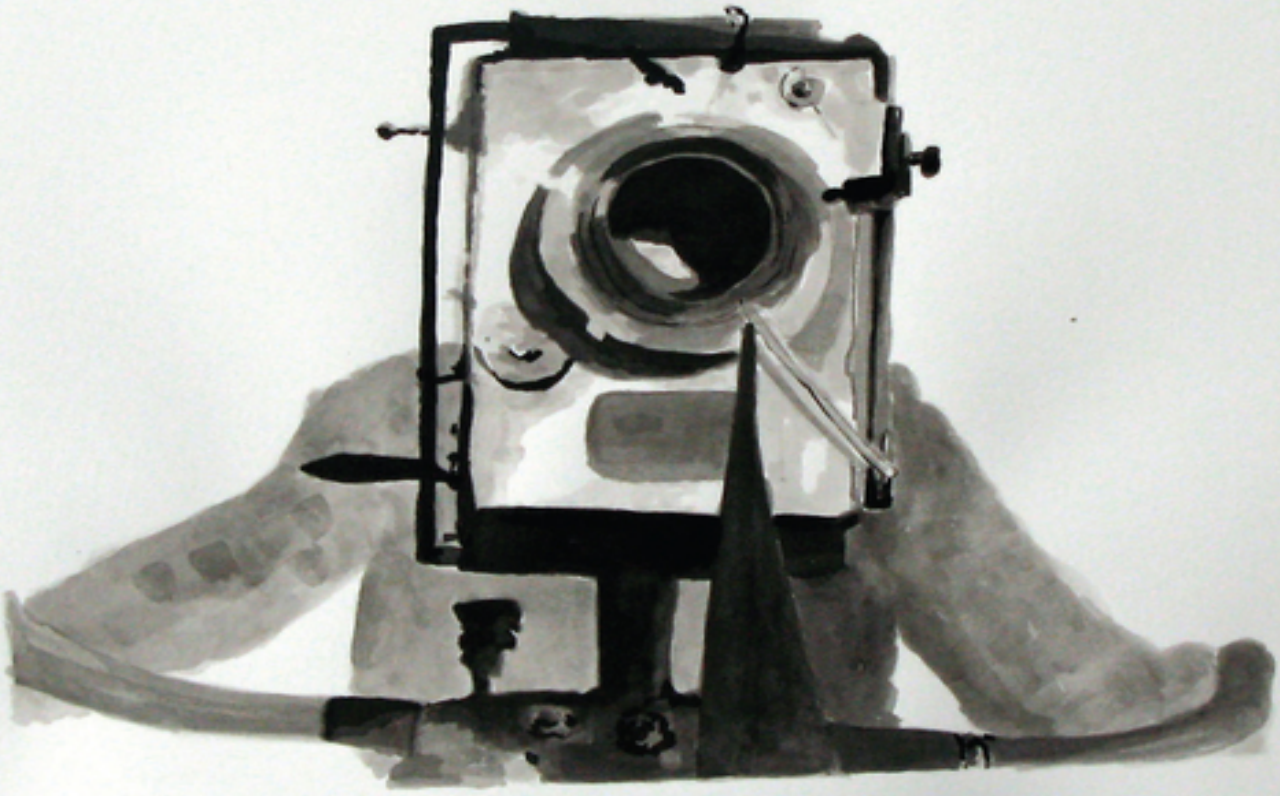
A COMPANION TO DOCUMENTARY FILM HISTORY

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 sequenciation, 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 nonfiction 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