9 Alternatives to Narrative Fiction Film: Documentary and Avant-garde Films

The logic of a work of art is the result of re-relating elements selected from reality into a new relationship so that a new reality is created which, in turn, endows the selected elements with a new value.

Maya Deren

Many moviegoers regard Hollywood films as the 'real' cinema, much in the same way as an American tourist abroad might ask: 'How much is this in *real* money?'" (Stam, p. 5). But alternative filmmaking practices such as documentary and avant-garde cinemas are very real, and a sound grasp of their history and formal organization is crucial to understanding film art and culture. This chapter explores the formal characteristics of documentary and avant-garde films and emphasizes the way they differ from narrative, feature-length commercial fiction films.

9.1 *March of the Penguins*, one of the top grossing documentary films in history.

Three Modes of Filmmaking: A Comparison

Documentary and avant-garde film depart from commercial fiction films in several ways, including their purpose, mode of production, exhibition venues, and their formal organization and visual style. Commercial films (whether screened in theaters, on video or DVDs, or purchased on cable or satellite) are designed to appeal to a mass audience in order to make profits for the companies that produce, distribute, and exhibit them. The parties involved—including writers, directors, actors, producers, studio executives, distributors, and exhibitors—treat films as products that entice the viewing public to spend money on films, concessions, and related toys and games. Not all commercial films turn out to be financially successful, of course, but profitability is the primary goal of the large corporations that produce, distribute, and exhibit them.

By contrast, documentary films present contemporary or historical events, not fictional stories. Documentary filmmakers may be motivated by many reasons unrelated to profitability: they may be interested in educating viewers about a pressing social issue, in introducing viewers to extraordinary people and their achievements, in capturing the humor and pathos of everyday life, or in using the tools of their craft to create a profound experience. Most documentary filmmakers do not treat profits as a primary objective; usually they are pleased if they can just make a living as filmmakers!

The goals of avant-garde filmmakers, like those of documentary filmmakers, vary widely, but two principal concerns dominate the cinemas gathered under this heading. The first is the desire to explore the artistic and technological capabilities of the medium, usually by rejecting the conventional use to which film has been put: telling stories. Like many modern artists, avant-garde films highlight the medium's "materials" (film, light, sound) and technology; these films often draw on connections to painting, sculpture, dance, music, and photography. The second major concern of many avant-garde, experimental, and underground filmmakers is to question orthodoxies beyond the realm of aesthetics. Avant-garde films often challenge conventional thinking about politics, culture, gender, race, and sexuality. These filmmakers are not focused on profits. Instead, they use film as a means of personal expression to address important social issues and to expand the aesthetic vocabulary of film art.

Another way to differentiate commercial film from documentary and avant-garde film is to consider their methods of production and exhibition. Documentaries are not produced in the industrial context of Hollywood, where corporate executives, stars (and their management companies), guilds, and unions interact as part of a complex, profit-oriented system. Instead, individuals or small groups of people work together, raising funds, renting equipment and space, and managing restrictive budgets. Documentary filmmakers spend weeks, months, or even years conducting research, doing interviews, and recording sound and images. Documentary films often have lower production values than commercial fiction films, owing in part to their having smaller budgets. Also, unless a documentary filmmaker works exclusively with archival materials, the spontaneity

of real-world events often prevents him from taking a "perfect" shot or recording flawless sound.

Typically, only a select few documentary films are granted theatrical release in art house cinemas or multiplexes. Several international film festivals are devoted to documentaries, including the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival in Durham, North Carolina, and the IDFA in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The peripheral status of documentary filmmaking relative to the Hollywood industry is reflected by the fact that there are just two Academy Awards for documentaries: one for short films and one for feature-length films.

In recent years documentaries have gained ground, as mainstream audiences have flocked to a new generation of movies from directors such as Errol Morris (*The Fog of War* [2003], *Mr. Death* [1999], and *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* [1997]), Michael Moore (*Roger and Me* [1988] and *Fahrenheit 9/11* [2004]), Morgan Spurlock (*Super Size Me* [2004]), and Rachel Boynton (*Our Brand is Crisis* [2005]). These films address a broad spectrum of subjects, from politics to the fast food industry. The vigor with which audiences have embraced documentary filmmaking was evident in 2006, when *March of the Penguins* ("*Marche de l'empéreur*"; Luc Jacquet 2005) not only won the Academy Award for Best Documentary but also outgrossed each of the narrative feature films nominated for Best Picture.

The commercial viability of recent films has made documentary filmmaking a somewhat more lucrative proposition within the film industry. As film exhibition moves further away from traditional theatrical venues, documentary films will become even more accessible. In the spring of 2006 ClickStar, a company that plans to capitalize on broadband technologies to offer entertainment programming, announced the launch of a documentary channel called Jersey Docs, headed by actor Danny DeVito.

The popularity of two documentaries that deal with the natural environment, but which adopt radically different stylistic approaches, suggests that audiences now crave a wider array of documentary experiences. *March of the Penguins* documents the death-defying acts of emperor penguins as they undertake their annual migration in order to mate (fig. **9.1**, p. 279). *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim 2006), which earned much acclaim at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival, focuses on the devastating effects of global warming. The film is based on a series of public lectures given by former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore.

Both films focus audience attention on aspects of the natural world, but

9.2 In *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore presents facts, figures, and images related to global warming.

each has a slightly different approach and uses slightly different effects. *March of the Penguins* offers a glimpse into a frozen world that most people will never see—Antarctica—while *An Inconvenient Truth* informs people about a reality that they may witness every day—the deleterious effects of the human reliance on fossil fuels on the environment. *March of the Penguins* uses actor Morgan Freeman's voice-over narration and breathtaking images of penguins' struggles for survival to both enlighten and enchant audiences, whereas *An Inconvenient Truth* relies on Al Gore's direct narration, supplemented by photographs, scientific research, and statistical evidence, to inform viewers about human behavior, to assess its negative impact on the environment, and to issue a call to action (fig. **9.2**).

Interestingly, a third recent documentary film—one that did not garner a commercial release—also focuses on the natural world, but does so in a startling different way from these two films. *Site Specific: Las Vegas 05* (Olivo Barbieri 2005; see fig. 9.33) is a short film that offers images of Las Vegas taken with a long lens from a helicopter and edited with a soundtrack composed of the sounds of helicopter blades whirring and a water fountain spraying. This documentary-avant-garde **hybrid** film invites viewers to take a closer look at the effects of human culture on the landscape. Ironically, the distance afforded by the helicopter shots renders the familiar details of cars and gambling casinos strangely haunting. Such creative experimentation suggests the vast possibilities of documentary filmmaking, although the public's continuing investment in feature-length films severely restricts the commercial venues for seeing short documentary films.

Avant-garde films are made in an artisanal mode, often by just one person. Although many avant-garde filmmakers use technology in unconventional ways to produce new visual and sound experiences, the goal is not necessarily to make conventionally beautiful images, but, rather, to create thought-provoking sensual and aesthetic experiences. Experimental filmmakers may eschew synchronized soundtracks, sets, and even actors. The prospects for screening avant-garde films are very limited: their unusual subject matter, short length, and limited distribution channels mean they are only rarely screened in commercial movie theaters. Most experimental films are screened in art galleries, on university campuses, at cinemathèques, film clubs, and theaters devoted to art and avant-garde cinema (such as the now-defunct Cinema 16 in New York) and at film festivals such as Madcat in San Francisco and Flicker (an organization with chapters around the U.S. devoted to Super-8 filmmaking). Two important institutions devoted to preserving and distributing experimental films are the Filmmakers' Cooperative in New York and Canyon Cinema in San Francisco. Because high-speed internet connections make it possible to view trailers and short personal films with ease on the iFilm Network or through the microcinema.com website, access to experimental and avant-garde films may improve.

Avant-garde films should not be confused with independent film, although filmmakers working in both of these modes may self-consciously reject the commercial film production process. Independent feature filmmaking is not always synonymous with an anti-industry perspective, however, as avant-garde filmmaking almost always is. During the Hollywood studio era, independent

producers such as Samuel Goldwyn and David O. Selznick circumvented the studio system and worked with directors such as Hitchcock, William Wyler, and William Wellman to make popular films. American directors Stanley Kubrick, Robert Altman, Alan Rudolph, John Sayles, Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, and Steven Soderbergh have made feature films without studio involvement, often by forming their own production or distribution companies. But these directors are not experimental filmmakers. Although they sometimes challenge Hollywood conventions, they produce feature-length narrative fiction films for wide distribution. Although some documentaries depict characters and stories, and some avant-garde films are interested in the way narratives work, neither type of film is *primarily* concerned with telling stories. Thus, they do not obey the rules of narrative form discussed in Chapter 4.

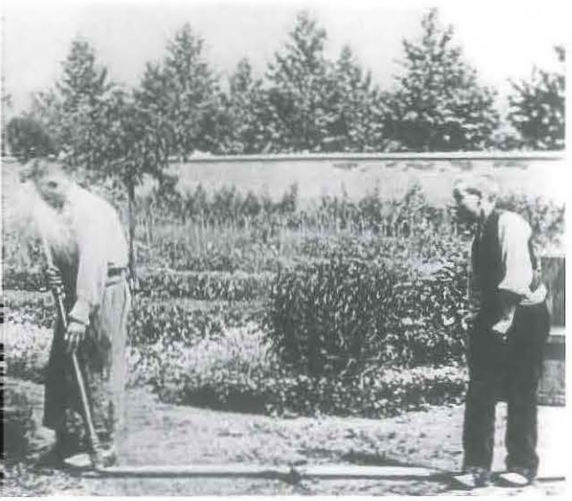
After looking at the history and motivation behind the rise of the documentary as a genre, the remainder of this chapter focuses on documentary form and conventions. It then discusses one type of documentary, the ethnographic film. This is followed by a discussion of issues relating to avant-garde cinema. Because documentary and avant-garde films have a lower commercial profile than mainstream narrative films, they can prove difficult to track down. The last section of this chapter therefore gives some tips on research in this area.

Documentary Film: "The Creative Treatment of Actuality"

Most films made before 1907 were not narrative fiction films but short documentaries. These *actualités*, as they were known, were "shot around the world, nominally 'unstaged,' although many were documents of performances, dances, processions, and parades" (Russell, p. 52). Moments from daily life, as well as trips to foreign locales, were the frequent subject of the earliest films, including the works of Auguste and Louis Lumière from the 1890s. The novelty of moving images meant that simple vignettes of everyday activities such as a train leaving a station fascinated audiences.

As non-fiction films based on real world events, these *actualités* were precursors to the documentary film. Yet these films vary in the way they present their images: some early Lumière films record everyday acts, such as workers leaving a factory at the end of the day (fig. **9.3**). In others, subjects self-consciously acknowledge

9.3 Workers leaving a factory, an early Lumière brothers *actualité*.



ener is distracted by a young
Waterer Gets Watered.

the camera, and the filmmakers develop rudimentary narratives. *The Waterer Gets Watered* ("*L'Arroseur arrosé*"; 1895), for example, depicts the travails of a gardener attempting to do his job, while a young boy plays tricks on h[illegible] (fig. **9.4**). The film has a beginning, middle, an[illegible]nd, and a comic twist. The legitimate question arises: at what point does a documentary film cease to be a document of reality and become instead a fictional creation?

The term "documentary" was coined by John Grierson, founder of the British documentary movement in the 1920s, who famously described documentary film as "the creative treatment of actuality." In his work for government agencies in Britain, Grierson argued that documentary film was superior to fiction film because it presented the real world, not a fantasy, but that it should do so with greater imagination than a standard newsreel. His deceptively simple phrase suggests the double-edged nature of documentary form. Filmmakers inventively shape the material of "real life" by selecting the subject matter, choosing angles and shots, making editing decisions, creating re-enactments, and adding music or voice-over narration. The outright scripting or staging of events during shooting is precluded. But a tension remains between an ideal—that documentaries capture unmediated reality—and the practical fact that making a film about a topic may well affect the behavior of subjects and the outcome of events.

The purpose of documentary film is to engage viewers by showing them some aspect or aspects of the real world. A documentary filmmaker captures and organizes visual images and sound to convey some truth of that real world situation. Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County USA* (1977), for example, depicts a struggle by coal miners who want to unionize and mine owners who oppose the union (fig. **9.5**). In one dramatic scene, Kopple captures the mine owner's agent driving through the picket line at night shooting at picketers. Without any commentary, the scene effectively makes the argument that the mine owners disregard the lives of the miners and explains why the miners need the union to protect themselves. Kopple captures and presents this moment of heightened reality in a way that encourages viewers to dra[illegible]ertain conclusions about the mine owners' unfai[illegible]d dangerous labor practices, and to take sides. Kopple, whose many non-fiction films cover subjects from the U.S. labor movement to celebrities such as Woody Allen and the singing group The Dixie Chicks, received the American Film Institute's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2004.

owner's agent shoots at
Harlan County USA.

A documentary film director's choices regarding organization and editing influence the conclusions

viewers may draw. Unlike Kopple, the director of *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), Andrew Jarecki, edits interviews in a way that makes it difficult for viewers to form conclusive judgments. The film concerns a family whose lives are irrevocably changed when two family members are accused of sexually abusing neighborhood children. Jarecki repeatedly interrupts the flow of individual testimonies and juxtaposes conflicting statements made by other interviewees. Because of the subtle editing of the film, viewers constantly question the truthfulness of statements that the family members, victims, police officers, and experts make.

Some documentaries trace the lives of individuals, such as the Friedmans or the coal miners, and as a result they resemble stories with characters, goals, and obstacles. But even such narrative documentaries do more than simply present a good story. They also say something about the real world.

Narrative Documentaries

Narrative documentaries rely on cause-and-effect logic and present subjects who seem like characters. But story elements are based on real-world events, and any powerful narrative documentary ultimately refers the viewer not just to a satisfying story but also to a complex reality. *Lost in La Mancha* (Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe 2002) tells the story of a grandiose but failed film production: Terry Gilliam's *Don Quixote*. The documentary treats Gilliam as a character with a primary conflict: he faces an uphill struggle to realize his dream of making the film (fig. **9.6**).

The filmmakers shaped this narrative of heroic failure after the fact; this was not the story they had intended to tell. When they began production, they had every intention of completing a "making-of" documentary about Gilliam's successful production. The finished documentary draws parallels between Gilliam and the fictional Quixote (both are men who try to do the impossible) as well as between Gilliam and Orson Welles (famous for his strong directorial vision and his own failed Quixote project). These parallels add to the building sense of doom as the production gradually falls apart.

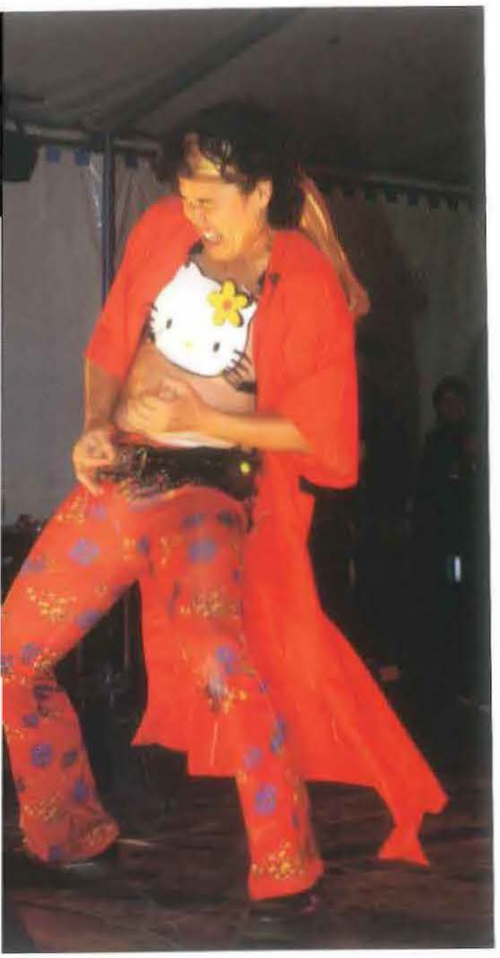
In this narrative documentary, Gilliam's story serves the filmmakers' argument that visionary artists such as Gilliam and Welles—idealistic, romantic figures—face insurmountable obstacles in realizing their visions because the industry is driven by finance and insurance interests. This is the complex reality behind the story the directors present.

9.6 Terry Gilliam's frustrated attempts to make a film become the subject of *Lost in La Mancha*.

Documentary Form

Film scholar Bill Nichols has developed a useful framework for evaluating the documentary's formal mode of organization. Nichols writes, "the logic organizing a documentary film supports an underlying argument, assertion, or claim about the historical world" (Nichols 2001, p. 27). The simplest argument a documentary film can make is that the images depicted in the film are real: that the film has captured some aspect of existence that is worthy of contemplation. Documentaries may also make other arguments: they may assert that the subject matter of the documentary is worthy of greater scrutiny (the issue has more sides than have been represented); that a social or economic practice has caused, or is causing, problems that need to be addressed; that a subculture is of interest because it resonates with culture at large (or, conversely, because it represents the profound diversity of humanity); that a forgotten but important cultural or historical figure needs to be given her or his due; that previous explanations of a historical event have not fully captured its complexity, or have deliberately ignored certain facts and some viewpoints.

ent kind of "musical"
on display in *Air Guitar*



Documentaries present this wide variety of arguments through rhetorical devices that appeal to logic, ethics, and emotions. Some documentaries use obvious strategies for argumentation, such as charts, facts, and expert witnesses. Others address viewers on an emotional level, encouraging them to see aspects of the world differently because they identify with a subject of the documentary. Some documentaries do both.

Viewers may be surprised to discover that even documentaries whose sole purpose seems to be light-hearted entertainment are presenting arguments of some kind. The spirited energy of *Air Guitar Nation* (Alexander Lipsitz 2006) derives from the comic irony of seeing individuals perform rock music without an instrument as they compete for the honor of representing the U.S. in the Air Guitar World Championship in Finland (fig. **9.7**). Contestants assume bizarre alter egos—renaming themselves Björn Turoque, C-Diddy, and Red Plectrum—and go all out with costumes and wild stage antics to win the approval of the judges and audience members. On a deeper level, however, the film explores the power of rock music to bring together diverse groups of people and suggests that one crucial way the music inspires such a devoted fan culture is by offering possibilities for fans to share their intensely personal identifications with rock stars by transforming mimicry into performance.

Documentary filmmakers employ a number of rhetorical strategies to support their assertions about the world. The rest of this section examines four of those strategies—the voice of authority, talking heads, direct cinema (also known as *cinéma vérité*), and self-reflexivity—and the way they are mocked in the popular style of pseudo-documentary called the mockumentary.

9.8 The *Why We Fight* series was highly influential during World War II.

Voice of Authority

One of the most basic strategies employed by documentary filmmakers is to combine voice-over narration with images (which function as evidence) in order to convince the audience of a particular claim about the world. Well-known political figures, respected celebrities, and actors with commanding vocal qualities may be employed to narrate these films in an authoritative style. Examples include Ken Burns's televised documentaries on baseball, jazz, and the U.S. Civil War. Burns gathers still photographs, archival footage, and other visual evidence, sewing these images and sounds together with voice-over narration.

Films that rely exclusively on this strategy include nature documentaries such as *March of the Penguins* and combat films in the *Why We Fight* series. Directed by Hollywood director Frank Capra during the 1940s, these newsreels offered American audiences images of World War II battles combined with scripted narration that persuaded Americans of the appropriateness of the military campaign (fig. **9.8**).

Documentaries made with the sole intent to persuade of the rightness of a single view are referred to as **propaganda films** because they advertise a single position without any allowance for competing perspectives. Some documentary filmmakers attempt to offer a balanced perspective by including competing views, while others feel that their own deeply held beliefs justify them in making the strongest argument possible for one point of view. In any event, it is always useful for viewers to consider the precise claim to authority represented by the narration. Is the author of the textual information an expert on the subject, or does the narrator's commanding voice alone convey authoritative knowledge?

Talking Heads and Director–Participant

A second rhetorical strategy combines images with verbal testimony from individuals affected by or interested in the subject matter of the documentary. This strategy allows real people, not a designated off-screen authority, to make assertions about the subject. Documentaries that rely exclusively on interviews are often called "talking heads" documentaries.

Interviews allow for a range of ideas to be presented and may convince the viewers that the reality the filmmaker has presented is as complex as the real

adical activist Bernardine Dohrn
Weather Underground.

world. It also captures the personal feelings of interview subjects, which may invite viewer identification. *Store Wars* (Micha Peled 2001) uses interviews with engaging subjects who discuss the disruptive impact of the attempt by the large discount chain Wal-Mart to build a store in their community. *The Weather Underground* (Sam Green and Bill Siegel 2003) combines archival footage from the 1960s and 1970s with contemporary interviews of Weather Underground radicals, along with activists who disagreed with their tactics, providing a vantage point from thirty years after the events (fig. **9.9**).

A documentary film director may edit images and sound to corroborate *or* to call into question the statements made by subjects. *Fast, Cheap, and Out of Control* (Errol Morris 1998) looks at four individuals and their work. Each of the four subjects works with animals or animal facsimiles: one is an animal trainer with the circus, another is a mole-rat expert, one is a topiary gardener who fashions enormous animals from shrubbery, and another is a scientist who creates robotic machines.

Morris adopts a bemused perspective on his subjects: his ironic distance is made evident through editing. He juxtaposes images of one subject with sound from interviews with another, so it seems as if the people he interviews are making comments about the lives and work of others. During shots of circus performers, the sound that accompanies the images comes from statements made by the mole-rat expert and robot scientist (figs. **9.10**, **9.11**). By pairing a subject's statements with seemingly unrelated images, Morris adds depth and dimension to the interviews, introducing ideas that none of his subjects has voiced. Morris gets at one truth by allowing the interviewees to tell their own stories, yet his editing encourages the audience to make unusual connections. For example, are human and mole-rat societies similar, because they both have sharply delineated roles such as king, queen, soldier, worker? Are circus performances akin to robotic movements? Are the robot scientist's concerns that he is too controlling relevant to other social contexts?

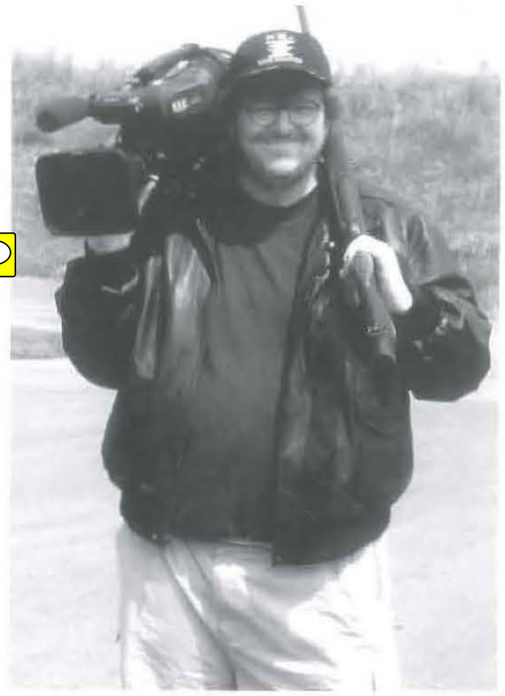
Unlike Morris, who presents complex ideas subtly, Michael Moore includes his own pointed commentary as well as interviews with others. Moore's controversial *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), which won the *Palme d'Or* at the 2004 Cannes

Robot scientist voice-over in
, and Out of Control:
es I feel like Yoda—I have to say
Force, don't try to control the

) Mole-rat expert voice-over in
, and Out of Control: "To me, it's
ible mammal with a queen, king,
orkers, all playing roles."

Film Festival (a prize rarely bestowed on documentary films), is an unapologetic critique of American foreign policy since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the film, Moore makes clear his feelings toward government leaders through antagonistic encounters with politicians. In one scene, he accosts members of Congress, asking them to volunteer their children for active duty in the ongoing military operation in Iraq. His actions imply that politicians may find it easy to pursue military options because they don't make the personal sacrifices that ordinary citizens make. Moore acts as narrator and participant, making his point of view clear to the audience (fig. **9.12**).

Super Size Me (2004) follows a similar strategy of directorial participation combined with interviews. Interested in dramatizing the health effects of fast food, director Morgan Spurlock meets with his doctors before embarking on a month of an all-McDonald's diet. Spurlock humorously narrates the changes in his body, interviews people ranging from Big Mac addicts to his own girlfriend, and returns to his doctors for periodic check-ups (fig. **9.13**). A little more than halfway through the month, all have grave concerns about the diet's health effects, which include weight gain, high cholesterol, elevated blood sugar, and liver distress. In this film, the director, his friends, and his doctors testify to the fact that fast food is unhealthy. The argument literally is presented through the director's body as well as in interviews and images.



9.12 Michael Moore.

9.13 Spurlock prepares to conduct his experiment in *Super Size Me*.

Direct Cinema

A third rhetorical strategy represents a radical shift from talking heads documentaries, especially those that feature the personal involvement of the director. Observational documentaries (also called direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*, which means "cinema of truth") present events without any evidence of the director's perspective or judgments. In short, filmmakers attempt to make themselves invisible. They shoot events with minimal intrusion (lighting, cameras, microphones) and do not supply voice-over commentary that might influence the viewer's interpretation. The development of this intentionally unobtrusive style of documentary during the 1960s owed a great deal to the introduction of lightweight 16 mm cameras and the portable Nagra tape recorder, which helped directors capture unfolding events with as little intervention as possible. A number of important observational films emerged from that decade, including David and Albert Maysles's *Salesman* (1966), D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* (1967), and Frederick Wiseman's *High School* (1968).

Two of direct cinema's visual techniques—the static camera and the long take—strongly connote the idea that viewers are invisible observers watching events unfold. The Maysles brothers' classic *cinéma vérité* documentary *Salesman* uses long takes and a static camera to depict Bible salesmen in the Northeastern U.S. The camera captures the boredom of some salesmen at district meetings as well as the anxiety of those whose sales figures have not been adequate (fig. **9.14**). A scene immediately after the district manager's "pep talk"

district manager gives a pep talk
n.

shows the manager storming out of the room, repeating some of the phrases from his talk. The camera becomes mobile as the filmmakers follow the subject down the hallway, eavesdropping on his conversation, which involves a somewhat misappropriated quotation of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer's famous line about fighting for social justice: "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Despite the desire of some *vérité* directors to make themselves invisible during production, they do make choices and employ techniques in production and post-production that convey implicit ideas. Directors choose the subject matter, select the framing of shots, and juxtapose scenes through editing. In many regards, editing is the cinematic technique that offers the documentary filmmaker the greatest influence over the material. In Wiseman's controversial *Titicut Follies* (1967), for example, the editing and framing make it difficult to distinguish between the staff and inmates at a mental institution (figs. **9.15**, **9.16**). Wiseman's camerawork and editing thus present a subtle argument that those deemed mentally unstable may not be so different from the rest of society, or that such institutions force the sane and insane to behave the same way.

Self-reflexive Documentary

A fourth rhetorical strategy departs dramatically from direct cinema by including the process of filmmaking as part of the subject matter of the film. Bill Nichols calls this "self-reflexive documentary" because, like formalist narrative films, these films refer to the process of filming and expose the way the medium constructs reality. They challenge audiences to reconsider the relationship between documentary images and reality. Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* is a documentary that questions the nature of cinematic truth. Its subject is Timothy Treadwell, who spent thirteen summers in the Alaskan wilderness living with

Inmates perform in *Titicut*

t) Staff members perform in
lies.

grizzly bears and who was ultimately killed by one of them. Herzog interviews people who knew Treadwell and makes liberal use of Treadwell's extensive video footage of himself (fig. **9.17**). Treadwell's numerous films and Herzog's implicit comparison between Treadwell and himself—both are obsessive individuals who take risks to capture what they love on film—present the audience with a dilemma. Can viewers accept at face value the way Treadwell represents himself simply because he appears on film? If not, does that suggest that Herzog's own project of uncovering truth through cinema is doomed? The film's self-reflexivity—the way it refers to the film medium—is apparent in shots of Treadwell positioning his camera and in a scene where Herzog himself appears in the frame, listening to the audio tape that documents the death of Treadwell and his girlfriend.

9.17 Timothy Treadwell's films are a central focus of Herzog's *Grizzly Man*.

The Mockumentary

Mockumentaries are not documentary films but fiction films that pose as documentaries by using familiar conventions. Comic examples include *This is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner 1984), *Fear of a Black Hat* (Rusty Cundieff 1994), *Waiting for Guffman* (Christopher Guest 1996), *Best in Show* (Christopher Guest 2000), and *A Mighty Wind* (Christopher Guest 2003). These films adopt documentary strategies—primarily interview and *cinéma vérité* techniques—but their "real-world" subject matter is fictional and their interviewees are characters played by actors. Humor derives partly from strict attention to details: the filmmakers not only parody the documentary conventions precisely (as in the use of *faux* historical footage of the mock rock band Spinal Tap or the understated observational style of *Waiting for Guffman*) but also capture the historical and cultural details of clothing, behavior, and musical styles (as in the fashions of *A Mighty Wind*).

Ethics and Ethnography

Ethical dilemmas arise within all types of documentary filmmaking. Whose vision of reality is represented in a documentary film, and how can filmmakers ensure fairness and accuracy? Image ethicists question the relationship between the filmmaker, the subject matter, and the people whose lives are being represented. The **ethnographic films** of Robert Flaherty, one of the earliest and most influential documentary filmmakers, have been reconsidered in light of what is now known about Flaherty's methods.

e) Allakarillak feigns awe at the e gramophone in *Nanook of the*

w) Vietnamese-born women in *Viet, Given Name Nam*.

Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), about the Inuit people in Canada, and *Man of Aran* (1937), about the Aran Islanders off the west coast of Ireland, are voice-of-authority documentaries organized by a series of intertitles that explain the images and activities depicted. In his zeal to valorize what he considered the blissfully primitive cultures of the Inuit and the Aran islanders, Flaherty misrepresented the cultures he intended to document. In *Nanook Revisited* (1988), Inuit commentators point out that Flaherty gave the name Nanook (which means "bear" in Inkituk) to a man whose actual name was Allakarillak. Flaherty also clothed Allakarillak in polar bear leggings not typically worn by the Inuit, staged a seal hunt, and contrived a scene in which Allakarillak appeared to be ignorant about the new technology of the gramophone, although he was not (fig. **9.18**).

In *Man of Aran*, Flaherty staged a shark hunt and depicted the islanders gathering seaweed. Harry Watt, who worked with Flaherty on the film, stated:

> the film was a phoney [. . .] They hadn't caught those sharks for seventy-five years. They hardly ever took the seaweed up, and they took it up on donkeys; they didn't carry it on their backs [as the film depicted]. (Sussex, p. 31)

Flaherty's films capture the filmmaker's romantic idea of the Inuit and the Aran islanders rather than their reality in the 1920s and 1930s. They highlight as a result the ethical complexities of documenting a culture, whether that culture is one to which the filmmaker belongs or one he visits.

Flaherty's filmmaking practices were extreme. Yet, even filmmakers who take pains to avoid the staging of reality must recognize that their choices—including subject matter and style—imply underlying ethical principles related to the subjects filmed and the audiences who will watch the film.

Some filmmakers use self-reflexive strategies to highlight the ethical dilemmas of documenting any culture and to make clear the director's role as observer–participant. For example, Minh-ha Trinh's *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989) questions the process of documenting exotic "others"—Vietnamese women—in political and philosophical terms. The first half of the film depicts women telling stories about their experiences of the war with the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s (fig. **9.19**). But the second half of the film reveals that the subjects are not women in Vietnam telling their stories. Instead, they are Vietnamese-born women who live in the U.S. and agreed to act in the film. They have been reciting firsthand accounts of other Vietnamese women. Trinh plays on U.S. audience expectations about the traditional characteristics of Vietnamese women. She also plays with documentary conventions regarding the nature of testimony, because she uses performers to tell other women's stories, then she asks the actors to comment on their role-playing. Who and where are the actual "subjects" and where is the truth? Trinh also tests the audience's willingness to consider film as a medium that constructs, rather than depicts, a reality by layering text with images and by incorporating poetry and abstract camerawork in the film (fig. **9.20**).

As these examples suggest, documentary filmmakers can and do make creative use of reality for a number of purposes: to inform viewers about extraordinary or mundane aspects of reality, to encourage viewers to draw conclusions about world events, to change the audience's understanding of social issues, and to question the way the film medium constructs reality.

9.20 Abstract images in *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*.

Avant-garde Film

Like documentary film, avant-garde film—called experimental film in the 1940s and '50s and underground cinema during the 1960s and '70s—represents an extraordinarily diverse array of filmmaking practices. Some avant-garde films tell bizarre stories, others focus on the abstract qualities of the film images, while still others may choose to explore one particular technical aspect of film, such as slow motion, and to exploit its effects to the full. Many avant-garde filmmakers have been associated with art and social change movements, including Surrealism, Minimalism, feminism, and gay and lesbian liberation.

If viewers think of cinema solely in terms of narrative film, then avant-garde films may put them off. These films ask viewers to interpret images and sounds that are not organized according to narrative form and thus require a different set of skills for interpretation. Scott MacDonald argues that avant-garde films may evoke frustration because "these films confront us with the necessity of redefining an experience we were sure we understood" (MacDonald, p. 2).

What kind of redefined film-going experience does MacDonald refer to? Avant-garde films rarely present straightforward stories or characters. Instead, they approach the film medium as an aesthetic, philosophical, and/or political means of expression. They often isolate elements of film art—including cinematography, sound, and editing—and subject them to intense scrutiny. Avant-garde films often reject traditional methods for combining images and sound, startling the viewer with new possibilities. They may explore such things as: the way light achieves certain photographic effects; the influence of abstract shapes and color on emotions; how superimposition connects two images; how repetition inspires certain thoughts; how rapid editing overwhelms perceptual capacities; and whether an image means the same thing to viewers when it is paired with an unlikely soundtrack.

Avant-garde filmmakers self-consciously break new ground in film aesthetics and cultural politics. The techniques experimental filmmakers use to challenge convention include time-lapse photography, fast, slow, and reverse motion, negative images, scratching and painting on the emulsion, superimposition,