punctuated by works that take the self-reflexivity and the intersubjectivity of documentary filmmaking as their guiding principle, representing less a preconceived argument than a series of interactions between the filmmaker and the world they encounter. Emblematic of the possibilities of documentary film to explore broader social and political

concerns, the presence of the filmmaker in the frame has gained traction as a productive approach to representing reality through documentary film. These presences take on different magnitudes, but the common thread linking the filmmaker's presence as a subject in the frame is the intersection of subjective experience, questions of authority, and personal expression as a framework through which meanings are constructed.

Claude Lanzmann's representation of the Holocaust in *Shoah* (1985) powerfully highlights the possibilities of telling history through the dual lenses of the intersection of subjective testimonies (literally a kind of intersubjectivity) and the filmmaker as the mediator of the history told by these testimonies. Lanzmann's physical engagement as a witness to the re-lived and re-told memories of the survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators who testify in the film is equally significant for framing the multiple subjectivities presented, and as a source of meaning in itself.

Lanzmann's presence heard in voiceover or seen on screen brings together the diverse range of (often competing) testimonies to present the nine and a half hour film as a single work of witnessing, the filmmaker standing as a proxy for the audience experiencing the many voices as a concerted act of remembering. At the same time, Lanzmann's reactions to these testimonies provide distinct colour and shape to the testimonies given that emphasise the subjective and lived dimension of history. Lanzmann is in one sense a kind of journalistic investigator, interviewing survivors and perpetrators, but the intimacy of his interactions and his own felt presence as a witness adds another self-reflexive dimension to his involvement in the film – the filmmaker discovers for himself as much as he reveals to the viewer. For example, Lanzmann betrays evident annoyance at the indifference of some of the Grabow residents to the fate of the Jews in their town, and his persistent questions seem bent on catching them admitting a lingering anti-Semitism. This sequence, in

which he is a constant presence, betrays his own perspective on the story and foregrounds his partiality as a witness to the retelling of this history.

On a different note, Lanzmann's gentle but determined questioning of Abraham Bomba in the barbershop highlights his personal relationship with the survivors he films as well as his resolve to elicit their testimonies on camera. When Bomba becomes choked with emotion recalling cutting the hair of a friend's wife before she was sent to her death, Lanzmann presses him to continue, calling him 'Abe' and pleading, "We have to do it." Bomba reiterates, "I won't be able to do it." Lanzmann continues pressing: "You have to do it. I know it is very hard." Eventually Bomba takes a moment, composes himself, and relents, "Okay, go ahead." Lanzmann is unseen in this scene, but his presence is strongly felt through his use of the term 'we' in reference to Bomba's testimony, his suggestion of empathy with the process of testifying, his imploring of Bomba to continue using a familiar nickname, and speaking to him as a friend and confessor more than as an investigative reporter.

On one hand Lanzmann's presence makes possible the key idea of the film that bearing witness to how this traumatic past is still lived is crucial to the possibility of coming to terms with that past; on the other hand Lanzmann's reactions and interventions show how any understanding possible through this recorded history is qualified in terms of the filmmaker's subjective shaping of it. Rather than undermining his project, however, this tension echoes the notion proposed by White that history is meaningful through its narration. For Lanzmann, understanding the Holocaust is only possible through an ongoing process of narration – building a picture through the retelling of personal experiences by circling the issues – because it cannot be comprehended by considering it as a singular historical event. Therefore, the tensions within the domain of representation (rather than the resolutions of argument and explanation)

are the very places whereby understanding is possible. These moments are shaped by self-reflexivity in Lanzmann's awareness of the power of the camera to catalyse confessions and provide a platform for testimony, while they are also shaped by the filmmaker's own response to the moment of filming. Lanzmann's approach tells us that the only way this history can be understood is through its re-telling by as many voices as possible, through building up a kind of relativised truth through multiple subjective accounts, and through our own commitment to know for ourselves.

As Lanzmann's presence in *Shoah* and Morin and Rouch's presence in *Chronicle of a Summer* highlight, history does not 'tell itself' but is told, by individuals, to individuals, through representation. More generally, the power of the presence of the filmmaker as a subject in the frame lies less in any guarantee of authenticity or reliability it can than in the subjective experience of representation being a productive point through which historical understanding is possible. The tension between the filmmaker-as-author and the filmmaker-as-subject offers a new site of historical knowledge, no longer institutionalised and collective but individualised and intersubjective, wherein individual subjectivities are sites for social meaning. The subjective presence of the filmmaker represents a new kind of historical reality and a distinct way of recording history, standing as a key intervention of documentary film in the ongoing discourse of history.

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