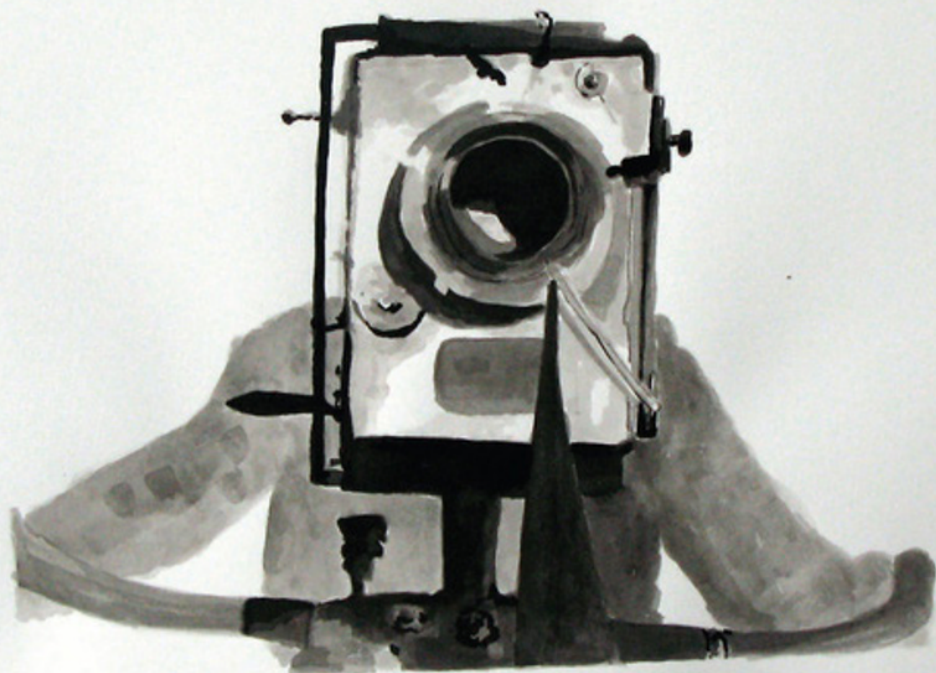


# A COMPANION TO DOCUMENTARY FILM HISTORY

EDITED BY JOSHUA MALITSKY



WILEY Blackwell



A Companion to Documentary  
Film History



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Edited by

Joshua Malitsky

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# Introduction: Expanding Documentary Histories

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## **Documentary Film and the Documentary Tradition**

Documentary media has a more prominent role in the contemporary global zeitgeist than it ever has before. Documentaries are produced by massive government agencies, by leading broadcast corporations, by independent collectives, by individuals, and by a host of formations in between. They are viewed in theaters, on broadcast and cable or satellite television, in public spaces, at workplaces, in schools, in galleries and museums, in planes, trains, and automobiles, and in homes. We access them on screens small and large, projected in theaters, on walls, and on personal devices, be they phones or personal computers. We watch them in one sitting or over the course of days, weeks, or months. A way of speaking about the world with images and (often) sounds connected to the world, they have become increasingly integral to how we experience our personal and professional lives. And whereas they serve a host of different functions, they have become perhaps the most significant form through which we think in depth about the past.

Scholarship on documentary and nonfiction film has grown substantially in the last 30 years and exploded in the last 10. A handful of excellent volumes on the current state of documentary studies have either recently been published or are forthcoming. Some serve as introductory textbooks, such as Louise Spence's and Vinicius Navarro's *Crafting Truth* (Spence and Navarro, 2010). Some have sought to encapsulate the "present agenda of concerns" in documentary studies such as Brian Winston's *The Documentary Film Book* (Winston, 2013) or the volume that Patrick Sjoberg and I produced entitled *The Documentary Moment* (Malitsky and Sjoberg, 2021). Others focus on debates and statements that have taken place over the history of documentary, such as Jonathan Kahana's *The Documentary Film Reader* (Kahana, 2016). Alexandra Juhasz's and Alisa Lebow's *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film* (Juhasz and Lebow, 2015), with which this book is affiliated, is an authoritative as well as an activist study of "documentary's world-changing

aspirations,” participating in the project to which it sees documentaries, scholars, and artists deeply dedicated—“the passionate commitment to and direct engagement with the lived world” (Juhasz and Lebow, 2015: 1).

This relationship between documentary media and the past is the subject of *A Companion to Documentary Film History*. In this book, a cluster of major scholars address the textual, industrial, and social aspects of this media form. Among the many recent works, *A Companion to Documentary Film History* is the only anthology that focuses its attention on the history of the documentary. Its goal in this capacity is both to shed light on central historical issues, be they related to reception, geography, authorship, multimedia context, or movements, and to do so by highlighting a breadth of historiographical approaches. Crucially, it achieves this by radically expanding the purview of what counts as documentary.

Recent years have witnessed growth in scholarship on nonfiction film practices that are seen by many to be peripheral to documentary. Travelogues, newsreels, industrial films, educational films, home movies, film diaries, science films, and promotional films were “considered too quotidian, too topical, too instrumental or too ephemeral to have a place in the documentary tradition” (Kahana, 2016: 3). Their aesthetics were too inconsequential, their voices too muted, their purposes too obvious. The new scholarship on this work, however, has transformed the field of documentary history by expanding the (cinematic) objects of consideration—and it has done so methodologically as well with its focus on materialist and archival histories. Challenging dominant auteurist and national cinema paradigms, such work highlights the conditions of film production and the context of its use, including the reasons for commission, the understanding of intended audience, the proposed purposes, and so forth. Doing so does not only make the subfield of documentary richer and more generative—though certainly it does that—but it is also historically *necessary*.

In Michael Cowan’s book on Walter Ruttmann, for example, he expands beyond Ruttmann’s more commonly considered experimental films to include his sponsored work on advertising films, industrial films, medical films, and Nazi propaganda. For Cowan, Ruttmann was not exemplary in this range of work, as “*all* of them [the Weimar avant-garde] made sponsored films before and after 1933”—a practice which expanded beyond Germany, “encompassing filmmakers such as Joris Ivens, Len Lye, Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, Rene Clair, and many others” (Cowan, 2014: 12). This fusion never goes away, and a combination of independent feature-length filmmaking and commissioned shorts can be seen, for example, with Errol Morris’s work. But beyond the scope of such studies, Cowan, Malte Hagener, and others have demonstrated that thinking together experimental aesthetics and practical application in sponsored work enables a fuller understanding of these filmmakers’ aesthetics. Rather than imagining the commissioned work as a practical and time-consuming diversion, we become open to the possibility that each practice encourages and enables innovation in form and approach in the others (Cowan, 2014; Acland and Wasson, 2011; Hediger and Vonderau, 2009; Hagener, 2007; Orgeron, Orgeron, and Streible, 2012; Dahlquist

and Vonderau, 2020). The new and expanded history of documentary film is also a new way of understanding what documentary is and how it has functioned over time.

This volume binds histories of what we might take as “classical” or “social” documentaries together with work that addresses “useful” nonfiction film practices under the heading of “documentary” (Acland and Wasson, 2011). I do so to encourage the creation of an expanded, enriched sense of documentary and nonfiction film studies and, most importantly, to account for the argument made above about the value of such a framework for understanding materialist and aesthetic histories. But there is no consensus about terminology in the field of Cinema and Media Studies, i.e. what counts as documentary and what should be described as a nonfiction genre is not at all decided.

This generates a tension with perhaps the most cited study of documentary media. In his introduction to documentary cinema, Bill Nichols offered this pointed, precise explication:

Documentary film speaks about situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations, and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this point of view into a way of seeing the historical world directly rather than into a fictional allegory. (Nichols, 2010: 14)

Nichols’ definition centers on the tripartite structure of documentary meaning-making (filmmaker—subjects in the film—viewers), the film’s connection with the historical world, the form’s distinction from narrative fiction film, and the voiced, perspective of the filmmaker. It has become the default definition of much work on the topic.

Yet there is increasingly little agreement about what defines *documentary* or *documentary film* in the first place. The contributors to this volume use a range of terms to describe the films associated with their objects of study, most frequently taking their cues from the labels being used at the time—*kulturfilm*, film journal, propaganda film, to name a few. There is even some playfulness and defiance about the effort to define it at all. Kahana remarks that “documentary is a slippery eel” (Kahana, 2016: 1). Juhasz and Lebow open their volume somewhat surprisingly with the remark, “even if we can agree that the majority of documentaries ... may be identified by certain well-worn practices ... we accept what has become commonplace in documentary studies: that documentary defies definition” (Juhasz and Lebow, 2015: 1). To be sure, definitions of documentary—and there are many who make the effort to define—depend on whether they are driven by aesthetic, epistemological, ontological, or political concerns. Many reckon with the most famous one: John Grierson’s “creative treatment of actuality,” the fundamental principles of which drive Brian Winston’s deconstruction and disavowal in *Claiming the Real* (Winston, 1995). The father of documentary would surely not be pleased by any inclusion of these “lower” forms of nonfiction film practices, which so often mistake “the phenomenon for

the thing itself ... ignoring everything that gave it the trouble of conscience, and penetration and thought” (Grierson, 1966: 201). Eschewing those labels, Michael Renov turns to poetics and rhetoric, an approach to artistic technique whose position at the border of science and art, and truth and beauty, he sees as homologous to the stance of documentary. He identifies four “fundamental tendencies or rhetorical/aesthetic functions” of documentary that emerge from particular historical, cultural, and technological contexts: to record, reveal or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyze or interrogate; and to express (Renov, 1993: 21). From the literary to the historical, Philip Rosen emphasizes the temporal gap required for the process of “converting document into documentary” (Rosen, 2001: 263). For Rosen, it is the process of transforming “relatively unbridled visual indexicality into sense” via sequencing, that marks documentary’s imbrication with *historical* meaning (Rosen, 2001: 232).

Others have sought to define documentary as an approach to speaking about the world with the world that expands beyond cinema and even photographic or pictorial-based media. Robert Coles’s *Doing Documentary Work*—the first book on documentary I was assigned in graduate school—addresses documentary projects across literature, photography, and film, assessing artists’ aesthetic, ethical, psychological, and critical struggles to communicate about the world. For Coles, documentary, across these media forms, is about engaging with others, and any attempt to speak about others is inflected by the subjective position one occupies (Coles, 1998). The film historian Charles Musser likewise aims to think documentary beyond cinema, linking his interest in definition to questions of history and origins. He argues in favor of “the need to think about documentary as a formation and as a practice that is not arbitrarily tied to the appearance and rapid adoption of that term” (Musser, 2018: 2). Musser points to two strands of cultural production that help us understand documentary’s *longue durée*: the magic lantern and the lecture. The former links nonfiction to technology and the image while the latter points to a founding instance of documentary truth, one based in science and experienced collectively. Rather than documentary depending on technological reproducibility, he writes:

The documentary tradition should not be seen as a subset of the history of cinema—but something else. They are two perhaps incommensurate histories that intersect, overlap, and become intertwined. Documentary practices offered a method of communication that incorporated new media forms as they became available. Projected celluloid-based motion pictures was but one of these. (Musser, 2018: 11)

For Musser, this long view of documentary provides insight into the form’s past and offers flexibility for thinking about contemporary practices.

Definitions are multiple, varied, even contradictory. Yet, in this way, with their negotiation between precision and flexibility and their various foci, they can be helpful; they call attention to the epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic concerns of the moment of their articulation. Along those lines, the goal of this Introduction is

not to attempt to define documentary but instead to introduce some of the ideas leading thinkers on the subject have put forth. Readers of the volume can then see how related conceptions are articulated by the contributors themselves, as well as how various tenets of documentary are prioritized by the work under consideration in their pieces.

## Writing Documentary History

The history of documentary has often been told with a technologically determinist bent. It begins with the move from the predocumentary phase of the actuality to the classical period of documentary with the inauguration of narrative in *Nanook of the North* (1922) (Barsam, 1973; Barnouw, 1974). With the emergence of sound films around the 1930s, the form develops with voice-over narration assuming the role of intertitles. The classical period sustains until approximately 1960, when the availability of portable 16 mm cameras and synchronous sound enabled a more intimate, democratic, less authoritarian model.

The more recent histories (of the last 35–40 years) are still in the process of being understood. To be sure, Direct Cinema's claims of providing objective evidence of the world through an observational approach have been called into question across contexts and by a range of approaches. Films with reflexive and performative elements have become more common and are often highly presentational in their address, calling attention to their acts of articulation and processes of production. In so doing, they locate the truth less in the relationship between the image and reality than in the trust between filmmaker and viewer. But that's not to say that filmmakers and viewers abandoned the possibility of documentary communicating the truth of the past (i.e. its historiographic function). As Linda Williams describes in an analysis of Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*, "some kinds of partial and contingent truths are nevertheless always the receding goal of the documentary tradition" (Williams, 2013: 392). In the early 2000s some scholars saw the development of this line of (postmodern) thought—the inability of the photograph or its digital replacement to serve as a guarantor of truth—as an indication that we have moved into a "post-documentary" moment (Corner, 2000; Winston, 2013). Yet this line of thinking never matched how documentary films were being watched. Viewers consistently and penetratingly interrogate films' truthfulness or factuality in ways that have probably changed less in the last 40 years than most expect. Indeed, with the information age, the availability of paratextual and extratextual materials (information that is in addition to critical responses to the film) increasingly shapes the judgments viewers make about the film and those involved in its production and circulation.

But if those are some broad strokes for telling the history of documentary, the vast majority of scholarship on the topic is more concerned with specific instances, whether it focuses on a filmmaker, a movement, or a geographic area. Documentary studies began to develop as subfield of Cinema and Media Studies in the 1990s in

response to a number of scholars' interest in documentary's underlying legitimacy (Renov, 1993; Winston, 1995; Gaines and Renov, 1999; Nichols, 1991; Kahana, 2016: 723–725). The subfield is associated by many with the academic conference Visible Evidence, also the name of a book series published by University of Minnesota Press (1997–2014, since taken over by Columbia University Press) that was one of the primary publishers of monographs and anthologies on documentary topics. This included volumes on documentary's role in nations' histories, on subgenres of documentary (including some on “peripheral” practices such as home and amateur movies), on individual filmmakers and individual films, on documentary's connection with political and intellectual movements, on documentary's relationship with other media forms, and on theoretical approaches to the form (<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/series/visible-evidence>).

Other (mostly academic) presses have supported this research as well: Wallflower, which has a “Nonfictions” series, Indiana, Columbia, Oxford, and more recently California and Amsterdam have all produced books on documentary-related topics. Academic journals are the other most significant place for the publication of historical work on documentary and nonfiction film material. *Studies in Documentary Film* is the only journal completely devoted to the topic, but there are fairly consistent publications in film and media-specific journals such as *Cinema Journal* (now the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*), *Jump Cut The Moving Image*, *Film History*, *Film Quarterly*, *Black Camera*, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, and *Screen*, as well as in transdisciplinary journals focusing on critical theory, media and culture, and art criticism like *Discourse*, *October*, and *Journal of Visual Culture*.

This volume is designed to provide an overview of the best historical scholarship being done on documentary and nonfiction film at the present moment. Instead of selecting previously published work, however, I reached out to scholars across the globe who are doing the most innovative and rigorous work in the area. To organize this work, I have created thematic strands that I believe productively account for the dominant and emerging approaches to understanding the history of documentary film and video. I am confident that these strands will spark intellectual conversations about the material and about the historiographical approach to the material. In other words, like so many of the best documentaries themselves, I aim to produce a work that encourages careful consideration of the historical objects at hand as well as the process of object-making that the approach entails. At some points, this is likely to be explicit. More often, however, this critical reflexivity will be evident in the creativity and meticulousness of the scholar's approach. The thematic strands enable and encourage such critical reflexivity by creating terrain that is fertile for debate around methodology and expansive to underrepresented groups and contexts. They account for approaches that allow us to take an international and global approach. By engaging both established and developing approaches to documentary and/as nonfiction film, this volume aims to locate readers clearly in an intellectual conversation and to equip them to shape its future direction.

## Thematic Strands

The volume consists of five thematic strands, each consisting of an introduction by an expert in the area and three to five essays.

### Documentary Borders and Geographies

Practically from its inception, documentary has been seen as having a privileged relation to the nation. It was in the 1920s and 1930s—the period of documentary’s early maturity—that politicians started to believe cinema could influence citizens. Nonfiction filmmakers’ arguments about what cinema could and should do were often made by those working for the state. Buttressing this notion was many filmmakers’ conviction that the film camera could uniquely capture nationality, both in established forms and in emerging states. This close connection between nonfiction film and national identity came to the fore again in the 1980s and 1990s when the emergence of national cinema studies coincided with the birth of documentary studies. In recent years, however, new approaches (archival and cultural-historical), new forms, and newly available sources have pointed to the internationalism of not only current projects but historical ones as well. As Alice Lovejoy notes, this transnational work “highlighted the importance of *internationalism* to documentary, and documentary to internationalism.” The essays in this section build on this principle, noting documentary’s consistent concern with borders and geographic frameworks but also highlighting the extraordinary variety of geographies under consideration in this research. They do so across scale, moving from the local town level in the United States to regional/supranational dynamics in the Soviet Union to unsponsored challenges to colonialism in French West Africa to the reception of Western documentary film theory in Japan. In addition to illuminating a range of conceptual issues related to the geographical, the essays in this section are all concerned with a particular era in documentary, from the end of World War II to the mid to late 1950s, a significantly understudied period in nonfiction film history.

### Authors, Authorship, and Authoring Agencies

The issue of authorship is central to many definitions of documentary; for John Grierson, it is a key aspect that distinguishes the documentary from less thoughtful or refined nonfiction genres. But authorship, as the essays in this section make plain, is a highly contested issue for documentary, encompassing questions about who controls or owns the image and debate over the status of documentary as commerce or journalistic speech. In addition to the definition, legal and academic, authorship remains a key framework for histories of documentary and nonfiction film. Following these arguments, the essays in this section take it as a *frictive* phenomenon to be explored with rigorous attention to context. James Cahill even develops a term that

captures the approach to authorship these essays take: AuNT or Author-Network Theory, which accounts “for the interplay of forces involved in the creation of non-fiction and documentary films.” The essays in the section likewise offer innovative conceptual frameworks for understanding the role of individuals, communities, and institutions in efforts of creative labor and the agency undergirding them. They do so across history, context, and nonfiction media form, interrogating authorial functions related to, among others, the creative and the artisanal, visibility and invisibility, documentary versus avant-garde historiography, and concluding with the issue of human subjectivity and posthuman modalities.

### Films and Film Movements

The third section of this volume focuses on how scholars of nonfiction film work with both individual films and bodies of films as a way of understanding cinema’s relationship to the past. Like the other categories, a “movement” is one of the most enduring frameworks scholars have for classifying bodies of films—both nonfiction and fiction. However, the connective tissue that links films within a movement is not always self-evident. The essays in this section interrogate those connections by addressing films that have been classified as part of film movements but do so in a way that establishes new, unanticipated connections with other films—those thought to be part of that movement as well as those outside of it—and cultural currents. As such, they urge us to reconsider the dominant associations of film movements with European cinema and with fiction film. Moreover, the term *movement* in scholarship on documentary film often takes on multiple meanings, referring to both the body of films and, frequently, the political movement with which they are aligned. The essays in this section explore in depth the implications of thinking of these films in relation to the movements with which they are associated. Sometimes this requires rigorous attention and sensitivity to the politics of the moment (Waugh), at others it requires reimagining what constitutes the movement itself (Gaines), and still at others it requires subverting the accepted genealogies of one of the most prominent movements in film history (Caminati).

### Media Archaeologies

Media archaeology is an approach to studying media history that aims to challenge what many see as teleological narratives of progress and technological development. Applying Michel Foucault’s archaeological approach to media and technology, scholars sought to identify forgotten examples in media history and to do so explicitly across media. It aims to radically destabilize narratives about media history, hierarchical relations across media, and the epistemological stability of cinema, radio, television, new media, and other forms. As Malte Hagener argues, the application of such an approach to documentary is generative. Documentary’s reliance on the dynamic between the fragment or “the document” and its insertion into a new

context, “the documentary,” is ripe for media archaeology’s interest in the “materialities and medialities” of ruptures and originary contexts. It also aligns with the efforts of documentary scholars to continually question documentary’s definitional center and borders. The essays in this section take up this challenge, applying rigorous historical research to an array of nonfiction film material, looking “not only for the breaks and fissures, but rather for the contact zones and adhesive joints at which new formations emerge and new concepts are born.”

### Audiences and Circulation

Traditionally less about entertainment than about education, instruction, and preservation, documentaries have rarely attracted substantial theatrical box office success. As a result, filmmakers and producers have had to argue that they have audience impact in a different way—by claiming that documentaries have *lasting effects* on viewers. But such claims, Brian Winston asserts, have little verifiability. The goal of sparking audiences to act in support of the film’s argument has been achieved on a limited basis and with limited, targeted communities. The more common effect of mainstream documentaries (for Winston, this is part of the Griersonian tradition) on a mainstream audience has been an empathetic response that seldom led to social action. But any assessment of audience impact, whether as empathy or action, has been made in the absence of an archive. As Winston notes, “Our historical understanding of viewers’ responses is trapped between the limitations of positivist social science and, essentially, anecdotage.” The essays in this section point to areas and methods that aim to redress these gaps. They urge us to reconsider established narratives of nonfiction film history: about the emerging dominance of fiction film entertainments inside and outside of the movie theater from 1907–1910 (Waller), and about the audiences and spaces of exhibition for films central to the Western European and American documentary canon in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Winston). They think through the implications of this historical (mis)understanding: on how the meaning of a film we thought we knew can be transformed both over time and across reception context (Mestman), and how those who dream of or project a certain type of audience engagement would be wise to think about how viewers have historically interacted with media technologies both old and new (Uricchio).

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Part I

Documentary Borders  
and Geographies



# Introduction

## *Documentary Borders and Geographies*

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Bill Nichols has observed that when documentary film took shape, it did so at the same moment – the late 1920s and early 1930s – that critics, filmmakers, and politicians began to argue that cinema could play a role in national (and nationalist) endeavors (Nichols 2001). These projects existed in close proximity, and often informed one another. When British critic and filmmaker Paul Rotha was writing his 1930 *The Film till Now: A Survey of the Cinema*, for instance – a book that chronicles the history of cinema in the United States, Britain, France, Germany, and the Soviet Union – he was also making nonfiction films for institutions like the Empire Marketing Board, one of the cornerstones of the British Documentary Movement (Rotha 1930). At the same moment, in Prague, filmmaker Jiří Jeníček was arguing for a Czech national cinema that could contest territorial claims by Czechoslovakia's German and Hungarian neighbors. Although Jeníček held that the “national” would reach its apex in the fiction feature, in the same years, he also was producing the short nonfiction films that he saw as a training ground for this format (Jeníček 1940: 27).

The idea that nonfiction film had a privileged relationship to the nation proved long-lasting in documentary studies, a subfield of cinema and media studies that emerged in the 1980s – perhaps not coincidentally, the same decade when the idea of “national cinema” rose to prominence. In the subfield's early decades, films such as Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 *Triumph of the Will* (documenting the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremburg, Germany), American director Pare Lorentz's 1936 *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (a New Deal film addressing the Dust Bowl), and Harry Watt and Basil Wright's 1936 *Night Mail* (a key work of British documentary depicting the British postal service's operations) became foundations of courses on documentary film, while widely read texts situated documentaries and their makers in

national frameworks (see, e.g. Grant and Sloniowski 1998). As a result, through the end of the twentieth century, documentary scholarship frequently echoed interwar authors' confidence in documentary's links to the nation, as well as the authors' arguments about the nation's self-evidence – its readiness to be documented. As Stephen G. Tallents, founder and director of the Empire Marketing Board, wrote in his *The Projection of England*, “national projection” was “the art” “of “throw[ing] a fitting presentation” of a country “upon the world's screen,” through a combination of “honest self-expression” and “honest confidence” (Tallents 1932: 37). Nationality, in Jeníček's theory of cinema, was something a camera could simply *capture*.

In the 2000s, documentary's embrace of networked technologies, and the turn by a growing number of film and media scholars to archival and cultural-historical methods, unsettled the nation's central position in documentary studies. At the same time that formats such as interactive documentaries (i-docs) underscored the connectivity undergirding a significant subset of contemporary documentary, linking viewers and locations (see Aston et al. 2017), historical research pointed out that, long before the rise of digital technology, documentary worked between and among geographies. In her work on UNESCO, for instance, Zoë Druick emphasized the role of the “international” in giving shape to postwar documentary (Druick 2008), while new approaches to the work of Joris Ivens, and to interwar radical documentary, highlighted the importance of *internationalism* to documentary, and documentary to internationalism (Waugh 2016). Much of this work employed transnational approaches, underscoring that even when documentary undertook “national” projects, it often did so with personnel, material, and ideas from elsewhere (Ivens's *Power and the Land* is a classic example: produced for the U.S. Film Service yet directed by the peripatetic Dutch communist). (See also Druick and Williams 2014; Malitsky 2013). Moreover, by turning their attention to a wider range of institutions, films, and historical sources, scholars called into question the very definition of the nation in and for documentary. In revisiting documentary's interwar foundations, for instance, Lee Grieveson and Jonathan Kahana demonstrated that British documentary and American New Deal documentary were as much a matter of the state – the set of institutions governing a territory – as of the nation (a more contested, and thus difficult-to-define, idea) (Grieveson 2011; Kahana 2008).

The essays in this section continue in this vein, underscoring documentary's investment in borders and geopolitical frameworks, yet pointing to the considerable variety of, and overlaps between, the format's geographies. The essays shift between lenses and scales – starting small, with the American town in the aftermath of World War II. In “A Distant Local View: The Small-Town Film and U.S. Cultural Diplomacy and Occupation, 1942–1952,” Martin Johnson examines three nonfiction films produced in the early 1950s by the Reorientation Branch of the United States Army's Civil Affairs Division: *A Town Solves a Problem* (1950), *Women and the Community* (1950), and *Social Change in Democracy* (1951). Destined to be shown in countries occupied by the United States after World War II, the films depicted life, work, and governance in three small towns: respectively, Pittsfield, Vermont; Monroe, New

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