Chapter 3

What Gives Documentary Films a Voice of Their Own?

THE QUALITIES OF VOICE

If documentaries represent issues and aspects, qualities and problems found in the historical world, they can be said to speak about this world through both sounds and images. The question of speech raises the question of "voice." Since documentaries are not lectures, questions of speech and voice are not meant entirely literally.

The spoken word, of course, does play a vital role in most documentary film and video: some films, like *Portrait of Jason* (1967), *Frank: A Vietnam Veteran* (1984), or *Shoah* (1985), seem, at first glance, to be nothing but speech. And yet, when documentaries speak about the historical world, they do so with all the means at their disposal, especially with sounds and images in relation to each other, or, in silent films, with images alone.

When Jason tells us about his life in *Portrait of Jason,* a key avenue to understanding his words involves what we see of his inflections, gestures, and behavior, including his interaction with Shirley Clarke, the filmmaker, as she orchestrates their dialogue. And when Frank, in *Frank: A Vietnam Veteran,* or the various interviewees in *Shoah* speak to us about their past, a key aspect of understanding the force and severity of that past lies in registering its effect on their way of speaking and acting in the present. Even

the most speech-oriented of documentaries—often referred to as "talking head" films—convey meanings, hint at symptoms, and express values on a multitude of levels apart from what is literally said. What does it mean, then, to raise the question of "voice" in documentary?

In Chapter 2 we said that documentaries *represent* the historical world by shaping its photographic record of some aspect of the world *from a distinct perspective or point of view. As such they become one voice among the many voices in an arena of social debate and contestation.* The fact that documentaries are not a reproduction of reality gives them a voice of their own. They are a *representation* of the world, and this representation stands for a particular view of the world. The voice of documentary, then, is the means by which this particular point of view or perspective becomes known to us.

The voice of documentary can make a case or present an argument as well as convey a point of view. Documentaries seek to persuade or convince us: by the strength of their argument or point of view and the appeal, or power, of their voice. The voice of documentary is the specific way in which an argument or perspective is expressed. Like a plot, an argument can be presented in different ways. "Freedom of choice is vital for women who must decide whether to have an abortion." This is an argument, or point of view, but one documentary might work performatively to convey what women in such a position feel or experience, as *Speak Body* (1987) does, with its array of women's voices heard off screen as we see fragments of female bodies on screen, while another work might rely on interviews with women in different countries to underscore the social impact that access or impediments to abortion procedures create, as *Abortion Stories: North and South* (1984) does, with its array of women who testify on camera to their experience in various North and South American countries. *Speak Body* and *Abortion Stories* make basically the same argument, but they do so from distinctly different perspectives and hence with distinctly different voices.

The idea of voice is also tied to the idea of an informing logic overseeing the organization of a documentary compared to the idea of a compelling story organizing a fiction. Not mutually exclusive, there is nonetheless the sense that an informing logic, conveyed by a distinct voice, has dominance in documentary compared to the compelling story, conveyed by a distinct style, that has dominance in narrative fiction. Voice, then, is a question of *how* the logic, argument, or viewpoint of a film gets conveyed to us.

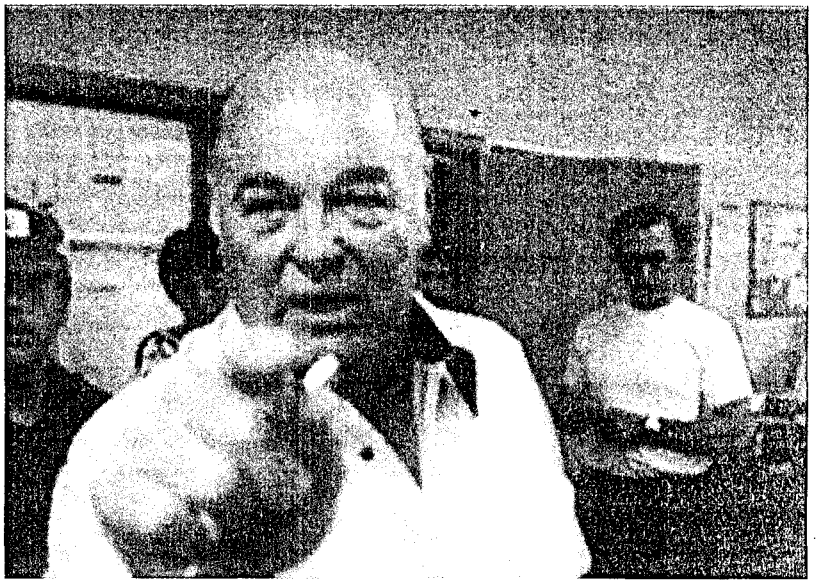
Voice is clearly akin to style, the way in which a film, fiction or non-fiction, inflects its subject matter and the flow of its plot or argument in distinct ways, but style operates differently in documentary than in fiction. The idea of the voice of documentary stands for something like "style *plus.*" Style in fiction

derives primarily from the director's translation of a story into visual form; it gives the visual manifestation of a plot a style distinct from its written counterpart as script, novel, play, or biography. Style in documentary derives partly from the director's attempt to translate her perspective on the historical world into visual terms, but it also stems from her direct involvement with the film's actual subject. That is, fictional style conveys a distinct, imaginary world, whereas documentary style or voice reveals a distinct form of engagement with the historical world.

When Robert Flaherty films Nanook biting into a phonograph record to see what kind of thing this strange disc that produces sound is, the inclusion, duration, and specific placement of the shot—elementary questions of style—reveal a willingness on Flaherty's part to let Nanook be the butt of a joke: Nanook "erroneously" uses his mouth where he should use his ear. The trust and collaboration between filmmaker and subject may appear in jeopardy, especially when viewed across the chasm of post-colonial studies that take some pains to examine the ways in which patterns of hierarchy persist in the everyday encounters between peoples of different cultures. The voice of the film betrays its maker's form of engagement with the world in a way that even he might not have fully recognized.

In another example, Jon Silver uses a long take at the opening of *Watsonville on Strike* (1989) (about a farm-worker strike in the California coastal town of Watsonville) while we hear him arguing with the union director about whether he can continue to film inside the union hall. This stylistic choice (long take over editing) also bears witness to an existential necessity: Silver must actually negotiate his own right to be there, his own right to film, in this specific moment. Everything is at risk at a precise instant of historical time that anything other than a long take could represent but not authenticate in quite so direct a manner. The long take is a record of that moment seen from Silver's literal, and political, point of view as it gradually but dramatically reveals itself to us.

When the director threatens to have Silver thrown out of the hall, he responds by panning his camera to the on-looking Chicano/Chicana workers and asks them, in Spanish rather than in the English he uses with the Anglo director,—What do you say? Is it all right for me to film? The record of his question and their enthusiastic response, all within the same shot as the director's intransigent refusal to grant permission, testifies to Silver's desire to represent himself as a straight-forward, above-board activist whose spontaneous loyalty lies with the workers rather than union representatives. We *see* him display this spontaneous loyalty when he pans the camera away from the director and toward the workers rather than cutting to another discussion at another time or place. He does not cut until the director has



Watsonville on Strike (Jon Silver, 1989)

In this opening scene, the union manager points and stares directly at the camera held by filmmaker Jon Silver. Such moments cause embarrassment within an observational framework or self-consciousness within a fictional framework. Here the manager's direct confrontation with the filmmaker testifies to Silver's active, participatory role in the shaping of events. What we see would not have occurred had the camera, and the filmmaker, not been there to record it.

wagged his finger at him and warned, "If you put my picture on television, I'll sue you."

The voice of the film reveals Silver's willingness to acknowledge the reality of the moment rather than slip into the illusion that people act as if the camera, and filmmaker, were not there. His voice, represented in the long take and camera movement, as much as in what he actually says, reveals *how* he makes his argument on behalf of the worker's cause. Like style, but with an added sense of ethical and political accountability, voice serves to give concrete embodiment to a filmmaker's engagement with the world.

The voice of documentary testifies to the character of the filmmaker like Robert Flaherty or Jon Silver, to *how* he acquits himself in the face of social reality, as much as to his creative vision. Style takes on an ethical dimension. The voice of documentary conveys a sense of what the filmmaker's social point of view is and of how this point of view becomes manifest in the act of making the film.

The voice of documentary is not restricted to what is verbally said, either by voices of unseen "gods" and plainly visible "authorities" who represent the filmmaker's point of view—who speak *for* the film, or by social actors who represent their own points of view—who speak *in* the film. The voice of documentary speaks with all the means available to its maker. These means can be summarized as the selection and arrangement of sound and image, that is, the working out of an organizing logic for the film. This entails, at least, the following decisions: (1) when to cut, or edit, and what to juxtapose and how to frame or compose a shot (close-up or long shot, low or high angle, artificial or natural lighting, color or black and white, whether to pan, zoom in or out, track or remain stationary, and so on), (2) whether to record synchronous sound at the time of shooting, and whether to add additional sound, such as voice-over translations, dubbed dialogue, music, sound effects, or commentary, at a later point, (3) whether to adhere to an accurate chronology or rearrange events to support a point, (4) whether to use archival or other people's footage and photographs or only those images shot by the filmmaker on the spot, and (5) which mode of representation to rely on to organize the film (expository, poetic, observational, participatory, reflexive, or performative).

When we represent the world from a particular point of view we do so with a voice that shares qualities with other voices. Genre conventions are one way to cluster such qualities. Some conventions are not specific to film but are shared with the essay, diary, notebook, editorial, evocation, eulogy, exhortation, description, or report. (These kinds of categories or forms constitute the chapter headings for Erik Barnouw's highly informative history of documentary film, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film,* where he mentions "reporter," "advocate," "prosecutor," and "guerilla," among others.) Other conventions, such as the ones that characterize the various modes of documentary—expository and observational documentary, for example—are specific to the medium.

Together, generic forms and modes establish some of the constraints that identify a given voice, but they do not wholly determine that voice. Each voice retains a uniqueness. This uniqueness stems from the specific utilization of forms and modes, of techniques and style in a given film, and from the specific pattern of encounter that takes place between filmmaker and subject. The voice of a documentary serves as evidence of a perspective, an argument, or an encounter. Our recognition that such a voice addresses us in a distinct way is a key part of our recognition of a given film as a documentary.

The fact that the voice of a documentary relies on all the means available to it, not just spoken words, means that the argument or point of view

Bontoc Eulogy (Marlon Fuentes, 1995). Photo courtesy of Marlon Fuentes.

Finding a voice. On first viewing we do not know that the person sitting in front of the old phonograph player is the filmmaker; nor do we know that the scratchy sounds dominating the sound track will eventually become the voice of the filmmaker's grandfather. In the course of the film, Fuentes embarks on his own voyage of discovery to learn more about his grandfather and his turn-of-the-century encounters with colonial anthropology. He combines archival footage, staged events (such as this one), and his own voice-over commentary to give to his film a voice that seeks to recover both family and Filipino history.

carried by a documentary can be more or less explicit. The most explicit form of voice is no doubt the one conveyed by spoken, or written, words. These are words that stand for the point of view of the film directly and are what we typically refer to as "voice-of-God" or "voice-of-authority" commentary.

Commentary is a voice that addresses us directly; it lays out its point of view explicitly. The comments can be passionately partisan, as it is in bold graphic intertitles of *Salt for Svanetia,* made in the Soviet Union in 1930 as Stalin was implementing a Five Year Plan to accelerate industrialization and agricultural production. These titles proclaim the arrival of the road that will bring much-needed salt to this remote region as a massive triumph of the highest order. In other cases, comments can be seemingly impartial, as in the reportorial style of most television journalists. In both cases, this voice

of direct address to the viewer argues for a position that says, in effect, "See it this way." This can be a galvanizing voice or a reassuring one, but its tone provides us with a ready-made point of view to which we will, it is hoped, subscribe.

Some documentaries eschew this type of explicitness, even in poetic modalities where comments hint and suggest rather than declare or explain. The point of view becomes implicit. The voice of the film does not address us directly. There is no voice of God or authority to guide us through what we see and to suggest what we should make of it. Evidence accrues, but evidence of what? The argument and voice of the film lie embedded in all the means of representation available to the filmmaker *apart from* explicit commentary. In contrast to the voice of commentary, we might call this the voice of perspective.

Perspective is what the specific decisions made about the selection and arrangement of sounds and images convey to us. This voice advances an argument by implication. The argument operates on a tacit level. We have to infer what the filmmaker's point of view, in fact, is. The effect is less "See it this way" than "See for yourself."

Although invited to see for ourselves, and to infer what is left tacit or unspoken, what we see is not a reproduction of the world but a specific form of representation with a specific perspective. The sense of a perspective, that is, an informing logic and organization, separates a documentary from mere footage or photographic records, where this sense of perspective is minimal. (It may still exist: surveillance footage from a store that focuses on transactions at a cash register implicitly says something about which elements of customer/personnel interaction hold the highest priority.)

Once we infer a perspective we know that we are not confronted by value-free replicas of the historical world. Even if the voice of the film adopts the guise of nonjudgmental, impartial, disinterested, or objective witness, it nonetheless offers a perspective on the world. At the least, a strategy of self-effacement testifies to the significance of the world itself and to a particular filmmaker's sense of solemn responsibility to report on it fairly and accurately.

The Thin Blue Line (1987), for example, uses no voice-over commentary at all, and yet through the perspective it offers it makes a clear argument for the innocence of a man convicted of murder. The voice of the film speaks to us through the juxtaposition of interviews with images that affirm or undercut what is said, in a spirit of critical irony similar to *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*'s critical irony toward the official propaganda films that celebrated women's work during World War II. A key witness against the accused has her validity undercut by Errol Morris's decision to

cut to scenes from a 1940s series of films about Boston Blackie, a former thief turned crime stopper who operates independently from the police. A scene of Blackie capturing a crook with the aide of his loyal female companion adds a comic note to the witness's solemn claims: through the juxtaposition of a light-hearted entertainment film with what was presumably decisive legal testimony, Morris gives voice to a point of view that, although tacit and indirect, remains hard to miss.

DOCUMENTARY AND THE VOICE OF THE ORATOR

The voice of documentary is most often the voice of oratory. It is the voice of a filmmaker setting out to take a position regarding an aspect of the historical world and to convince us of its merits. The position addresses those aspects of the world that are subject to debate. They are issues and topics that do not lend themselves to scientific proof. As issues of understanding and interpretation, value and judgment about the world we actually occupy, they require a way of speaking that is fundamentally different from logic or story telling. The rhetorical tradition provides a foundation for this way of speaking. It can embrace reason and narrative, evocation and poetry, but does so for the purpose of inspiring belief or instilling conviction about the merit of a particular viewpoint on a contentious issue.

How do we proceed when we proceed rhetorically? In what forms, with what conventions do we speak? Classic rhetorical thinking identified three divisions (discussed in the next chapter) and five "departments," each of which carries over to documentary film: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. Cicero described their connection this way:

> [S]ince all the activity and ability of an orator falls into five divisions, . . . he must first hit upon what to say; then manage and marshal his discoveries, not merely in orderly fashion, but with a discriminating eye for the exact weight as it were of each argument; next go on to array them in the adornments of style; after that keep them guarded in his memory; and in the end deliver them with effect and charm. (*De oratore,* I.xxxi)

We can review the usefulness of these five divisions in turn.

Invention

Invention refers to the discovery of evidence or "proofs" in support of a position or argument. (The word "proof" occurs in classic texts, but we should remember that rhetoric and documentary film address aspects of human experience where the certainty of scientific proof is unavailable. What counts as proof is subject to social rules and conventions rather than to something

as conclusive as the scientific method.) Aristotle proposed two types of evidence. They correspond to the division between appeals to the facts of the matter—inartistic or non-artificial proofs—and appeals to the feelings of the audience—artistic or artificial proofs.

Inartistic proof involves the facts or evidence that can be brought to bear and that lies beyond dispute (although the *interpretation* of this factual evidence may be very much in dispute). Examples of inartistic proof include witnesses, documents, confessions, physical evidence, and scientific analyses of fingerprints, hair or blood samples, DNA, and so forth. These types of evidence lie outside the reach of the orator or filmmaker's artistic power to create, although very much within her power to evaluate or interpret.

More pertinent to our discussion of how documentaries speak or acquire a voice of their own is the idea of artistic or artificial evidence or proof. These are the techniques used to generate the *impression* of conclusiveness or proof. They are a product of the orator or filmmaker's inventiveness rather than something found elsewhere and introduced intact. In his *Rhetoric,* Aristotle divided artistic proofs into three types. Each strives to convince us of an argument's or perspective's validity. All three have relevance to documentary film and video:

- ethical: generating an impression of good moral character or credibility;
- emotional: appealing to the audience's emotions to produce the desired disposition; putting the audience in the right mood or establishing a frame of mind favorable to a particular view;
- demonstrative: using real or apparent reasoning or demonstration; proving, or giving the impression of proving, the case.

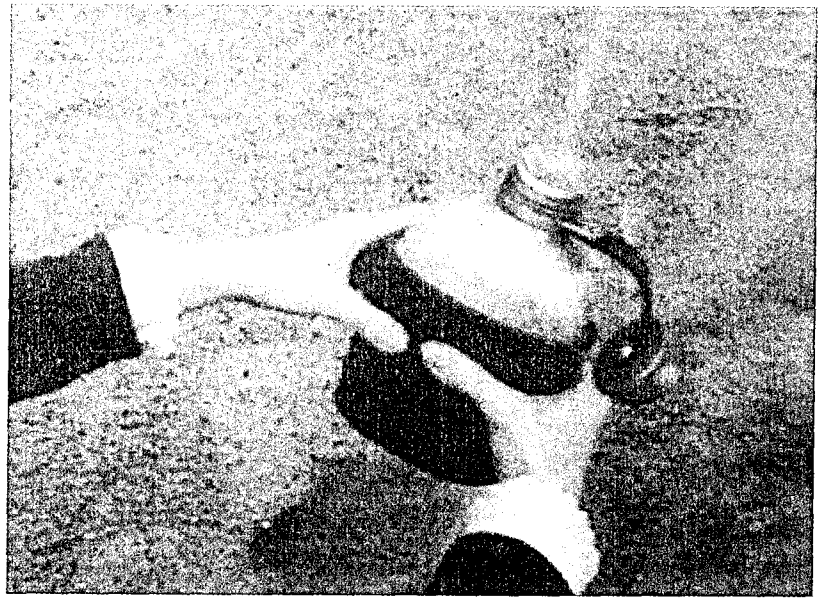
If real reasoning or logic were totally satisfactory, the issue would probably be scientific or mathematical in nature rather than rhetorical. The mixture of hunks of real reasoning with veiled pieces of apparent, faulty, or misleading reasoning characterizes rhetorical address. This can be seen as a flaw, from the point of view of pure logic, or as a necessary consequence of taking up issues for which there is no final proof or single solution. In this case, decisions will hinge on values and beliefs, assumptions and traditions rather than the weight of reason alone. For example, deciding whether to restrict land development because it will harm the environment or to promote land development because it will stimulate the economy admits, partially, of scientific or factual evidence, but the final decision will hinge heavily on values and beliefs. Rhetoric facilitates giving expression to these quite real and very fundamental factors.

These three strategies call on the orator or filmmaker to honor the three "C's" of rhetorical discourse by being credible, convincing, and compelling. An important tendency within documentary film since the 1970s has been to shift the focus of these strategies from supporting representations of the historical world by experts and authorities to supporting representations that convey more personal, individual perspectives. This lessens the requirement for the filmmaker to produce effective artistic proofs to a minor key since a work like Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* (1991) does not claim to be an overarching history of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II but a more personal account of her own family's experience. It can be credible, convincing, and compelling without being definitive or conclusive.

The best of these personal works, such as Tajiri's; Alan Berliner's two films, *Intimate Stranger* and *Nobody's Business,* on his own hard-to-know and often absent father; Deborah Hoffmann's *A Dutiful Daughter,* on the filmmaker's relation to her mother after she succumbs to Alzheimer's disease; Emiko Omori's *Rabbit in the Moon,* on her family's internment during World War II and its consequences; Su Friedrich's *The Ties That Bind,* on her relation to her German-born mother and to German history mediated through her mother; Marilu Mallet's *Unfinished Diary,* on her life in Canada as a Chilean exile married to a Canadian documentary filmmaker (Michael Rubbo); Ngozi Onwurah's *The Body Beautiful,* on her relation to her white British mother and her black African father; Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied,* on the filmmaker's experience as a gay, black male; and Marlon Fuentes's *Bontoc Eulogy,* on his relation to his grandfather and the legacy of colonialism in the Philippines, all successfully couple their accounts of personal experience to larger social, historical ramifications.

This coupling itself often serves to establish credibility and conviction since the filmmaker starts from what she or he knows best—family experience—and extends outward from there. These works also gain a compelling quality thanks to the intensity with which the filmmaker approaches aspects of his or her own life. The frankness and intimacy of the approach contrasts quite dramatically with the aura of detached objectivity that marked more traditional documentaries. Subjectivity itself compels belief: instead of an aura of detached truthfulness we have the honest admission of a partial but highly significant, situated but impassioned view.

An example of a more traditional approach to oratorical address is television news broadcasting. The anchor person, at one end of a spectrum from the sensationalist talk show host, establishes a basic ethical proof: here is an honest, trustworthy person, free of personal biases and hidden agendas; you can trust this person to relay the news to you without distor-



History and Memory (Rea Tajiri, 1991)

This image of a woman's hands holding a canteen beneath a stream of tap water recurs throughout Tajiri's film. It is, in one sense, an impossible image (for a documentary), since it is an image, Tajiri tells us, that appears in her dreams as if it were a memory of what living in the Japanese-American internment camps during World War II was like for her mother. In her voice-over commentary Tajiri refers to this image as one of the inspirations for her effort to return to this suppressed history, a history that no one in her family wished to reexamine as much as she did. How could she build on this small scrap of a larger experience with its references to the desert, the primacy of water, the hands of her mother, and the sense of isolation or fragmentation that haunted the interred citizens? *History and Memory* is an eloquent answer to this question.

tion. A Jerry Springer or Geraldo Rivera, the other hand, serves more as a stereotype than a credible speaker: we expect certain forms of excess and outrage to occur because "that's the kind of person he is." There is a certain predictability, far more than credibility, attached to their images.

On broadcast news shows, emotional proof operates in reverse fashion from usual: the show works to quiet, not arouse, emotion. What happened in the world need not perturb even if it does interest us. We need not take any specific action other than to attend to the news. The packaging and management of world affairs, the reassurance that almost any event, no matter how extraordinary, can be encapsulated within the daily format of a news item assures us that things may change but the news

Rabbit in the Moon (Emiko Omori, 1999). Photos courtesy of Emiko Omori.

A very personal film, *Rabbit in the Moon* involves the reflections of filmmaker Emiko Omori and her sister on their experience as young girls in the detention camps built during World War II to house citizens of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast of the United States and Canada. The film couples family interviews and the filmmaker's voice-over commentary with historical footage to place the personal story in a larger framework of lingering racism and government policies of "national security."

can consistently assimilate them. If there is an effort to compel belief, it lies in the news broadcast's effort to convince us of its own powers of reportage. We can feel safe and secure because the news carries on. Events happen, people die, leaders change, nations fall, but the news provides a constant reference point. We can trust it to give us a window onto the world indefinitely.

News broadcasts also must convince us. They must resort to demonstrative proofs, with their traditional mix of real and apparent proof. The real proofs come from the factual evidence brought before us: statistical information on inflation or unemployment, eyewitness accounts of specific events, documentary evidence of a certain occurrence, and so on. One kind of apparent proof lies in the way such evidence may be interpreted to support a particular case. News coverage in the United States of the Gulf War against Iraq, for example, might provide authentic images of a speech by Saddam Hussein on Iraqi television but edit it and position it to support rep-

resentations of his anti-American attitude and defiant belligerence, whether that was the main point of his speech or not.

A more extensive source of apparent proof lies in the structure of news programs as such. The convention of situating the anchor in a TV studio that seldom has a specified geographic location works to give the sense that "the news" emanates from somewhere apart from the events it reports, that it is above or beyond such events, and is, therefore, free from partisan involvement in the events. At the same time, a second convention calls on the anchor person to sketch out the broad outline of a story or news item and then to call on a reporter for substantiation.

Unlike the anchor, who sets the tone of impartiality, hovering in a space without geographic coordinates, the reporter is always "on the scene." This convention operates as if to say, I have told you about this event but lest you doubt, I will prove the truth of what I said by inviting a reporter to provide further detail from the very place where the story is unfolding. When we cut to reporters, they invariably occupy the foreground of the shot while the background serves to document, or prove, their location on the spot: oil fields in Kuwait, the White House in Washington, the Vatican in Rome, cable cars on the streets of San Francisco, and so on.

In this case physical presence serves a rhetorical function. It functions as a metonymy. Whereas metaphors link together physically disconnected phenomena to suggest an underlying similarity (love is a battlefield, or marriage is a piece of cake, for example), metonymies make associations between physically linked phenomena. They typically use an aspect of something to represent the whole thing: fresh fish goes with seafood restaurants set along the shore because the ocean is only yards away, for example. The restaurant's physical proximity to the sea serves as a metonymy for fresh fish. Similarly, reporters standing on the scene of a news event will get the true story because they are there, in physical proximity to the event itself.

Metaphor and metonymy are rhetorical or figurative devices rather than logical or scientific forms of proof. They need not be true. Not all love is necessarily a battlefield, just as not all fish prepared in seaside restaurants is fresh. Similarly, not all commentary heard from reporters on the scene is true. This may do little to detract from its convincingness. The value of figures of speech like metaphor and metonymy is precisely that they offer a more vivid and compelling image of something, whether this image corresponds to any larger truth or not.

Television news is a sober business. It adopts the solemn airs of those other discourses of sobriety that address the world as it is, such as economics, business, medicine, or foreign policy. This sobriety, and the three

"C's" of rhetorical engagement, can be treated ironically as well. Films like *Land without Bread* (1932), *Blood of the Beasts* (1949), and *Cane Toads* (1987), about the rampant growth of a toad population in Australia, exemplify an ironic use of the three artistic proofs. The credibility of the commentators in all three films, for example, seems assured by their solemn intonation and objective style. They are also male voices, tapping into a culturally constructed assumption that it is men who speak of the actual world and that they can do so in an authoritative manner. But credibility unravels as *what* they say begins to undercut *how* they say it. Why is the commentator pointing out "another idiot," or praising a slaughterhouse worker as if he were a god, or describing cane toads as if they were an invading army?

Conviction also erodes as we begin to sense that the ostensibly objective tone is itself a mock-scientific one. Is the commentator serious about his claims of a toad menace when we see the Australian landscape pass by from the literal point of view of a solitary toad inside a wooden crate set inside a railroad freight car? Is the heroism of the abattoir worker genuine when we see the still twitching heads of slaughtered cows piled in a corner? Can we be getting a full picture of the life of the Hurdanos when the commentator likens their customs to those of "barbaric" people elsewhere?

Finally, the films consciously refuse to compel belief in the truthfulness of their representations. The hints of partiality and exaggeration build to a conviction that what we see is *not* what careful scrutiny of the facts would reveal, that what we see is an intensified emphasis on how these films see the historical world from a particular point of view. The particularity of the point of view captures our attention; its idiosyncrasy compels us to believe in it as a representation that deliberately undercuts believability in order to question our usual willingness to believe films that adopt the very conventions these films subvert.

Irony involves *not* saying what is meant or saying the opposite of what is meant. Just as the ironic use of television's journalistic conventions provides an important clue that *This Is Spinal Tap* is a mock documentary, the ironic use of authoritative commentary in these three films is a vital clue that they want to provoke suspicion of documentary conventions themselves more than they want to persuade us of the validity of their actual representations about the world.

Land without Bread, Blood of the Beasts, and *Cane Toads* all serve to remind us that beliefs stem from shared values and that shared values take on the form of conventions. These include conventional ways of representing the world in documentary (sober-minded commentators, visual evidence, observational camera styles, location shooting, and so on) as well as con-

Solovky Power

Director Marina Goldovskaya discovered a 1927–28 Soviet propaganda film that presented Solovky prison as a model of clean living, wholesome food, and redemptive hard work. The authorities had to withdraw the film from circulation: their enthusiasm to deceive led them to fabricate an environment better than that of most of the viewers. Citizens began to wonder why prisoners had nicer rooms and better food than they did!

Memory

Memory held crucial importance for speech delivered on the spot, such as in the heat of a debate. One could memorize a speech by sheer force of will, or one could develop a "memory theater" as a way to remember what was to be said. This involved imaginatively placing the components of the speech in different parts of a familiar space such as one's house or a public place. This mental image then facilitates retrieval of the speech's components as the speaker "moves" through the imagined space, in a set order, retrieving the arguments deposited there.

Since films are not delivered as spontaneous speech, the role of memory enters in more fully in two ways: first, film itself provides a tangible "memory theater" of its own. It is an external, visible representation of what was

Solovky Power

Marina Goldovskaya excavates the story of the prison through interviews with survivors, prisoner diaries, and official records that attest to the living conditions of extreme hardship. We see here some of the family photographs and letters of a Solovky prisoner.

said and done. Like writing, film eases the burden to commit sequence and detail to memory. Film can become a source of "popular memory," giving us a vivid sense of how something happened in a particular time and place.

Second, memory enters into the various ways by which the viewers draw on what they have already seen to interpret what they presently see. This act of retrospection, of looking back, remembering what has come before during the course of a film, and making a connection with what is now present, can prove crucial to an interpretation of the whole film just as memory can prove crucial to the construction of a coherent argument. Although not part of rhetorical *speech* as such, it is part of the overall rhetorical *act.* When Errol Morris begins *The Thin Blue Line* with exterior, evening shots of abstract, impersonal Dallas skyscrapers coupled to the accused man's comment that Dallas seemed like "hell on earth," these images serve a metaphorical function that hovers over the remainder of the film, if we activate our memory of them in an appropriate manner. Similarly, our recall

of the opening image of a man sitting on the floor playing a phonograph record becomes crucial to an overall understanding of Marlon Fuentes's *Bontoc Eulogy* (1995). As the film unfolds we learn the identity of the man and the significance of his act. We gradually come to understand why the film begins as it does. We can only arrive at this understanding by remembering, by thinking back to the beginning with the addition of later knowledge. This form of re-view is often crucial to a full grasp of a film's meaning.

Delivery

Originally, delivery divided into voice and gesture, which represents something akin to our division between commentary and perspective as ways of advancing an argument or point of view. Gesture involves non-verbal communication; it is also a key aspect of what is meant by performance or style. Other vital aspects of delivery are the ideas of eloquence and decorum. Although these words now have a feel of the drawing room about them, this is a particular piece of historical baggage that degrades their original importance. We can consider eloquence, for example, as an index of the clarity of an argument and the potency of an emotional appeal, and decorum as the effectiveness of a particular argumentative strategy, or voice, for a specific setting or audience. Eloquence and decorum measure "what works" and reflect the pragmatic, effect- or result-oriented nature of rhetoric itself. They are not by any means restricted to polite (or overly polite) speech. They can apply to any form of speech or voice that seeks to achieve results in a given context.

The five departments of classic rhetoric provide a useful guide to the rhetorical strategies available to the contemporary documentarian. Like the orator of old, the documentarian speaks to the issues of the day, proposing new directions, judging previous ones, measuring the quality of lives and cultures. These actions characterize rhetorical speech not as "rhetorical" in the sense of argumentative for the sake of being argumentative, but in the sense of engaging with those pressing matters of value and belief for which no facts and no logic provide a conclusive guide to proper conduct, wise decisions, or insightful perspectives. The voice of documentary testifies to its engagement with a social order and to its assessment of those values that underlie it. It is a specific orientation to the historical world that gives a documentary film a voice of its own.

Chapter 4

What Are Documentaries About?

THE TRIANGLE OF COMMUNICATION

For every documentary there are at least three stories that intertwine: the filmmaker's, the film's, and the audience's. These stories are all, in different ways, part of what we attend to when we ask what a given film is about. That is to say, when we watch a film we become aware that the film comes from somewhere and someone. There is a story about how and why it got made. These stories are often more personal and idiosyncratic for documentary and avant-garde film than they are for feature films. Leni Riefenstahl's production of *Triumph of the Will,* for example, remains a controversial story of Riefenstahl's artistic ambitions to make great films of emotional power but free of propagandistic intent—according to her own accounts—together with the story of Nazi party pressure for a film that would generate a positive image at a moment when its power was not fully consolidated and its leadership not fully concentrated in Hitler—from the point of view of most film historians. Interpretations of the film often pick up the thread of one or the other of these stories, praising the film as a great piece of film art or condemning the film as a blatant piece of Nazi propaganda.

We often want to consider how a film relates to the previous work and continuing preoccupations of the filmmaker, to how the filmmaker might un-