Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?

HOW DOCUMENTARIES REPRESENT THE WORLD

The bond between documentary and the historical world is deep and profound. Documentary adds a new dimension to popular memory and social history. Documentary engages with the world by representing it. It does so in three ways.

First, documentaries offer us a likeness or depiction of the world that bears a recognizable familiarity. Through the capacity of audio and visual recording devices to record situations and events with great fidelity, we see in documentaries people, places, and things that we might also see for ourselves, outside the cinema. This quality alone often provides a basis for belief: we see what was there before the camera; it must be real (it really existed or happened). This remarkable power of the photographic image cannot be underestimated, even though it is subject to qualification because

- An image cannot tell everything we want to know about what happened
- Images can be altered both during and after the fact by both conventional and digital techniques
- A verifiable, authentic image does not necessarily guarantee the validity of larger claims made about what the image represents or means.
In documentaries we find stories and proposals, evocations or descriptions that help us see the world anew. The ability of the photographic image to reproduce the likeness of what is set before it, its indexical quality, compels us to believe that it is reality itself re-presented before us, while the story or proposal presents a distinct way of regarding this reality. We may be familiar with the problems of corporate downsizing, plant shutdowns, and global assembly lines, but Michael Moore’s *Roger and Me* (1989) views these issues in a fresh, distinctive way. We may know about cosmetic surgery and the debates surrounding efforts to regain lost youth by these means, but Michael Rubbo’s *Daisy: The Story of a Facelift* (1982) adds his own personal perspective to our knowledge.

Second, documentaries also stand for or represent the interests of others. In a participatory democracy, each individual participates actively in political decision making rather than relying on a representative. Representative democracy, however, relies on elected individuals to represent the interests of their constituency. Documentary filmmakers often take on the role of public representatives. They speak for the interests of others, both for the individuals whom they represent in the film and for the institution or agency that supports their filmmaking activity. *The Selling of the Pentagon* (1971), a CBS News production on the ways in which the American military markets itself and ensures itself a substantial slice of the federal tax dollar, presents itself as a representative of the American people, investigating the use and abuse of political power in Washington. It also represents the interests of CBS News in marketing itself as an institution independent from government pressure and committed to a well-established tradition of investigative journalism.

Similarly, *Nanook of the North* (1922), Robert Flaherty’s great story of an Inuit family’s struggle for survival in the Arctic, represents Inuit culture in ways that the Inuit were not yet prepared to do for themselves. It also represents the interests of Revillon Freres, Flaherty’s sponsor, at least to the extent of depicting fur hunting as a practice that benefits the Inuit as well as consumers.

Third, documentaries may represent the world in the same way a lawyer may represent a client’s interests: they make a case for a par-
particular interpretation of the evidence before us. In this sense documentaries do not simply stand for others, representing them in ways they could not do for themselves, but rather they more actively make a case or propose an interpretation to win consent or influence opinion. *The Selling of the Pentagon* represents the case that the U.S. military aggressively fuels the perception of its own indispensability and its enormous need for continued, preferably increased funding. *Nanook of the North* represents the struggle for survival in a harsh, unforgiving climate as the test of a man’s mettle and a family’s resilience. Through the valor and courage of this family unit, with its familiar gender roles and untroubled relationships, we gain a sense of the dignity of an entire people. *Daisy: The Story of a Facelift* represents the case for the social construction of an individual’s image in novel and disturbing ways that
include the effects of social conditioning, medical procedures, and documentary filmmaking practices.

THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTING OTHERS

Documentaries, then, offer aural and visual likenesses or representations of some part of the historical world. They stand for or represent the views of individuals, groups, and institutions. They also convey impressions, make proposals, mount arguments, or offer perspectives of their own, setting out to persuade us to accept their views.

The concept of representation is what compels us to ask the question, “Why are ethical issues central to documentary filmmaking?” This question could also be phrased as, “What do we do with people when we make a documentary?” How do we treat the people we film; what do we owe them as well as our audience? Should they receive compensation? Should they have a right to block the inclusion of events that prove incriminating? Is it all right to have people repeat actions or conversations for the sake of the camera? Does this compromise the integrity of their actions and the film’s claim to represent a reality that exists autonomously from its filming?

For fiction films the answer to the question of what to do with people is simple: we ask them to do what we need them to do. “People” are treated as actors who are working in their professional capacity. Their social role in the filmmaking process is defined by their professional role as actors. Trained actors agree to contractual terms to portray a given character in a film in exchange for compensation. The director has the right, and obligation, to obtain a suitable performance. The actor is valued for the quality of performance delivered, not for fidelity to his or her own everyday behavior and personality. Using nonactors begins to complicate the issue. Stories that rely on nonactors, such as many of the Italian neo-realist films or some of the New Iranian cinema, often occupy part of the fuzzy territory between fiction and nonfiction. Such work has often had an influence on both documentary and fiction filmmakers.

For nonfiction, or documentary, film, the answer is not quite so simple. “People” are treated as social actors rather than professional actors. Social actors continue to conduct their lives more or less as they
would have done without the presence of a camera. They remain cultural participants rather than theatrical performers. Their value to the filmmaker consists not in what a contractual relationship requires but in what their own lives embody. Their value resides not in the ways in which they disguise or transform their everyday behavior and personality but in the ways in which their everyday behavior and personality serve the needs of the filmmaker.

That said, documentary filmmakers often favor individuals whose unschooled behavior before a camera conveys a sense of complexity and depth similar to what we value in a trained actor's performance. These individuals possess charisma: they attract our attention, they hold our interest, they fascinate. Nanook may well have been the first “star” of documentary film but many have followed, from Timothy Treadwell, the central character in Werner Herzog’s remarkable documentary, *Grizzly Man* (2005), to Becky Fischer, the riveting Christian fundamentalist who leads young boys and girls to Christ in Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady’s *Jesus Camp* (2006).

The director’s right to a performance is a “right” that, if exercised, threatens the sense of authenticity that surrounds the social actor. Social actors present themselves as they are, not as a director conceives a role. Too much direction and the sense that we behold an authentic self-presentation may waver. Nanette BURSTEIN’S *American Teen* (2008) received criticism from some reviewers on this score since it actively shaped its five principal characters, a set of high school seniors, into relatively stereotypic roles (handsome jock, artistic misfit, etc.), but the students claimed the film represented them fairly.

On the other hand, self-consciousness and modifications in behavior can document the ways in which the act of filmmaking alters the reality it sets out to represent. As mentioned in chapter 1, people modify how they present themselves to others over the course of their interaction, depending on the feedback they receive. The famous 12-hour documentary series on the Loud family televised on PBS, *An American Family* (Craig Gilbert, 1972), for example, raised considerable debate about whether the Louds’ behavior and their own family relationships were altered by the act of filmmaking or were simply “captured” on film. The parents divorced and their son declared himself gay. These acts figured heavily in the overall drama of the series. If these events
Jesus Camp (Heidi Ewing, Rachel Grady, 2006). Becky Fisher, seen in close-up, ministers to young children. Her charismatic personality has a powerful effect on them. Jesus Camp shows her at work and lets the viewer decide how to judge the impact of her fundamentalist views. Courtesy of Loki Films and Magnolia Pictures.

came about because of the watchful eye of the camera and the presence of the filmmakers, were these changes encouraged, even if inadvertently, because they added to the dramatic intensity of the series?

Documentary filmmakers typically obtain a release from anyone they film. A release grants full decision-making power to the filmmaker. The individual forfeits any and all control over the use of his or her likeness and therefore over the final outcome. Nonetheless, some participants in financially successful documentaries may end up feeling used. As individuals who are central to the success of a film, they may feel entitled to compensation commensurate with the compensation an actor would receive. After all, their “performance” drew people to the film. In separate cases, both Randal Adams, the central figure in Errol Morris's powerful documentary, The Thin Blue Line

http://site.ebrary.com/id/10437993?ppg=68
Copyright © Indiana University Press. . All rights reserved.
May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.
(1988), and Georges Lopez, the hero of Nicolas Philibert’s remarkable study of a teacher in a one-room school in rural France, *Etre et avoir (To Be and to Have)* (2002) sued the directors for a fair share of the considerable box office revenue the films generated. Both filmmakers’ lawyers rebutted that they were prepared to offer some compensation but that they balked at the idea that individuals had a right to be paid for being themselves, even in front of a camera. Doing so would destroy the documentary tradition, they argued. The American and French courts that heard the cases upheld the filmmakers’ basic position, even though the men did receive compensation as part of the settlement.

What to do with people? Another way to put the question is, “What responsibility do filmmakers have for the effect of their acts on the lives of those filmed?” Most of us think of the invitation to act in a film as a desirable, even enviable, opportunity. But what if the invitation is not to act in a film but to be in a film, to be yourself in a film? What will others think of you; how will they judge you? What aspects of your life may stand revealed that you had not anticipated? What pressures, subtly implied or bluntly asserted, come into play to modify your conduct, and with what consequences? These questions have various answers, according to the situation, but they are of a different order from those posed by most fictions. They place a different burden of responsibility on filmmakers who set out to represent others rather than to portray characters of their own invention. These issues add a level of ethical consideration to documentary that is much less prominent in fiction filmmaking.

Consider Luis Buñuel’s *Land without Bread* (1932). In it, Buñuel represents the lives of the citizens of Las Hurdes, a remote, impoverished region of Spain, and he does so with an outrageously judgmental, if not ethnocentric, voice-over commentary. “Here is another type of idiot,” the narrator tells us at one moment as a Hurdano man raises his head into the frame. At another moment we see a tiny mountain stream as the narrator informs us, “During the summer there is no water other than this, and the inhabitants use it despite the disgusting filth it carries.” Taken at face value, this abusive representation of people takes our breath away. How profoundly disrespectful; how contemptuous! How little regard for the hardships and difficulties of those who confront an inhospitable environment and whom the filmmaker does not
In *Out of Africa* (Lisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, 1992). This film adopts a radically different attitude from *Land without Bread*. A high degree of collaboration occurred between filmmakers and subject. Their interaction gives the viewer a sense of “inside” or “behind-the-scenes” knowledge rather than the impression of parody, or possibly disrespect. Middleman and merchant Gabai Barré assures the filmmakers that this piece of “wood,” as he calls it, is a good sculpture. The leap in value that an object takes when it goes from “wood” to “art” is the source of Barré’s livelihood and of his clients’ sense of aesthetic pleasure. *Photos courtesy of Lucien Taylor.*

choose to nominate for the myth of noble savage, as Robert Flaherty did with Nanook.

On the surface of it, *Land without Bread* seems to be an example of the most callous form of reporting, worse even than the hounding of celebrities by paparazzi or the gross misrepresentations of others in “mondo” films such as *Mondo Cane* (Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco E. Prosperi, 1962). But Luis Buñuel’s film gradually suggests a level of self-awareness and calculated effect that might prompt us to wonder if Buñuel is not the insensitive cad we initially thought. In one scene, for example, we are told the Hurdanos eat goat meat only
when a goat accidentally dies. What we see, though, is a goat that falls off a steep mountainside as a puff of gun smoke appears in the corner of the frame. The film suddenly cuts to an overhead view of the dead goat tumbling down the mountainside. If this was an accident, why was a gun fired? And how did Buñuel jump from one position, at some distance from the point where the goat falls, to another, right above the falling goat, while the goat is still tumbling down the mountainside? Buñuel's representation of the incident seems to contain a wink: he seems to be hinting to us that this is not a factual representation of Hudarno life as he found it or an unthinkingly offensive judgment of it but a criticism or exposé of the forms of representation common to the depiction of traditional people. Perhaps the film's comments and judgments are a caricature of the kind of comments found both in typical travelogues and among many potential viewers. Perhaps Buñuel is satirizing a form of representation that uses documentary evidence to reinforce preexisting stereotypes. Land without Bread, from this perspective, might be a highly political film that calls the ethics of documentary filmmaking, and viewing, into question.

Seen from this perspective, Buñuel sounds, in 1932, an early and important cautionary note against our own tendency to believe literally what we see and hear. We risk missing the irony of a Buñuel or the manipulations of a Riefenstahl if we think seeing is believing in all cases. Leni Riefenstahl constructs as flattering a portrait of the National Socialist Party and its leader, Adolf Hitler, at their 1934 Nuremberg rally in Triumph of the Will (1935) as Buñuel constructs an unflattering portrait of the Hudarnos in Land without Bread. We accept either film as a "truthful" representation at our own peril. Buñuel may be among the first filmmakers to explicitly raise the issue of the ethics of documentary filmmaking, but he is hardly the last.

THE PURPOSE OF ETHICS

Ethics exist to govern the conduct of groups regarding matters for which hard and fast rules, or laws, will not suffice. Should we tell someone we film that they risk making a fool of themselves or that there will be many who will judge their conduct negatively? Should Ross McElwee have explained to the women he films in Sherman's March...
In *and Out of Africa* (1992), art gallery owner Wendy Engel assesses Gabai Barré’s wares to choose items for her shop. Much of this film’s emphasis is on how objects take on new meanings and values when they cross cultural boundaries. Barré plays a vital but customarily unnoticed role in this process. His willingness to let the filmmakers create new meanings and values of their own from his activity led them to give Barré a credit as a co-creator of the film.

(1985), as they interact with him during his journey through the South, that many viewers will see them as examples of coquettish, heterosexually obsessed Southern “belles”? Should Michael Moore have told the people of Flint, Michigan, he interviews in *Roger and Me* that he may make them look foolish in order to make General Motors look even worse? Should Jean Rouch have warned the Hausa tribesmen whom he films performing an elaborate possession ceremony in *Les Maitres Fous* (1955) that their actions may seem bizarre, if not barbaric, to those not familiar with their customs and practices, despite the illuminating interpretation his voice-over commentary provides? Should Tanya Ballantyne have warned the husband of the down-and-out family she portrays in *The Things I Cannot Change* (1966) that her record of his
Triumph of the Will (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935). In contrast to The City, Triumph of the Will celebrates the power of the assembled, choreographed masses. The coordinated movement of the troops and the cadence of the sound track’s music make it clear that these city dwellers experience not alienation but ecstasy.

behavior could serve as legal evidence against him (when he gets into a street fight, for example).

These questions all point to the unforeseen effects a documentary film can have on those represented in it. Ethical considerations attempt to minimize harmful effects. Ethics becomes a measure of the ways in which negotiations about the nature of the relationship between filmmaker and subject have consequences for subjects and viewers alike. Filmmakers who set out to represent people whom they do not initially know but who typify or possess special knowledge of a problem or issue run the risk of exploiting them. Filmmakers who choose to observe others but not to intervene overtly in their affairs run the risk of altering behavior and events and of having their own human responsiveness called into question. Filmmakers who choose to work with people already familiar to them face the challenge of represent-
Two Laws (Caroline Strachan and Alessandro Cavadini, 1981). The camera height, the wide angle lens that shows the spatial relation between individuals, and the visible presence of the sound recorder (one of the social actors) are all decisions that were made in consultation between the filmmakers and their subjects. Courtesy of Facets Multimedia.

...common ground responsibly, even if it means sacrificing their own voice or point of view for that of others. Carolyn Strachan and Alessandro Cavadini consciously adopt precisely such a collaborative, self-effacing position in Two Laws (1981), as they go about making decisions about everything from subject matter to camera lenses through dialogue with the Aboriginal people whose case to regain title to their ancestral land provides the core of their film.

A common litmus test for many of these ethical issues is the principle of “informed consent.” This principle, relied on heavily in anthropology, sociology, medical experimentation, and elsewhere, states that participants in a study should be told of the possible consequences of their participation. To invite someone to join in a medical experiment involving a new drug without telling him or her that the drug has potentially dangerous side effects, may not prove an effective treatment, and may or may not be, in fact, a placebo breaches medical ethics. The individual may consent to participate because he or she cannot afford
the standard drug treatment, for example, but cannot consent on an informed basis without a conscientious explanation of the design and risks of the experiment itself.

To invite someone to participate in a film about his or her family, unemployment, the possibilities of romance in the nuclear age (as Ross McElwee describes his goal in *Sherman’s March*), or to follow someone through the process of obtaining a facelift as Michael Rubbo does with *Daisy: The Story of a Facelift*, poses a less clear-cut issue. Of exactly what consequences or risks should filmmakers inform their subjects? To what extent can the filmmaker honestly reveal his or her intentions or foretell the actual effects of a film when some intentions are unconscious and many effects are unpredictable?

A striking exception to this perspective is Stanley Milgram’s extraordinary film, *Obedience* (1965). It is an expository summary of the experiments he conducted at Yale in which unwitting subjects agreed to “test” the memory of other subjects. If the “student” failed the memory test the target subject had to administer a shock. Each failure led to a stronger shock, up to and including levels marked “Danger Severe Shock” and “Fatal.” After each subject either administered the most severe shock or refused to continue before reaching this point, the experimenters disclosed to them that the shocks never reached the student and that the other subject was in on the deception. It was not, in fact, a test of memory but of people’s willingness to obey commands in a given context.

Milgram himself was shocked by how many people displayed full compliance with the command to continue giving the electrical jolts. His results have led to considerable debate about obedience. Less discussion has gone to noting that his experiment required that the target subjects not know the true purpose of the experiment. The experiment’s design required that truly informed consent be withheld. Milgram himself did not seek to defend this choice in later discussions—he didn’t think so many would go so far and therefore did not think informed consent would loom as an issue. The experiment and subsequent film made of it stand as a cautionary example of what can be at stake in matters of ethics. In 2002, Alex Gibney revisited Milgram’s work, the 1970s Stanford prison experiment that divided students into prisoners and guards only to see brutality and sadism erupt
Obedience (© 1968 by Stanley Milgram, copyright renewed 1995 by Alexandra Milgram, and distributed by Penn State Media Sales). This image presents an unsuspecting subject who thinks he is giving powerful shocks to a “student.” The shocks never arrive but the subject does not know this. The body language of many subjects suggests extreme discomfort or anguish even though many of them deny being strongly affected by what they had to do. Permission granted by Alexandra Milgram.

to a shocking degree, and other similar experiments in The Human Behavior Experiments (2006). He links their findings to recent events such as the torture carried out at Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 by military police and the CIA and to the callous conduct of Enron corporation when it deliberately manipulated the electrical power supply in the state of California in his Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room (2005). Errol Morris, in Standard Operating Procedure (2008), also explores the ramifications of obedience to authority through a series of interviews with some of the military police who “softened up” prisoners for their interrogations. These MPs, but not the actual interrogators or higher officials, were prosecuted and given jail sentences.

The issue of whether informed consent can be withheld moves us toward questions of deception. What is a deceptive practice in documentary filmmaking? Is it acceptable to feign interest in a company’s
achievements to gain evidence of unsafe labor practices? Is it appropriate to film illegal acts (using cocaine or stealing cars, say) to make a documentary about a successful but severely stressed businessman or an urban gang? What obligation do documentarians have to their subjects relative to their audience or their conception of the truth? Is it all right to make Miss Michigan look foolish by asking her opinion about local economic conditions in order to mock the irrelevance of beauty pageants to the damage caused by automotive plant shutdowns in Flint, as Michael Moore does in one scene from *Roger and Me*?

Another concrete example of such issues involves a scene from *Hoop Dreams* (1994) in which the filmmakers go with Arthur Agee to a local playground. Arthur is one of the two young men whose hopes of making it to the NBA (National Basketball Association) form the basis of the film. But as Arthur practices his game in the foreground, the camera records his father engaged in a drug deal in the background. Should the filmmakers have included this scene in the final film? Did it compromise Mr. Agee or risk providing legal evidence against him? To answer these questions, the filmmakers consulted their lawyers, who judged the degree of detail in the image was insufficient to serve as evidence in court, and they discussed the matter with the Agee family itself. They were prepared to remove the scene if anyone in the family wanted it removed. In fact, the family, including Mr. Agee, felt it should stay in. Mr. Agee was subsequently arrested on a drug charge, an event that transformed him, on his release, into a far more responsible father. He felt that the scene would help dramatize his own growth as a parent over the course of time.

Given that most documentarians act as representatives of those they film or of the institution sponsoring them rather than as community members, tensions often arise between the filmmaker’s desire to make a compelling film and the individual’s desire to have his or her social rights and personal dignity respected. Mitchell Block’s film *No Lies* (1973) makes this point exceptionally clear. The film takes place entirely inside the apartment of a young woman whom the filmmaker visits with his hand-held camera. He nonchalantly chats with her as he films, seemingly to practice his shooting skills, until a casual question reveals a traumatic event: the young woman was recently raped. What should the filmmaker do? Stop shooting and console her as a friend?
No Lies (Mitchell Block, 1973). The “production crew” in action. In No Lies a single person with a camera shoots the film we see. In this case we may end up wondering if we have been deceived when we learn that the cameraman is not Mitchell Block, the actual filmmaker. On the other hand, we may decide that Mitchell Block has made a wise decision to employ actors to play the role of a filmmaker and his subject, given the highly intrusive nature of the filmmaker’s questioning.

Continue shooting and make a film that might aid our understanding of the effects of this form of criminal behavior? Exploit the moment to capture something much more sensational than he anticipated? The filmmaker opts to continue shooting. His questions become increasingly probing and personal. He expresses doubt about whether the rape happened at all, causing the woman considerable distress. Finally, as the short film comes to a close, he seems to realize he has pushed too hard and agrees to stop filming.

What do we make of the young man’s conduct? Block’s film would seem grotesquely callous if Mitchell were himself the filmmaker and the events we see entirely authentic. But No Lies functions something like Land without Bread and the harrowing Belgian film Man Bites Dog (1992), in which a documentary film crew appears to become complicit with the criminal acts of a thug whose life they set out to document: the films work to call into question audience assumptions
about documentary representation. They explore how our sense of detached observation can turn into intense discomfort.

Block practices a calculated deception in order to make this point: we learn in the final credits that the two social actors are, in fact, trained actors and that their interaction was not spontaneous but scripted. No Lies functions like a meta-commentary on the very act of documentary filmmaking itself by suggesting that we as an audience are put in a position similar to the young woman's. We are also subject to the manipulations and maneuvers of the filmmaker, and we, too, can be left unsettled and distressed by them. We are unsettled not only by the on-screen filmmaker's aggressive interrogation of the woman but also by the off-screen filmmaker's (Block's) deliberate misrepresentation of the film's actual status as a fiction. The actors play roles under contractual agreements rather than present themselves as social actors. The film becomes, potentially, a second rape, a new form of abuse, if we feel taken in or used by the deception, but the deception can also provide considerable relief. No Lies serves as an important comment on documentary film's potential for abuse by turning people into victims so that we can learn, voyeuristically, about their suffering and misery.

Issues often arise in relation to the question of how to relate to people ethically because of the degree to which the filmmaker stands apart from those he or she films. The filmmaker controls the camera and thus possesses a power others don't. Further, filmmakers, especially journalistic filmmakers, belong to organizations and institutions with their own standards and practices. Even independent filmmakers usually see themselves as professional artists, pursuing a career more than dedicating themselves to representing the interests of a particular group or constituency.

In their voice-over commentary on the DVD of Jesus Camp, Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, the co-directors, refer to their central figure, fundamentalist Becky Fischer, as “a great documentary subject” due to her charisma. Her appeal lies in her conviction and articulateness. That she professes a highly contentious set of fundamentalist beliefs is not something they indicate any desire to attack or defend. They want to make a good film and they clearly decided that a charismatic individual gives them considerable leverage: charisma virtually guarantees
audience involvement, even if the exact nature of that involvement can range from reverence to revulsion.

The filmmakers let the audience decide how to respond to Ms. Fischer’s efforts to convert young boys and girls into devout fundamentalists. They, in fact, go to some pains not to undercut what she says or to endorse it. This approach makes it possible for fundamentalists, including Ms. Fischer, to feel that the film represents them accurately and for those who question these religious views and practices to find ample evidence for concern. In this case the filmmakers adopt a professional detachment from the issues at hand. Ethics need not mean taking a stand for or against the values and beliefs of others so much as acting in ways that do not withhold respect from subjects or undermine trust from audiences. At the same time, some films like *Land without Bread* and *No Lies* will remind us that these values can also be put into question. Developing a sense of ethical regard becomes a vital part of the documentary filmmaker’s professionalism.

**FILMMAKERS, PEOPLE, AUDIENCES**

“How should we treat the people we film?” is a question that reminds us of the various ways in which filmmakers can choose to represent others. How should we relate to one another and how much can the presence of a camera change the rules of the game? Very different forms of alliance can take shape between the three-fold interaction among (1) filmmakers, (2) subjects or social actors, and (3) audiences or viewers. One convenient way to think about this interaction involves a verbal formulation of this three-way relationship. A number of formulations recur frequently in documentary films. The most classic formulation is

> I speak about them to you.

I. The filmmaker takes on a personal persona, either directly or through a surrogate. A typical surrogate is the voice-of-God commentator, whom we hear speaking in a voice over but do not see. This anonymous but surrogate voice arose in the 1930s as a convenient way to describe a situation or problem, present an argument, propose a solution, and sometimes to evoke a poetic tone or mood. Films like
Song of Ceylon (1934) and Night Mail (1936) rendered Ceylonese culture and the British postal service, respectively, in a poetic tone. The commentaries made the transmission of information secondary to the construction of a deferential, somewhat romanticized mood. The voice of God, and a corresponding voice of authority—someone we see as well as hear who speaks on behalf of the film, such as the field correspondents in Harvest of Shame (1960), who report on the conditions faced by migrant farm laborers, Roger Mudd in The Selling of the Pentagon, as he investigates the workings of the Pentagon’s public relations machine, or Wynton Marsalis in Jazz (2000), as he offers his personal insights into the history of jazz in America—remains a prevalent feature of documentary film (as well as of television news programming).

Another possibility is for the filmmaker him- or herself to speak, either on-camera, as in Sherman’s March and Roger and Me, or off-camera, heard but not seen, as in The Thin Blue Line, and Nobody’s Business (1996), Alan Berliner’s film about his cantankerous but loving father. In these cases the filmmaker becomes a persona or character within his or her own film as well as the maker of the film. The character may be thinly developed, as in the case of The Thin Blue Line, where we learn very little about Errol Morris himself, or quite richly developed, as in the case of Roger and Me, where filmmaker Michael Moore portrays a socially conscious nebbish who will do whatever is necessary to get to the bottom of pressing social concerns, a persona that he has adopted in his subsequent work as well (TV Nation [1994], Bowling for Columbine [2002], Fahrenheit 9/11 [2004], Sicko [2007], and Capitalism: A Love Story [2009]).

Speaking in the first person edges the documentary form toward the diary, essay, and aspects of avant-garde or experimental film and video. The emphasis may shift from convincing the audience of a particular point of view or approach to a problem to the representation of a personal, clearly subjective view of things. The emphasis shifts from persuasion to expression. What gets expressed is the filmmaker’s own personal perspective and unique view of things. What makes it a documentary is that this expressiveness remains coupled to representations about the social, historical world, including the world of the filmmaker as a social actor, going about his or her life among others. Much of the
"new journalism" (Hunter Thompson's *Slouching toward Las Vegas*, for example) that stressed a personal point of view and documentary filmmaking influenced by it, such as Michael Rubbo's and Michael Moore's work, stressed just this combination of an idiosyncratic or personal voice coupled to reporting on a topical issue.

*Speak about.* The filmmaker represents others. The sense of speaking about a topic or issue, a people or individual lends an air of civic importance to the effort. Speaking about something may involve telling a story, creating a poetic mood, or constructing a narrative, such as the story of how the mail gets to its destination or how Nanook manages to find food for his family, but it also implies a content-oriented desire to convey information, rely on facts, and make points about the world we share. Compared to "What story shall I tell?" the question "What shall I speak about?" turns our minds to the public sphere and to the social act of speaking to others on a topic of common interest. Not all documentaries adopt this posture, but it is among the most common ways of structuring a documentary film.

*Them.* The third person pronoun implies a separation between speaker and subject. The I who speaks is not identical with those of whom it speaks. We as an audience receive a sense that the subjects in the film are placed there for our examination and edification. They may be rendered as rich, full-rounded individuals with complex psychologies of their own, a tendency particularly noticeable in observational documentaries (discussed in chapter 7), but just as often they seem to come before us as examples or illustrations, evidence of a condition or event that has happened in the world. This can seem reductive and diminishing, but it can also be highly compelling and effective. Early documentary, prior to the rise of the observational and participatory modes in the early 1960s, relied almost entirely on using individuals as examples or illustrations. The lack of ability to record speech synchronously encouraged treating shots of specific people as instances of larger concerns. Sometimes such individuals take on highly symbolic significance, as in the example of Rodney King, whose beating by Los Angeles policemen after a traffic stop was caught on video. Mr. King does not emerge as a full-blown character in the raw footage that circulated widely on the news and beyond. Instead he serves as a symbol of police brutality and institutional racism. The
power and shock effect of the footage depends more on its graphic nature and apparent authenticity than on its portrayal of a personality. For some the use of individuals as examples diminishes the pleasure of documentary when compared to fiction; at the least, it suggests that the pleasure and satisfaction of documentary representation derives from more sources than character development alone.

You. Like “them,” “you” suggests a separation. One person speaks and another listens. A filmmaker speaks and an audience attends. Documentary, in this sense, belongs to an institutional discourse or framework. People with a particular form of expertise, documentary filmmakers, address us. They bring us together, momentarily, as a “you.” As an audience we are typically separated from both the act of representation and the subject of representation. We occupy a different social time and space from either; we have a role and identity of our own as audience members that is itself a distinct aspect of our own social persona: we attend the film as viewers and bring specific assumptions and expectations to this role. “They,” the film’s subjects, may be husbands and wives, lawyers and accountants, students and athletes, professionals and travelers, like us, and their actions may prove instructive in more direct ways than we expect from fiction. We need not ask if real army recruits are like Demi Moore’s character in G.I. Jane (Ridley Scott, 1997); we can see real recruits in Joan Churchill and Nick Broomfield’s documentary Soldier Girls (1985) or Fred Wiseman’s Basic Training (1971). We may draw analogies about human conduct from the dramatic events in G.I. Jane, but we can draw conclusions about human conduct from the actual events represented in Soldier Girls and Basic Training.

“You” becomes consolidated as an audience when the filmmaker indicates that he or she is indeed addressing us, that the film reaches us in some way. Without this sense of active address we may be present at but not attend to the film. Filmmakers must find a way to activate our sense of ourselves both as the one to whom the filmmaker speaks (about someone or something else) and as members of a group or collectivity, an audience for whom this topic bears importance. The usual means of doing this is by recourse to techniques of rhetoric (discussed in chapter 4).
Rhetoric is the form of speech used to persuade or convince others about an issue for which no clear-cut, unequivocal answer or solution exists. Guilt and innocence in the judicial process often hinges not simply on evidence but on the convincingness of the arguments made regarding the interpretation of the evidence. The O. J. Simpson trial was a prime example, given that there was a considerable amount of incriminating evidence. Even so, the defense lawyers made a successful argument that this evidence might have been fabricated and was circumstantial; its value was suspect. A judgment about the truth, the verdict, lay outside the realms of science, poetry, or story telling. It came to pass within the arena of rhetorical engagement, the arena in which most documentary operates as well.

Georges Franju’s *Blood of the Beasts* (1949), for example, uses irony and surreal imagery to persuade us of the strangeness of slaughtering cattle, in 1940s France, so that we may enjoy their flesh, whereas Frederick Wiseman’s *Meat* (1976) observes the activities in a midwestern slaughterhouse with considerable detachment, in 1970s America, to show us the routine nature of the human interactions among workers and supervisors, men and animals. Wiseman focuses on issues of labor, Franju on myth and ritual. Wiseman regards the workers as typical or representative wage earners in a labor-management context, Franju regards the workers as mythical figures who perform astounding feats. Specific stylistic and rhetorical choices operate in both cases to activate our sense of being addressed and engaged in specific ways.

*I speak about them to you* may be the most common formulation of the three-way relationship among filmmaker, subject, and audience, but it is certainly not the only one. A chart could be made that would include all of the variations in pronouns that this sentence allows for. Each variation would carry a different set of implications for the relationships among filmmakers, subjects, and viewers. A few of the more pertinent ones are sketched out here:

*It speaks about them (or it) to us.*

This formulation betrays a sense of separation, if not alienation, between the speaker and the audience. The film or video appears to arrive, addressed to us, from a source that lacks individuality. It ad-
addresses a subject likewise separated from us, even if it lies within some
proximity. This formulation characterizes what we might call an insti-
tutional discourse, in which the film, often by means of a voice-over
commentary, perhaps even a voice-of-God commentator, informs us
about some aspect of the world in an impersonal but authoritative
manner. The subjects or social actors represented are usually represented
as examples of a general situation or condition. The City (1939), for
example, addresses the problem of urban poverty, decay, and alienation
as "it"; abstract topics of general interest. The people shown serve to
illustrate the film's point: new cities must take on characteristics of the
small town rather than the urban slum. We get to know none of them
individually. The effect is compelling, not necessarily detached and
cold at all, but it retains an aura of institutional address.

The City and films like it also appear to speak to "us" but address
themselves to a largely undifferentiated mass. We should attend to the
film because we need to know about its topic. Informational films and
advertising messages, including trailers for forthcoming films, often
adopt this framework. The River (1937), for example, not only uses a
shtetorian male commentator, it constantly refers to what "we" have
done to the land and what "we" can do to change things, even though
the actual culprit is quite removed from you or me today and from large
segments of its original audience in 1938. The film wants all of us to
take responsibility for soil erosion and flood control.

Films of this sort seem to arrive from nowhere in particular. They
are not the work of a specific individual whom we could call the film-
maker; they are often not even the work of an institution as identifiable
as CNN news with its on-camera representatives (anchor men and
women, reporters, interviewees). They arrive as the utterances of an
"it" that remains impersonal and unidentifiable. (The "it" may be the
scientific community, the medical establishment, the government,
or the advertising industry, for example.) This "it" speaks to an "us"
that may be a function more of demographics than of collectivity.
Such works convey information, assign values, or urge actions that
invite us to find a sense of commonality within a framework that may
be dryly factual or emotionally charged, but it is seldom organized
to move beyond a statistical, generic, or abstract conception of who
"we" are.
I (or we) speak about us to you.

This formulation moves the filmmaker from a position of separation from those he or she represents to a position of commonality with them. Filmmaker and subject are of the same stock. In anthropological filmmaking the turn to this formulation goes by the name of autoethnography: this refers to the efforts of indigenous people to make films and videos about their own culture so that they may represent it to “us,” those who remain outside. The Kayapo Indians of the Amazon River basin have been exceptionally active in this practice, using their videos to lobby Brazilian politicians for policies that will protect their homeland from development and exploitation.

Often the sense of commonality hinges around the representing of family. Alan Berliner, for example, has made two exceptional films about his grandfather and father, *Intimate Stranger* (1992) and *Nobody’s Business*, respectively. Jonathan Caouette’s *Tarnation* (2003) is an intensely personal family portrait. It borders on art therapy to the degree that telling the story of his mother’s descent into madness at the hands of misguided parents and relatives also serves as his opportunity to reunite with her. Marlene Booth has made an intriguing film about her family’s experience as predominantly assimilated Jews living in Iowa, *Yidl in the Middle* (1998). After discovering in her adulthood that her father was Jewish, Lisa Lewenz travels to Europe to understand what her family’s life was like in 1930s Germany in *Letter without Words* (1998). In a film that mixes staged enactments with documentary representations, Camille Billops describes what happens when she and the now-grown daughter whom she gave up for adoption as a child reunite in *Finding Christa* (1991).

By speaking about an “us” that includes the filmmaker these films achieve a degree of intimacy that can be quite compelling.

One of the most striking examples of the first-person voice in a documentary is Marlon Riggs’s extraordinary video *Tongues Untied* (1989). In it Riggs speaks about what it means to be a black, gay male in a subtle fusion of both “I speak about us to you” and “I speak about myself to you” formulations that stresses the linkages between personal and collective experience. He and other social actors speak on- and off-camera about their lives as black, gay men. Some recite poetry,
some recount stories, some participate in sketches and reenactments. These are not the standard voices of authority. They are not stripped of ethnic identity or colloquial idiosyncrasy to approximate the dominant norm of standard, white, nonregional English. Inflection and rhythm, cadence and style attest to the power of individual perception and the strength of personal expression that makes *Tongues Untied* one of the milestones in documentary filmmaking.

These various formulations of the relation of speaker/subject/audience convey some sense of how the filmmaker adopts a specific position in relation to those represented in the film and those to whom the film is addressed. This position requires negotiation and consent. The outcome provides some measure of the respect accorded others, even in the face of disagreement, and of the trust established with the audience. Signs of trust and respect provide evidence of the ethical considerations that went into the film’s conception, acknowledging that some films will deliberately challenge or subvert these values. These formulations suggest what kind of relationship the viewer may have with the film by suggesting what kind of relationship we may have with the filmmaker and his or her subjects. To ask what we do with people when we make a documentary film involves asking what we do with filmmakers and viewers as well as with subjects. Assumptions about the relationships that should exist among all three go a long way toward determining what kind of documentary film or video results, the quality of the relationship it has to its subjects, and the effect it has on an audience. Assumptions vary considerably, as we shall see, but the underlying question of what we do with people persists as a fundamental issue for the ethics of documentary filmmaking.