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The Rhetoric of Evidence in Recent Documentary Film and Video

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The Rhetoric of Evidence in Recent Documentary Film and Video

by

Steven W. Schoen

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

Documentary is a genre of film that portrays “real” events using depictions that connote the objectivity and facticity implied by the processes of photorealism. Many contemporary documentary theorists and critics observe a constitutive problem in this ethos: despite the apparent constructions and agendas of documentary filmmaking, the framing and assumption of documentary as a window on the world tend to naturalize its own constructions as “real.” Critics who engage documentary trace the multitude of ways this problem plays out in particular films. These projects yield many important insights, but they most often approach documentary as a form of inherently deficient representation fraught with ethical questions—questions created by the frame and ethos of objectivity it fails to achieve. Are events portrayed truthfully? Are people depicted fairly? Are filmmakers *misrepresenting*?

In this study I seek to show that a rhetorical approach to documentary shifts the critical focus to instead examine *how* documentary constructions and images *work as evidence* in the claims and rhetorical agendas of documentary. I study recent film texts (2000-2012) that explicitly and primarily structure their documentary materials as *evidence* for the truth of an argument or interpretation, and I argue that documentaries, when they

work as documentary, establish and verify their depictions as evidence by drawing on the elements of their "scene." I use Kenneth Burke's dramatic approach to observe that the "real world" as depicted in documentary is at once experienced as representation of the world outside the documentary, but also constructed as the scene of a dramatization. Understanding the dramatism of documentary helps me to characterize what I call a "rhetoric of evidence" that may be particular to documentary expression. In the films I study documentary "scene" interacts at key moments and particular ways to locate the events of films in the "real world," not just as evidence that something is real, but also as meaningful for particular arguments and rhetorical moves.

This study reveals the often extremely subtle ways that documentaries wield the influence of "truth," and also offers filmmakers an understanding of how evidence might be deployed more deliberately to present a social world that is open for transformation.

Introduction

Telling Documentary Truth

Over two decades ago, I sat in a hot, crowded restaurant in Saint Louis inelegantly learning to eat crawfish “Louisiana-style” while I was interviewed for a job in video production. The job involved working as a segment producer for a weekly newsmagazine television program. Though I only had some radio experience and a three-month internship in television, the interview went well and I was hired. Within a few weeks I began producing my first “mini-documentary,” an eight-minute piece that would make up one part of an upcoming program. My assigned topic was “Islamic art,” something I knew almost nothing about, but I was instantly hooked by the experience of documentary production.

To my eye, something remarkable was happening.

No doubt part of the excitement was the rush of power—the journalist’s warrant to pry, to scrutinize, to gaze at the world and breathe it in, then speak it as my own word. But even from within the restraints of media convention, the program’s standards of journalistic rules and gentlemanly objectivity, I could also feel the wild contingency of the genre, its intoxicating elasticity. Even then I would have admitted the seemingly impossible paradox sustaining the segment I produced: Islamic art was what my documentary segment said it was, but also something accessible in a

world of experience prior to my text, a phenomenon with dimensions seemingly imperturbable by the particularities of my discourse.

That dialectic—the radically polyvalent potency of discourse on the one hand, and on the other hand the hard, resistant kernel of the Real (Žižek, 1989, p. 47), the recalcitrance of historical-material events (Burke, 1984)—is the productive magic of documentary. Documentary creativity unfolds in the discipline of telling *found* stories. Like the rhyme and meter of poetry, the restraint of telling documentary stories, that is, using materials often “gathered” in the context of largely uncontrollable circumstances, forces creativity. Articulations are made, webs of meaning constructed, new possibilities called forth.

That was—and is—a central allure for me as a filmmaker. Documentary allows me to tap into the unpredictable disciplinary power of seemingly randomly intersecting lines of discourse and use the inherent productivity of their interaction to usurp what masquerades as “what is.”

Pushing together things that do not come together on their own can create an enormously productive tension. Symbols that do not fit expectedly re-interpret one another in surprising ways, unfolding the world as a vast, open source of novelty and possibility. It is a phenomenon thrilling in the energy of its chaos—challenging, even menacing, basic presumptions and because of that imparting a sense of deep provisionality, even as one works to impose narrative order. Kenneth Burke calls such symbolic configurations “gargoyles” (1984), and their inherent instability can evoke a kind of a reverential humility about the ability of narrative to speak a “truth” that can

make and do, yet leaves experience radically open to re-tellings of “truth.” Situations can be engaged and explored, yet remain open to re-framings, or what Burke (1969a) would identify as a change in circumference, a re-drawing of the boundaries that seem to define a situation and shape the relationships constituting the narrative (events, circumstances, those involved and so forth).

My experience of making documentaries is not that of a passive observer or an impassionate mid-wife to some kind of reality or pre-formed unit of the real. The reality of my objects and the pressing facts of the subject matter are certainly present and persistent. Yet I make choices, I shape a product, I am part of a way of making statements and revealing facts and demonstrating significances and impressing an audience, and perhaps above all, creating a product that has integrity yet power—the power to engage and the power to transform.

I have talked with many other documentary directors and listened to interviews with countless more. They almost always believe they have revealed a truth, or many truths, and they all see themselves as makers of a film that uses technique to communicate and impress these truths among an audience. Common among documentary filmmakers, I believe, is the sense of a personal transformation in which they themselves have engaged, learned, and “told” these truths, whether about a collection of facts, or about powerful historical, political or even spiritual truths. A documentarian may be a revealer, a story-teller, a witness, an advocate, a detective, an explorer, or an agent of cultural diplomacy, but she is never absent from the process

and she is always a filmmaker, someone who attends to the creation and production of a message for an audience. The difference between documentarians and other filmmakers is that to make a documentary one implicitly and explicitly claims to have found or been told a truth, and in turn to be telling or revealing the truth to those who will listen.

Objectivity and Evidence

All who are familiar with thoughtful discussions about documentary film will recognize that lurking in and hovering about these realizations are contentious issues about the “objectivity” of documentary film. The relationship between “story” and “objectivity” in documentary films has often been the pivot point for innovation in approaches to the genre. From the early films of Flaherty, whose *Nanook of the North* (1922) included staged events to show the “reality” of the lives of native Inuit people, to the “fly-on-the-wall” observation style of films like Wiseman’s *High School* (1968) to Errol Morris’ filmic presentation of a multifaceted, multiperspectival “truth” behind the crime and prosecution of Randal Adams in *Thin Blue Line* (1988), the history of documentary is a history of varying approaches to this balance between the “truth” of art and the “truth” of facts,¹ and the role of objectivity in documentary. One of the earliest definitions of the genre, by pioneer documentarian John Grierson is “the creative treatment of actuality” (1932, p. 8).

¹ See Barnouw’s *Documentary: A history of the non-fiction film* (1993), which traces a history of documentary through the prevailing approaches documentary producers take toward truth and story as they create their films.

Philosophically, critically, and methodologically, some of the most vibrant and irresolvable issues of the last century have to do with the goals and possibility of objectivity, our abilities to know and to convey "truth," and the ontological and epistemological frailties of language to represent what is real without the distortion of ideology and bias. Just as the truth claims of philosophy, science, history, critical scholarship, and journalism have been respectively and repeatedly assailed, re-evaluated, qualified, and dismissed, the idealistic ethos of documentary as a source of objective truth or as a medium of truth-telling has placed the genre in the midst of such controversies.

Perhaps partly due to the fascinating nest of theoretical issues it raises, documentary film, though once largely ignored in film and media studies, is now an active area of interdisciplinary study. There is a vibrant, emerging body of scholarship accompanying the profusion of documentary and documentary forms in popular media texts. Much of this work is heavily shaped by the cultural studies tradition and remains focused by these important questions that the genre evokes about "reality," "truth," and the operation of power (Beattie, 2004; Corner, 1996, 2001, 2002; Cowie, 1999, 2011; Gaines, 1999; Gaines & Renov, 1999; Holmlund & Fuchs, 1997; Kilborn & Izod, 1997; Klotz & Cutler, 2000; Minh-ha, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993; Rabinowitz, 1994; Renov, 2004, 1993b; Ruby, 1992, 2000; Ward, 2005; Winston, 1995, 2000, 2006). And along with the burgeoning academic literature on documentary there is now a refereed journal (*Studies in Documentary Film*) and an annual conference on documentary scholarship.

Much of this critical engagement with documentary is heavily informed by Bill Nichols' (1991) application of insights from cultural studies to documentary theory. Nichols and critics who follow have attended to important and fundamental theoretical questions at the heart of audio-visual media representations in general.

As a communication scholar, I join a small but perhaps growing number of scholars who believe such issues about documentary are best approached with the point of view of rhetorical communication (Benson, 1980; Benson & Anderson, 2002; Benson & Snee, 2008; Borda, 2008; Dow, 2004; Foss, 1983; Gronbeck, 1977; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2008; Plantinga, 1991, 1997, 2002, 2005; Rosteck & Frenztz, 2009; Spence & Navarro, 2011; Winters, 1966). That is, documentary can be conceived as a form of rhetoric—messages designed to persuade—and issues concerning the objectivity, truth status, and representational fidelity of documentary film can be productively addressed by considering that documentaries are statements about what is true, and are messages designed to get audiences to experience them as true.

For most rhetoric scholars such a framework might be obvious, yet the traditional ethos of documentary as objective yet resists, perhaps even feigns shock, at such claims. Documentary film depictions look and sound very much like the sights and sounds of direct experience, and can be thought of as allowing a privileged access to—and responsibility for—those objects and events. But as I will elaborate, contemporary criticism of documentary that relies on the language of “representation” risks framing discussions of

documentary, at least implicitly, as questions about whether the reality in the film is a faithful or unfaithful representation of the reality outside the film. This framing can eclipse attention to the ways documentary as “produced message” works to get audiences to experience its depictions as “true.”

Perhaps one of the reasons a rhetorical frame is overlooked by some scholars is the general impression that to call something “rhetoric” is to automatically claim that it is not nor can be the “truth”—but this is only the case if you hold to an idealistic objectivity that holds that “truth” is a completely incorruptible perception of reality, a foundation upon which scientific objectivity may rest. This might be interesting or important for the foundations of science, but no one who thinks carefully about documentary can realistically expect this foundationally pristine perception from documentary film.

Preachers, politicians, scientists, artists, educators, and virtually everyone else create rhetorical messages that claim to present the truth and attempt to get audiences to experience their claims as true. In this, documentaries are no different. Yet the ways that filmmakers, scholars, and audience members construct or frame documentary film is with an ethos that it is a special way of telling the truth, with special obligations and properties of truth-telling built into its practices. In this, documentary is like the discourses of science and journalism.

Documentary as Rhetoric

In the study that follows, I will argue that the distinctive feature of documentary film as a kind of rhetoric is in how these films work to *situate*

their depictions in "reality." Documentary films establish the common world of experience as their "scene," and they convey this scene as an experience to create *evidence* for their claims to present a true version of reality. In other words, in the critical examples I present throughout the study, I seek to identify a persistent *rhetoric of evidence* that positions the situations² they depict as of the "real" world, and do this in ways that are designed to explicitly correspond to and evoke the ordinary sense making people do in the "real" world of everyday, social and embodied existence.

In sum, looking at documentary as rhetorical may yield many insights about its nature as produced and perceived, and I will not exhaust those in this dissertation. Looking at how the special properties of documentary provide *evidence* of its truthfulness or fidelity is, I believe, a very productive line of analysis. It is also at the intersection of the concerns I first identified as a documentary practitioner.

In other words, my interest is in documentary *as rhetoric*. As Burke (1969b) observes, "Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning' there is persuasion" (p. 172). "Rhetoric" describes more than "style" and more than intentional acts of discursive power (an agent intervenes in the social to achieve specific goals). Rhetoric also operates more subtly in the cultural presumptions and motivational choices constituted via the working of symbols. For Burke, the very

² By "situations" here and throughout this study I simply mean to designate acts or events as located by time, place and motivation. I specifically do *not* mean to evoke Bitzer's (1968) "rhetorical situation" as an event with extra-rhetorical capacities that in turn call forth a rhetorical response. With Vatz (1973) and others I locate the operation of rhetoric differently. Nonetheless, the usage here is meant straightforwardly.

resources of social cooperation are found in the ways symbols work to invoke rhetorical transactions and transformations. Rhetoric is what symbols do, and it is this “doing” which structures the possibilities of social experience; rhetoric is about *symbolic action* that solicits cooperation.

Payne describes Burke’s notion of rhetoric as “a compass for dramatic action” (1997, p. 265). That is, Burke (1969a) proposes that people use language and symbols according to the terms of drama, and further, that following the work of the dramatistic terms by which they do this offers insight into how motives are operating. Burke identifies a pentad of “five key terms of dramatism” (scene, agent, act, agency and purpose) for understanding “what people do and why they are doing it” (1969a, p. xv). While it is not my goal to offer a strict “pentadic analysis” of the films I study, I am guided by Burke’s insight into the dramatic structure of language and symbols as I critically engage the films I analyze. Thus the real-world “scenes” that documentaries evoke are important for what those scenes *do*: they relate with other factors in the film to create a kind of experiential evidence for audiences.

The forms and conventions of documentary production are proliferating in popular media, and there is a steady increase in the entertainment appeal and marketability of non-fiction audio-visual media.³ Documentary appears as argument and social engagement across media forms from grass-roots, micro-budget programming distributed on YouTube to its growing presence as a staple on pay networks like HBO and Showtime.

³ See Corner’s (2002) discussion.

The use of film and video to influence others is at work in Facebook expressions of identity, cable news network reportage, and a multitude of political interventions from Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 911* to U.S. presidential campaign films (Morreale, 1993; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 1993, 2008).

Rhetoric and Representation

As noted, contemporary criticism of documentary often locates the specialness of documentary in its mode of representation, that is, in the verisimilitude of filmic images to the materially situated events they portray. The "special" qualities of documentary representation are often discussed in the literature as though documentary necessarily carries with it an implicit promise of objectivity that the film is obliged to fulfill—either by adopting practices of objectivity, which are ultimately doomed to failure (Ruby, 1992, 2000)—or by explicitly disavowing that it will attempt such objectivity, often by adopting a reflexive and sometimes very personal authorial stance.⁴

In this study I will show that a rhetorical approach to documentary makes possible a shift in focus from the presumption that documentary depictions get their power and obligations for accountability from their "objective" representational fidelity to the material world, and instead examine *how* those images *work as evidence*. Indeed, the power of documentary images is often connected to their evocation of material reality, but documentary texts invite audiences to engage those images in the

⁴ See Nichol's (2001) discussion of the "reflexive" and "performative" modes of documentary (pp. 125-138).

context of a rhetorical purpose—sometimes as examples illustrating and advancing a direct argument, sometimes as a narrative (the story is told), sometimes as dramatization (generating conflict, drama, interest), but nearly always with a pragmatic rationale for generating audience interest, appeal, and effect. A critical focus on the relationship between image and reality does *not* help describe and understand these important elements. When the “real” is presented or re-presented it is as *evidence* of some explicit or implicit truth claim or desired interpretation. Rhetoric is a well-suited and productive way to analyze the expression of motives, and I will show that attending to *how* motives are established in the ways “reality” works as evidence is a particularly apt and productive avenue for critically engaging documentary film and video. This rhetoric of evidence I describe is an extension and elaboration of the existing work by rhetorical scholars.

In Chapter One of this study I will develop the theoretical and methodological context for this approach to documentary. I will examine the current documentary scholarship that leads me to consider rhetoric as an especially appropriate method of documentary criticism, and I will consider the work by scholars of rhetoric as they look at documentary. Building on this foundation, I will sketch the general shape of a rhetoric of evidence, then explain the theoretical and methodological basis of my approach, which flows from the theories of Kenneth Burke. Finally, I will propose a limited use of Burke’s pentad, which will show in following chapters how a focus on scene reveals how “reality” is used in these dramatic and rhetorical ways. I offer a critical approach that shows the sometimes extremely subtle ways that

documentaries wield the influence of truth, but also offers filmmakers an understanding of how evidence might be deployed more deliberately to present a social world that is open for transformation.

Chapter One:

Documentary Theory and a Rhetoric of Evidence

Contemporary Documentary Theory

Much of the scholarship in contemporary documentary theory is preoccupied with issues of representational fidelity and the ethical quandaries that arise from those concerns. Documentary is a genre that defines itself as a portrayal of “real” events in the common world of human experience. A documentary *is* a documentary because it trades on its value as a connection to those events: it purports to “document” the reality of the situations and events it portrays. Yet it is mediated and constructed; like other texts it can only re-present this reality. And this is how we use the word “representation;” one thing stands for something else and evokes its meaning.

Perhaps for this reason, most of the major questions of documentary scholarship arise in this framework. Are events portrayed truthfully? Are people depicted fairly? What can we know about the people, situations and cultures depicted? What do filmmakers include, what do they leave out, and what does that tell us about both the filmmakers and the filmmaking in its forms, practices and relationships to power?

Contemporary documentary theory is therefore largely conducted with this understanding of these films and videos as a mode of representation (Corner, 2002; Cowie, 1999; Gaines, 1999; Minh-ha, 1990, 1993; B. Nichols, 1991, 2001, 2008; Renov, 2004, 1993b; Ruby, 1992, 2000; Wells, 1999; Winston, 1995, 2000, 2006).

For Bill Nichols (1991) this is the distinguishing mark of documentary film and video as a category; he groups documentary with science as a “discourse of sobriety” (p. 3). Nichols’ *Representing Reality* (1991) is referenced in nearly all contemporary documentary film literature and is described by Michael Renov (1999) as “the single most significant and influential book on documentary film” (p. 314). The work is a pragmatic shotgun blast of theoretical engagement with the genre, with a vast, credible taxonomy linking issues circulating in cultural studies and postmodern theory to characteristic examples of documentary, its forms and techniques. For Nichols, documentary, across various modes,⁵ is explicitly articulated with the “historical lifeworld,” as distinct from so-called “narrative” films depicting imaginary worlds. For Nichols and theorists such as Renov (1986, 1993a, 2004), Gaines (1991, 1999), Cowie (1999, 2011) and Winston (1995, 2000), the gap created by an implied but doomed representational promise of

⁵ Nichols describes four general “modes,” or types of documentaries: expository, observational, interactive and reflexive. The different modes have links to historical trends, technological resources and stylistic devices affecting their representational claims and strategies. The modes, however, all continue to be used, and often appear in combination. This spread of approaches yields widely varying epistemological stances (from naïve realism in some observational documentaries to highly reflexive documentaries offering representations designed to undermine their own status as objective or “real”). Nonetheless, Nichols describes the entire genre as rhetorical and positions documentary as a category marked by its relationship to the “historical lifeworld,” that is, occurring in a particular time and place within the realm of everyday experience.

fidelity to the profilmic events that occurred in front of the camera is a crucial permanent condition of the genre,

It is important to recall that documentary is the cinematic idiom that most actively promotes the illusion of immediacy insofar as it forswears "realism" in favor of direct, ontological claim to the real. Every documentary issues a "truth claim" of a sort, positing a relationship to history which exceeds the analogical status of its fictional counterpart. (Renov, 1986, pp. 71-72)⁶

Bruzzi⁷ summarizes this approach:

Repeatedly invoked by documentary theory is the idealized notion, on the one hand, of the pure documentary in which the relationship between the image and the real is straightforward and, on the other, the very impossibility of this aspiration.

Nichols sees this problem: filmic representation can seem to provide an access to its referents that blurs the distinction between observing them and observing footage of them—and therein portray its images as transparently real and "true." Such an illusion of "transparency" would hide the work of language that is always structuring "reality" in specific ways; appearance cloaks itself with reality, erasing its insufficiency, allowing the inflections of *this* version of "reality" to pass as reality as such and erase a representation's work to produce subjectivity (B. Nichols, 1991, p. 93).

⁶ Also quoted in Bruzzi's discussion (2006, p. 5).

⁷ Bruzzi (2006) describes her own approach to documentary as an alternative to this work by representational theorists, and instead positions her work as building on Judith Butler's understanding of performativity (p. 6).

Nonetheless, Nichols is unwilling to give up on a direct material link between documentary representation and the life world because he sees that link as what constitutes documentary's function as documentary. He posits both the inescapable enveloping of all human experience in language, *and* insists on ready access to a dimension of materiality that somehow has a capacity to constitute a difference between documentary representation and the representations of fictional films;

The world is where, at the extreme, issues of life and death are always at hand. History kills. Though our entry into the world is through webs of signification like language, cultural practices, social rituals, political and economic systems, our relation to the world can also be direct and immediate...not simply linguistic imperatives but preludes to action that carry life and death consequences for our physical selves. *Material practices occur that are not entirely or totally discursive, even if their meanings and social value are* [emphasis in original] (B. Nichols, 1991, p. 109).

Yet the matter of theorizing a connection between documentary representation and this "extra-symbolic" communication remains. Nichols makes the connection by theorizing the operation of "excess" (141-149). He borrows the term from Bordwell (1985), who uses it to describe the staggering profusion of detail in any particular film (think of the detail in any one frame of film) that necessitates some of the image as extra semantic—"formal qualities" that "fail to add up...that which remains ungovernable with

a textual regime preside over by narrative” (B. Nichols, 1991, p. 141). For Nichols, excess is evoked to the extent that a documentary represents excess *as excess* in a kind of mystifying evocation of reality as such (B. Nichols, 1991, p. 144).

While the profusion of photographic and sonic detail in film images may surely work to evoke a “real world” feel, the ontological approach embedded in Nichols approach sponsors a range of controversies about “truth,” and this had a deep, and often productive impact on documentary scholarship. As Butchart (2006) points out, much of contemporary documentary discourse is embroiled in controversies around “truth,” that is to say, predicated on (at least implicitly) a comparison of documentary representation to a broad range of extra-textual measures of verification. For example, Ruby describes a series of difficulties around participant consent given circumstances such as unequal power relations between filmmakers and subjects, and the radical control filmmakers have over the way an interview subject’s words and images are edited into a finished film (Ruby, 2000). Winston highlights similar problems to insist on a responsibility by filmmakers to fairly represent those they portray (2000). While these are crucial considerations that filmmakers should take seriously, I argue that shifting attention to *how* documentary films structure a relationship between filmmakers, films and audiences offers an important and different perspective on the responsibilities of filmmakers as they construct their appeals to “reality”—a shift from what that “reality” *is* to what that reality *does*.

Rhetorical Criticism of Documentary

Karlynn Kohrs Campbell describes rhetoric as “persuasive discourse, written and oral, encountered face-to-face or through the electronic print media, that seeks to affect attitudes and actions” (1997, p. 3). In the context of documentary, filmmakers strive to strategically influence audiences through the arrangements of words, images, and sounds to create a kind of audio-visual rhetoric.

Put another way, films do not assemble themselves. They are the product of choices ranging from topic selection and camera placement to the particular juxtaposition of words, images and music. As a filmmaker I assemble my film to reflect my understanding of the events I depict. Though much of what I shoot is often not under my direct control, my choices are always strategic and meant to engage audiences with the ideas, emotions and sensibilities that are part of my own encounter with the events I film. And as I edit together the material I have gathered, I make another series of choices, many of them intentional, and others governed or shaped by habits of thought, feeling and convention. And I do this for a reason; my films are meant to invite an audience to share my perspective and motives. At their best, these films do this in a way that suggests that the people, things and events they depict exceed my perspective and they invite audiences to consider a truth that is expansive, contingent, and open. Thus my choices as a filmmaker reflect my own active sense making of the events I depict.

A rhetorical perspective calls attention to messages as *composed*, as a set of stylistic choices that are made in order to affect an audience’s

perceptions and beliefs. Rhetorical criticism therefore attempts to understand the rationale and logic, or what is sometimes called “psychologic” behind those choices, with the assumption that they are made in order to persuade. Traditional rhetoric viewed style as reducible to a set of formulas or tropes, “commonplaces,” available to speakers and writers as a means to embellish their messages and steer the emotions and beliefs of the audience. Contemporary rhetoric—and language study generally—takes seriously the idea that the tropes and formulas of discourse are trainings and conditionings of audiences, much like a grammar, and the critique of these common metaphors and reductions can help to expose the ideological templates by which we navigate and interpret our social truths.

In spite of the presumed goal of objectivity, it seems impossible that makers and audiences for documentary are in some way immune from these common features of discourse. To shoot documentary is often to survey events on the fly, always embedded in convention and circumstances, always evolving, always provisional, but always structured as motive.

Interpretations and reinterpretations can emerge and shift in the flow of events, with change possible even at the deepest level. The suppleness and dynamism of drama is a central resource for documentary filmmakers.

Drama obviously does more than provide a window on reality: it presents situated action, it communicates motives and consequences of action, and as Burke labors to demonstrate, it ultimately embodies a grammar of transformation (Burke, 1969a) where people and actions and scenes emerge transformed by the putative forces of the physical, human, and metaphysical

worlds. Burke's approach to rhetoric in a theory of dramatism is therefore helpful to capturing these elements of how documentary must work in the strategies and structures of film and with an audience trained, and immersed, in those formulas of mediated experience.

It is in this sense that I locate this research project as "rhetoric." Documentaries are media constructions that are created to affect an audience and to do so they employ the conventions of narrative, drama, and film, as well as the traditional rhetorical elements of argument and evidence. I analyze the texts I study as a practicing rhetor/filmmaker in order to better understand the resources for making "truths" that are more generous, more compelling and more tentative. Rhetoric locates me within an academic tradition that allows me to follow the work of film texts, but also to seek ways to make more ethically sensitive films.

Although Blakesley (2003) notes that the "substantial body" of rhetorical film analysis is "scattered across a wide range of disciplinary thought" and so "has remained on the periphery, especially in film studies proper" (p. 3), there is a growing body of insightful and productive rhetorical analyses of documentary films tracing the way these films work to form and color audience attitudes and perceptions.

Often this work to influence is clear enough and no less obvious to casual observers than documentary "representation." Many documentary films and videos are unabashed efforts to shape the values and ideas of their viewers, and the impulse to use the tools of rhetoric to critically engage these films has long appealed to rhetorical scholars. Winters (1966)

approached Pare Lorentz's *The River* (1938) using Burke's pentad of terms to analyze the production of the film as an instance of rhetoric,⁸ with the making of the film explored as the "act," the filmmakers analyzed as "agent," and so forth (Winters, 1966, pp. 33-35). In considering the "agency" of the film, Winters used Burke's notion of identification to describe the impact of an announcer incanting a list of the many geographic locations the Mississippi River passes through, suggesting this worked to spark audience recognition and engender a sense of familiarity and identification with those affected by the river (Winters, 1966, pp. 69-72). Gronbeck (1977) also recognized documentary as inherently rhetorical in an essay proposing categories for organizing and analyzing documentary by type. Gronbeck's categories see the informational content of given documentaries in tension with the formal and stylistic elements usually associated with rhetoric—thus envisioning a kind of rhetorical spectrum from highly informative to outright propagandistic. Foss (1983) argued for the usefulness of documentary as a way to teach rhetorical theory, describing a course outline that paired various documentary films with then-current books and articles in rhetorical theory. And Aguayo (2005) analyzes activist documentary as a rhetoric of social change, and finds that in some instances documentary helps to nurture collective identity and establish rhetorical sites for negotiating and defining ideological positions, but that documentaries can also short-circuit activism by evoking a "spectator audience identity" (p. 7).

⁸ As I have described, Burke proposed this pentad of terms as basic elements that when considered together help analyze the rhetorical work of a text to convey human motivation.

The most sustained work of rhetorical criticism of documentary is by Thomas Benson, later with Carolyn Anderson, in examining the films of Frederick Wiseman (Anderson & Benson, 1991; Benson, 1980; Benson & Anderson, 2002). They explicitly characterize their approach as *rhetorical*, which they observe:

has come to be used as a way to refer to what Kenneth Burke has called 'symbolic inducement,' that is, to the ways in which humans make meanings out of the forms they construct and perceive in the world (Benson & Anderson, 2002, p. 2).

In their analyses of Wiseman's films this plays out as attending to "how the details of the film relate to each other to form a structure, and to offer an account of how the structure may invite a rhetorical response" (2002, p. 110).

For example, in Wiseman's *High School* (1968), they trace the rhetorical work of the film at two levels: the *film's* structure and the structure of the *social interactions* depicted in the film. So for example, Benson and Anderson describe the way the initial shots in the film frame what will follow. There are shots of trucks with signs for "Penn Maid Products" and in the first images of the school "it looks like a factory" (2002, pp. 110-111)—a framing they note Wiseman described as intentional. At the heart of their analysis of the film, Benson and Anderson identify the film as evoking for viewers a double-bind (2002, p. 118). Benson and Anderson give several examples of ways the film enacts the dynamic they describe,

Teachers and administrators invoke contradictory commonplaces to gain momentary advantage, remove words from their proper signification, reduce poetry to technique, and just plain miss the point of their own sanctimonious homilies (2002, p. 119).

They go on to trace how this double-bind functions around issues of power and sexuality in the school as *rhetoric*, that is, in a way crafted to elicit a response from audiences: "The film is not simply the repository of meanings; it is an instrument for the evocation of those meanings, as rhetorical experiences, in the audience" (2002, p. 122). And it does this largely through inviting and then immersing the audience in the same impossible position of trying to make sense of demands for self-restraint and appeals to sexual allure, or lip-service appeals to creativity in an atmosphere of crushing discipline and uniformity.

In terms of scope, the extensive work of Benson and Anderson, attending to the body of documentary films directed by Frederick Wiseman is the exception rather than the rule in the rhetorical criticism of documentary. Most recent rhetorical criticism is rather the analysis of one or another particular film. For example, Benson, together with Snee (2008), edited a collection of essays about recent political documentaries. The most well-known film covered in the collection is *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004), a film that Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2008) position as an awkward mix of deliberative rhetoric and campaign rhetoric that engages audiences more at the level of symbolic satisfaction than political empowerment:

The film moves the true believers into the theater to live the moments vicariously more than it repels them into the political spaces as a collectivity to debate the issues (p. 47).

Borda (2008) offers a similar critique of the “preaching to the choir” documentaries made in response to Moore’s films, which she analyzes as purely spectacle-driven emotional appeals, where “documentary” images are evidence in the confirming sense of a cliché. Interestingly, her critique of the films, like the others in the collection, rests largely on the inadequacies of the films as political rhetoric. That is, the films are held to account by these scholars for the way they interact with the expectations of responsible democratic debate; while they are faulted for a misuse of the power of film to work as an emotionally gratifying but otherwise superficial spectacle, the films are *not* taken to task for representational failure.

Overtly political documentaries, perhaps as unabashed instances of persuasion, seem to especially draw the attention of rhetorical scholars. Rosteck and Frentz (2009) examine *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006) as an example of a “mythic frame,” with the viewer invited to identify with Al Gore’s personal transformation into a mythic hero of environmental responsibility. Rostek and Frentz describe the film’s portrayal of Gore “dying” to his old ways of carbon-impact ignorance, then battling against the odds to confront corporate and establishment deniers. Objective science is “evidence” for the crisis that has called forth a hero who tells his personal story in a way the audience is expected to identify with.

...this documentary text claims a privileged link to a historical situation and its scientific data; it uses our experience of understanding and decoding narrative; it engages our foreknowledge of the signifying power of myth (Rosteck & Frentz, 2009, p. 15)

An interesting contrast to this rich sense of rhetoric is the more limited conception of rhetoric in Nichols' *Representing Reality* (B. Nichols, 1991). Interestingly, Blakesley (2003) identifies Nichols as a chief example of film scholarship with a "strong rhetorical emphasis" (p. 3) and it is true that he pays special attention to documentary as rhetoric. But Nichols borrows his framework for this from David Bordwell (1985).⁹ Following Bordwell, Nichols views rhetoric as addressing (1) the representational structure of documentary images suggesting themselves as real, (2) the logical structure of a documentary's claims, (3) intertextual and extratextual appeals and the (4) formal structure of the documentary—both its own arrangement and the relationship of its arrangement to expectations for its genre. This is productive as far as it goes, yet, this is rhetoric in a traditional, Aristotelian sense that leaves behind important 20th century insights. Within Bordwell's (1985) "cognitive film theory" frame, the structural formulas that function rhetorically are seen as manifestations of human cognitive processes (as

⁹ While rejecting Bordwell's science-focused theoretical ground in cognitive psychology, Nichols takes up Bordwell's understanding of nonfiction film as positioned for viewers as real because of the indexical correspondence to the same scene in the historical life-world. For Bordwell, (although presumably not for Nichols) the cognitive structures of the brain are key. To the extent that the verisimilitude of indexical representations is consistent with the world of everyday experience, realist representations work to evoke a sense of themselves as "real." Nichols seems to agree about the persuasive force of documentary realism—hence offers a careful, detailed critique of realism as problematic.

formed by cultural patterns, and themselves in turn shaped by [aggregate manifestations of] brain function).

By locating the work of symbols in brain structure, attention shifts from the function of symbols to the function of neurons, and motive shrinks from the linguistically structured richness of a full dramatic context to cognitive function, with rhetoric more or less well serving the physiologically constituted phenomena of the brain. For Nichols use, this notion of rhetoric helps in exploring *what* is said, but rhetorical theory as such gets left behind in order to get to the more subtle, less obvious ways that the texts and processes of documentary manifest power and are deployed as (and within) cultural forces. Blakesly (2003) writes that Bordwell's approach "uses rhetoric in the dismissive and popular sense (as biased, motivated, disingenuous, or empty phraseology)" (p. 3). Nonetheless, Nichols (1991) notes the persistent work of documentaries to present evidence as a filmic documentation of the historical life world, and in this context characterizes documentary as fundamentally rhetorical (26, 134-141, 195-197, 231).

Plantinga, (1991, 1997, 2002, 2005) and Carroll (Bordwell & Carroll, 1996; 1983, 1996) also approach documentary *as rhetoric*, but also do so working from the perspective of cognitive film theory, a science-linked empiricist approach that generally rejects much of contemporary film theory in favor of attention to cognitive patterns and structures as they shape film texts (Bordwell, 1989; Carroll, 1996). Carl Plantinga's *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (1997) in particular, is a sustained examination of documentary *as rhetoric*.

For Plantinga, documentary is a genre of argument and its “rhetoric” is constituted in the ways filmmakers appeal to viewer’s expectations about veracity and meaning based on their sense of genre. Rhetorical force is enhanced to the degree to which images match viewer’s expectations about documentary and its representational conventions and suggest a direct correspondence to things in the world of immediate visual observation.

Another example of a rhetorical analysis of documentary that considers the impact of the genre on text is Dow’s (2004), study of the 1970 ABC News documentary *Women’s Liberation*. Her work traces the way the documentary’s conventions adhere to the expected forms for what Nichols calls “expository documentary” (1991, p. 35). Dow (2004) highlights the impact of the sub-genre’s rhetorical frame of “objectivity” and “authority” as significant for understanding the rhetorical significance of the documentary, noting the shift in tone in news coverage about feminism toward a new seriousness evoked by a 1970s documentary frame (p. 61).

A final example of work that might be grouped with contemporary rhetorical approaches to documentary is Spence and Navarro’s *Crafting Truth* (2011).¹⁰ They observe,

All representations of actuality must choose which aspects to include and which to leave out. Decisions are made to emphasize one element and to downplay others, to assert some truths and to ignore others... what is at issue is not so much “Is

¹⁰ Spence and Navarro (2011) do not explicitly locate their work as rhetoric. While they align themselves with Bruzzi’s rejection of theoretical preoccupations with “objectivity,” they draw broadly and eclectically from contemporary documentary theorists.

it true or untrue?" but rather "How is actuality treated in order to sanction the documentary's claims to be telling the truth" (p. 2).

They attend to the "staging" of truth (p. 25), and the role of evidence in documentary; "It is how evidence is used in the flow of information that gives it cogency" (p. 40). For Spence and Navarro understanding documentary evidence is a matter of attending to the style of its deployment, that is, asking about the *manner* in which evidence is presented (straightforwardly as "fact," as testimony, with an ironic or suspicious tone, and so forth). In other words, for Spence and Navarro tracing the function of evidence in documentary is largely a matter of gauging the epistemological status the film itself seeks to impart to the words and images it explicitly deploys to make arguments.

Tracing these various approaches by rhetorical scholars, some common themes recur. One is the role of audience identification (which I will discuss in more detail below). Most of these rhetoric scholars who study documentary do so with Burke's rehabilitated view of rhetoric as identification, and are informed by Burke's general theory of dramatism. Consistent, too, with Burke's approach is the central theme that the *documenting* that these films do is more than just a matter of data imprint. Documentary depictions *do* things with symbols, that is, documentary depictions become evidence that make arguments, verify claims, move audiences emotionally, and work to characterize and shape attitudes. And they do this by locating the messages and meanings of films in the "real

world” of common experience—what I will call documentary “scene.” I also draw this insight about the important rhetorical role of scene from the work of Kenneth Burke and likewise rely on Burke’s understanding of rhetoric as drama as I analyze this evidentiary work in the films I study.

Documentary Images as Evidence

Theory and criticism of documentary as a form of representation, as I have observed, often concerns itself with whether events are being “represented” accurately, and with this comes an implied ideal of pure representation—the notion of a window-like access to things as they are. Even when this is acknowledged as impossible, the ideal remains to haunt documentary by its absence. As Cowie explains about documentary,

...because it is extracted from ongoing reality, it thereby distorts by becoming exemplary, standing in for but also excluding—as unrecorded—other views and other people (2011, p. 21).

My central argument is that documentary depictions do not so much work as windows through which we view reality, but as arguments that a point of view, implicit or explicit claims, and characterizations about people, objects and actions *are truthful*. Although they may strive to be ethical and noble rhetors, filmmakers are persuaders nonetheless: they make sense of those situations—discern the “truth” then tell it. In the mere act of representing the world, documentarians make selections about what is important to see and how to frame it as a true state of affairs. Or in terms of Burke’s famous formulation about language generally, in language we seek a faithful *reflection* of reality, but in so doing we make *selections* from reality,

and in making those selections we necessarily construct a *deflection* of reality (Burke, 1969a, p. 59). Burke's theory that "drama" is the most productive framework for seeing these essentially rhetorical operations is especially appropriate for characterizing the rhetoric of documentary: the filmmaker is not just representing that this situation exists, she is *dramatizing* that it *means* this and such, or *does* this and such, within the context of the state of affairs she is revealing to us! The reality a film presents is not simply a referential world outside the medium. When documentary *shows* us the world, *points* to situations and events, and *tells* us "this is the situation," it is *acting* as a rhetorical voice that is *documenting* a claim or argument—at times one that is even explicitly voiced by a person or even narrator. Documentary films present *evidence* that some state of human affairs exists and should be attended to—often for moral, legal, ethical, humane, emotional reasons that we can't help but experience as we witness this truth. None of this is to deny the important appeal of documentary to the material character of its depictions as part of that evidence.

The use of documentary images as a kind of vicarious material evidence happens across the genre. For example, to generate opposition to whaling, *The Cove* (Psihoyos, 2009) structures uncovering the slaughter of dolphins and whales in the classic form of an adventure story, but uses appalling images of panicked dolphins and bloody water as *material evidence*. In less obviously rhetorical examples, *Every Little Step* (Stern & Del Deo, 2009) uses audio recordings of dancers talking about their experiences and videotape of dance rehearsals as evidence of the

“authenticity” of both Bob Fosse’s Broadway hit *A Chorus Line* and its own storytelling. *Man on Wire* (Marsh, 2008), a film I will discuss later in this study, uses footage of the preparations for Philippe Petit’s high-wire walk between Twin Towers in 1974 (along with photos of the walk) as evidence of the real difficulty and material danger of the story being told. A very compelling heist story of Petit and his crew gaining access to the towers is lent credibility and historical actuality through its impressions of now absent monuments—cultural icons nostalgically accessible, despite their traumatic absence, through a physical trace on film, working like the bones of a saint at a shrine.

Indeed, contemporary documentary scholars meet annually in an academic conference called “Visible Evidence”¹¹ and there is a 22 volume *Visible Evidence* series of scholarly books edited by Gaines, Ginsburg and Renov, which includes as volume 6 *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Gaines & Renov, 1999). In the series, the status of documentary images as evidence is often questioned on the basis of representational failure. The series description notes

Public confidence in the “real” is everywhere in decline. The Visible Evidence series offers a forum for the in-depth consideration of the representation of the real, with books that engage issues bearing upon questions of cultural and historical representation, and that forward the work of challenging

¹¹ See www.visibleevidence.org

prevailing notions of the "documentary tradition" and of nonfiction culture more generally.¹²

In other words, what is at stake is the renegotiation of what sort of evidence is constituted by documentary, but through the lens of representation. Gaines notes in her introduction to volume 6 that the essays struggle with "the impossible claim to indexicality,"¹³ giving us a compendium of cases in which the special indexical relation is in question" (1999, p. 6). The articles in the edited work (Gaines & Renov, 1999), as is common in the literature of documentary theory, note the multitude of ways that documentary works are inadequate to the "truths" of the spatio-temporal events they record, as well as being inadequate to the incalculable levels of socio-cultural meanings and power relationships embedded in human events. Hence the "special-ness" of indexical relation collapses, as Gaines noted.

In a more recent example of documentary "evidence" cast as representation, Bill Nichols considers issues of authenticity surrounding reenactment in documentary films, claiming that "when the distinction between reenactment and enactment goes unnoticed or unrecognized, the question of deceit arises" (B. Nichols, 2008, p. 73) because "the reenactment forfeits its indexical bond to the original event" (B. Nichols, 2008, p. 74). What is interesting here is that unacknowledged reenactment is condemned not so much for the rupture of the social rules that audiences expect honored as

¹² See <http://www.upress.umn.edu/byseries/visibleevidence.html>

¹³ The idea of an "indexical sign" is borrowed from Peirce (1931-58), and is an image that is generated from a material relationship to a physical object, like the impression of a leaf in mud, the smoke of a fire, or chemical reactions caused by refracted light on film.

part of their expectations for the genre (the production practices that are commonly understood to constitute documentary), but it is condemned instead for its epistio-ontic rupture through spacio-temporal distortion; “truth” is positioned as dependent to the material correspondence between this event in a particular time and place and images that are physically generated by it. Nichols goes on to note ways filmic depictions of actual historical events can work to disrupt narrative simplifications—for example, he observes that attempts by the characters in *Capturing the Friedmans* (Jarecki, 2003) to re-story past events in later interviews are revealed for what they are in the obvious contrast and temporal dislocation between adult selves speaking while images of very different seeming child-selves are portrayed from home movies. This sort of actual footage is contrasted by Nichols with reenactment footage which works, in his words, as “rhetorical tropes” that often “enhance or amplify” as pathos or logos (B. Nichols, 2008, p. 88). Nichols seems to be insightfully claiming special consequences flowing from the resistances to narrative flexibility in observational footage of events. But he *also* seems to find a special onto-epistemic evidentiary status in this resistance. That is, the “truth” of the images lies not in their function, but in their ontic status.

The Rhetoric of Evidence

Nonetheless, Nichols also, elsewhere, goes far in treating the ontological and epistemological status of documentary images as evidence from a rhetorical perspective, building his discussion in part by noting Aristotle’s treatment of the “artistic” and “inartistic” proofs of rhetoric:

artistic proofs are those created by the speaker, such as building one's ethos and moving the audience with pathos, and *inartistic proofs* are those found and used by the speaker, such as witness testimony and statistics. Nichols notes that although inartistic proofs are not created by the filmmaker/rhetor, the *interpretation*

of this factual evidence may be very much in dispute... These types of evidence lie outside the reach of the orator or filmmaker's artistic power to create, although very much within her power to evaluate or interpret (2001, p. 50).

While Nichols goes on then to explain various ways documentary images can be incorporated "artistically," it is clear that he considers documentary evidence as yet part of the "inartistic" category, and the *proof* it offers as being provided by the logic and science of the outside world. In considering the rhetoric of evidence in documentary, I would want to push Nichols position yet farther: When a filmmaker presents "witness testimony," how much of that *proof* can be said to be "found?" Through question selection, interpersonal interaction, identity performance and so forth, interviews entail the co-creation of meanings by the interviewer, the interview subject, specific contexts, situated social meanings, and particular ideas and messages (Denzin, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Jorgenson, 1991). There is no aspect of a documentary interview free of construction. And further, filmmakers use close-up shots on the face of the interviewee—or perhaps instead more "objective" feeling medium shots. Interviews are edited, and interposed with footage of other things, the testimony of other

interviewees, or even narration. Further, that edited interview is presented at a certain point in an ongoing and constructed narrative/argument for a certain dramatic/rhetorical effect, and the testimony thereby *interprets* images that have already been presented or frames images that will be presented.

In asserting a rhetoric of evidence for documentary film, I am arguing that there are a set of rhetorical choices and strategies that contextualize the presentation of what is usually considered objective and material "data" from the "real" world. This is not only true of elicited interviews as testimony, but also legal documents, scientific data, and photographically real material objects and situations. When they are presented as "proof," it is within the ongoing rhetorical rationale and master strategy of the film: sometimes that is an explicit argument or political cause, sometimes that is an implicit or disguised agenda, or as with other forms of rhetoric, sometimes the filmmaker may not even be aware of her biases in the constructions and selections she makes. When a documentary film says "this is true" or offers an image and says "this is real," it offers it as *proof* of something that is at issue or open to interpretation: I argue that there is a rhetoric in documentary style that constructs these events and images as *evidence* to be used in forming impressions and judgments by an audience.

Yet for an audience, documentary "proof" is more than an ontically certified re-presentation of words or images. The images, sounds, and testimonies that are depicted are done so as part of a created message and as a kind of mediated experience that has been shaped with a tremendous

amount of control in both its creation and its experience by the viewer. How a viewer experiences the “proof” of a documentary image is shaped by the power of photographic realism, the incredible technological control over how the image is created and presented found in film, by all of the conditioning and training of audience members in narrative and cinematic codes, and by the special (although sometimes specious) status of documentary film as an art-form devoted to revealing “truth.” In this sense I am arguing that there is implicit “rhetoric of evidence” in documentary that I seek to investigate.

At the most basic level, I am suggesting that documentary operates more like a narrative or drama than it does a speech, legal or scientific tract, or journalistic report. The evidence of the real, material world that is presented functions as proof of this or that claim or premise in an ongoing narrative and dramatic structure—whether it is the claims of the documentarian, witnesses, authorities, or the rhetorical argument and agenda that the documentary as a whole might embody (such as climate change is dangerous, bullying is unacceptable, the war is wrong, bankers caused the economic crisis, and so forth). As Walter Fisher (1984) argues, when dealing with the rhetoric of narrative form, we have to abandon what he calls the “rational world” paradigm that imputes logical, scientific rationality to users and audiences of narrative. People, he argues, judge the truth of a narrative on the basis of “probability” and “fidelity: Is what the story presents likely? Does it ring true? In other words, even when experiencing fictional narratives, audience members seek certain kinds of truths, especially ethical truth, and their criteria for judging the truths of

narratives are not drawn from scientific or logical training, but from narrative training: Does this make sense in the context of the story that is being told and does this square with my larger stories about how the world is?

Fisher notes that his proposal for a “narrative paradigm” for rhetorical studies is grounded in Burke’s master critique of language and his dramatic perspective. For documentary studies, it seems a very easy argument to make that documentaries are more like drama than any other kind of narrative structure, and that documentaries implicitly and explicitly employ the resources of drama, and by extension cinema, in how they tell a story, make an argument, and organize themselves for effect. That is, evidence becomes meaningful in the context of its use, in the way it shapes how a situation is understood. Documentary depictions, in and of themselves, could never be expected to “mean” the unvarnished complete reality of the situations they represent because film experience and embodied experience are different. The filmic context already alters the rhetorical situation of the film in comparison with pro-filmic events. Every edit further alters the relationship of the film to pro-filmic events. The function of documentary images as evidence takes place in the new rhetorical situation constituted by an encounter with the text.

So images can evoke a connection to the material, and make appeal to that connection as offering evidence, all the while staying firmly within the field of argument/ persuasion/ rhetorical engagement. Further, casting a documentary as representation can itself be a rhetorical move raising the stakes of documentary from *argument* to *good or evil* (arguments may be

analyzed and refuted, but not so easily condemned with the force and satisfaction of the moral certainty available with the ethical transgression the frame of representation makes possible). In the case then, for example, of Nichols' (2008) analysis of the film *Capturing the Friedmans* (Jarecki, 2003), the ways he believes the temporal dislocations of footage from different periods work to attest to the murkiness of truth can be understood instead to function rhetorically as structuring a film that wavers back and forth between the innocence and guilt of its subjects, therein marking the "objective" voice of the film and its filmmakers.¹⁴

It is never *just* a documentary's "indexical" status or promise of representation that executes its rhetorical work to evoke the real. As I have argued, we make meaning dramatically. An image works as evidence of the real when it is used in a way that evokes the real world of our experience, and as Heidegger would remind us, experience of the world and its things—our perception—is always received in a context of meaning and intention. So while our reception of filmic sound or image as indexical (Peirce, 1931-58), or its evocative homology with embodied perceptual experience (Sobchack, 1992) is important for documentary, it is also a staple of Hollywood entertainment that these same factors can work in obviously fictional ways. Documentary film becomes evidence when it helps us make sense of its depictions as *real* situations. The central argument of this study is that we better understand the function of documentary depictions as evidence when we observe how they meaningfully structure what they depict

¹⁴ See below, Chapter 4, for an example of how film *Jesus Camp* (Ewing & Grady, 2006) is an example scene structuring evidence of a film's "objectivity."

in terms of real-world motivation. While this evidence relies on the audio and visual verisimilitude of film sounds and images to our everyday embodied experience, they must become dramatically meaningful. And in terms of dramatic structure, the visual evidence of documentary is deployed through scene.

What emerges then is an invitation to trace the *various* rhetorical forms by which documentary uses its scenic depictions to structure and execute the truth claims of films (as evidence). In some cases, this is indeed conveyed according to a rhetoric of representation by framing the representation as one of "here is the reality." In other cases, however, and often enough *dramatically* so, the film implicitly or explicitly points and says "here is the proof!" These kinds of arguments are apparent when a Michael Moore or a Spike Lee or a Werner Herzog cut from an interview to show us a picture—"here is evidence this person has lied", or, sometimes, has "told the truth!" My attention then is focused on *how* documentary films constitute their depictions as "true" or "real," in what context and to what effect, and following what patterns. The relationship of documentary film depictions to things and events in the "real" world of everyday experience begs questions of *how* truth is constituted as truth and *how* film texts position their depictions as real. In short, documentary film does not just re-present the world, it creates documents about what its objects mean and thereby argues cases about why they matter.

A Burkean Approach to Documentary

As with virtually all the rhetoric scholars who study documentary, I find the critical insights and vocabulary of Kenneth Burke particularly helpful to my project examining documentary film. Burke's rehabilitation of rhetoric within the context of a more general theory of communication—symbolic interaction—allows me to treat documentary very broadly as both produced by filmmakers and interpreted by audiences, and enables me to trace the ways sense-making is at work in film, but also contemporary culture more generally. That is, in order to make meaning and carve a sensible order out of the materials of documentary, a filmmaker and audience member must somehow share a common language of human events and significant experience, and it is in that basic communicational necessity that Burke builds his theories of rhetoric as dramatism.

Burke's development of dramatism as a method of critique evolved across 60 years and a dozen or so books. Basically, Burke explores the vast anthropological terrain he calls "symbolic action" examining the foibles and pitfalls of the "symbol using animal" (1966, p. 3) One of the chief contributions of Burke's huge corpus of critical work and theorizing is the critical vocabulary he forges to describe the intricate rhetorical workings of everything from poetry, drama, literature, psychology, philosophy, scientific and political tracts. There are three basic concepts central to the dramatisitic method that I would like to treat in more detail here, as they help to illustrate how and why this method can be useful to the critique of

documentary film: the “dramatistic” frame, rhetoric as identification, and motivated action.

Dramatism

Dramatistic method advances drama as the central metaphor of this critical system. In short, Burke’s (1969a) criticism argues that all language use, or “symbolic action,” can be looked at as drama. About this, Burke is quite literal: we literally dramatize the items, relationships and events of our lives in communicating them to others. By reading texts and social events as drama, we employ a basic and common interpretive frame that reveals the human and basically rhetorical qualities of communication. In other words, looking at symbol use as drama attends to the meanings the speakers or authors are trying to advance, and the kinds of results or changes they expect as a result. Central to drama, Burke (1969a) argues, is the idea of *transformational language*. We dramatize with a transformational purposiveness, with a language of action intended to transform the character of situations, items and events in our world, and with the expectation that things can indeed be rhetorically transformed. Given this anthropological context for symbol use, it seems impossible to conceive that film audiences can experience filmic images without the experience and expectation that their views of the world will be dramatically transformed, regardless of the objectivity of the filmmaker or photographic veracity of the image itself.

Dramatistic method, therefore, involves tracking the transformational qualities of the symbolic acts within a text, with an eye toward discerning what effects are intended and what effects are likely to result from featuring

this kind of situation or action or another. Clearly this way of characterizing the rhetoric of a text is appropriate and productive for documentary; even if a documentary seeks to reveal an objective truth, its materials are selected and presented with a goal of dramatizing the content. Or as Paul Rotha (1952) describes, echoing Grierson, documentary is the “creative dramatisation of actuality” (p. 105). The basic grammar and rhetoric of documentary works then to transform meanings, perceptions, and even actions as a result of the depictions it structures. To whatever extent documentary waivers from purely neutral and objective observation and recording—and in both camera choices and the selection and ordering of materials it must—we are in the presence of a functional dramatism, and thereby also rhetoric. In short, the transformational grammar of drama itself dictates that the material is organized and presented as a series of such transformational moments, however implicit or semi-conscious such a scheme may be.

Identification

Burke’s theory of transformational language and his dramatic approach led him to reconsider the traditional art of rhetoric (1969b). Burke’s critique moves the traditional Aristotelian concept of rhetoric from a rhetoric of persuasion as a kind of soft logic to a “rhetoric of identification.” In short, the implicit rhetorical agenda of appeal, Burke argues, is to invite the audience member to identify with the ideas, character, or purposes of the rhetor/author, and to participate in the drama she is creating in her language choices. Burke’s shift from the cognitive and logical operations assumed by

the “rational world paradigm” to the audience driven psychological and sociological assumptions of identification revolutionized the study of rhetoric in the communication field from the 1950s forward (M. H. Nichols, 1952). Burke’s expansion of rhetoric to include poetic and narrative genres is part of the impetus to see rhetoric outside the traditional bounds of public and political talk, and thereby founded the interest of rhetoric scholars in documentary and other forms of film and literature.

For Burke the transformational language and imagery of our dramas and dramatisms, including literature, film, scientific tracts, philosophical arguments, and so forth, proceed via “identification.” That is, the appeal of such texts operates by asking a viewer to *identify* her or his concerns, character and motivations, with those of the speakers or actors in a text—just as a hero of a stage play, novel or film solicits the basic identification of the audience member to share in the same motives and heroic actions, even if only while engaging the text. “Factual” works, no less than other texts, also solicit alignment with the “motives” expressed in the text. Again, in Wiseman’s *High School*, Benson argues that we come to understand the oppression of the school and of the administrators through our *identification* with the students’ alienation and repression. In Lee’s *Four Little Girls* (1997), we understand a father’s testimony about his daughter in an identification with his pain and anguish. And less obviously, we are invited by the design of the text to participate in Lee’s own revulsion at the racism of a businessman, and share in Lee’s horror at the images of black men being hanged by Klansmen. None of these scripts, images, or scenes are in the

text by accident; they all act on us, and identification as a concept of rhetoric says that they work by getting us to respond with the basic motivations as they are constructed, depicted, and played out in the drama. Put another way, the text structures a subject position for us according to the same terms by which we organize the other social identifications of our lives. A documentarian solicits and directs the identifications of viewers (or constructs them in making sense of the field footage as it is gathered and edited) via symbols structured as dramatic action.

In short, when looking for the basic or elemental rhetorical agenda in any work, Burke's theory suggests that the dramatic structure of a text implicitly works to seek the identification of the audience, and so the text will be rhetorically organized to achieve this. Identification means potentially more than just "relating" to a topic or claim or person, but seeing one's identity—especially as a moral agent—bound up with the conflict of the drama, its goods and evils, and its outcomes. When arguing, as I have, that the organization and composition of documentary film must be implicitly rhetorical, this assumption helps make the point that documentaries do, like drama, solicit the identification and motivational participation of audience members. The critical examples I offer in this dissertation are only some of the endless examples.

Motivated Action

According to Burke (1969a), the basic unit of dramatisitic analysis, or drama itself for that matter, is "motivated action." Acts, as humans interpret them (most apparently in drama), are motivated. People act with purposes

and expect results, and we understand human actions in terms of their motives. Drama, in Burke's analysis, is therefore a semiotic of motivated actions, wherein a coherent message is forged and understood by the development—and transformation—of motives across the episode.

Burke's theories of "motive" are complex and often confusing, but comprise the heart of his work in *A Grammar of Motives* (1969a) and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1969b). The difficulty of his theory is in a great part due to our commonplace concept of motives as psychological intentions or contents of individual purposes. For Burke, "motives" are inherently linguistic, verbal, symbolic constructs; again, we are looking at motivated action as the basic unit of a dramatic text or script. In a drama, what is depicted is "action," and the rhetoric comes in how we are asked to interpret or read the motive for that action, that is, how we identify positively or negatively with that motive as depicted.

For my own purposes, I wish to avoid the entire set of complexities and confusions about reading "motive" and imputing them to actors or agents. My own interest here is in recognizing that the text of a documentary contains the elements of a drama, and that in a drama, everything is "active" in promoting the interpretation the drama is advancing and in inviting the identification of the audience to align with that interpretation. Importantly for my purposes, this includes the "scene" that the drama presents as the physical, environmental, and/or historical-social context for the action. A "scene" in a drama is not a reality *outside* the drama, it is a construction that functions as part of the drama; The

dramatistic scene *is itself "motivated action."* In looking at documentary rhetoric and its uses of "reality," I am saying we must look at what the scenic depictions *do*. I am asking how the scene *acts* to accomplish the dramatic goals and rhetorical identifications of the documentary.

The relevance of this for reading or producing a documentary is considering what situation is presented, or to present, at a particular point in the script. It is with the sense that this scenic image or content *does* something to the viewer's perceptions or ability to understand the *next* event of the documentary, whether that be another situation that juxtaposes content, a comment from a witness or expert, or a depiction of someone *doing* something. When Pare Lorentz shows us *The River* (1938), the river is the scene for the film, but it *acts*, working with a verbal script and a series of depictions that together *dramatize* a set of meanings with a point of view and expected persuasive results. As Benson (1980) shows, in Frederick Wiseman's *High School* (1968), the scene of the high school and the actions of the administrators and the effects on the students are intended to be interpreted with the basic motives of alienation and repression.

Hence, within the context of drama, even purely scenic, visual content, does something. It becomes context that shapes audience perceptions and is motivated action that the viewer must interpret. Furthermore, the "scene" does transformative work across the events and interpretive interactions of a drama or documentary: The "River" we end up with isn't the same "river" we start with; the "High School" as experienced as a cauldron of alienation and repression isn't the same "high school" we are shown in the beginning.

Scenes of a drama are active in the meanings and interpretations that are made, and they themselves are transformed by the actions and events shown to take place in them and in relation to them.

In the dissertation that follows, I propose to use the idea of an active, dramatistic "scene" in a very limited way in order to demonstrate some of the facets of what I am calling the rhetoric of evidence in documentary film. Burke famously proposed a "pentad" of dramatic action: within a given drama, motivated action derives from five common elements or characters: the scene, the agent, the actions themselves, the purpose (or why of it), and the agency (the how of what is done). Together these five elements and their combinations or movements (from scene to act, from agent to act, etc.) constitute the basic *grammar* of transformations possible in a dramatic text. While the decades of critical uses and abuses of this scheme in rhetorical analysis are interesting, and the issues about this scheme are many, for my purposes these key elements of drama are simply convenient ways of making the point that the "scene" as depicted in a documentary acts to execute the rhetorical purposes and choices of the text. It seems uncontroversial that these elements are basic to drama, and they have been likened to the parallel elements of the journalistic story: Who, What, Where, When, and How (and Why?). In the critical work that follows, I will argue that documentary scene evokes realistic and objectivist connections to the "real world," real events and material reality, yet within the dramatic action of the documentary itself, scene is an active and even dominating element of the

drama, serving to structure the other elements, foster identification, and work as evidence to “prove” the truth of the documentary claims.

In particular, I will show that “scene” is crucial for the work that documentaries do *as documentaries*. Scene is the work that documentaries do to set the “real world” as their context. And the notion of transformation is essential here. Documentary scene interacts with the other elements of a film’s drama—the acts it depicts, its characters, the methods that accomplish the act, the reasons we are shown—to shape an audience’s experiences. Put simply, the criteria of a film’s value do not reside in the fidelity of its representations to external profilmic events, but are relocated to the film’s impact on its audience, and hinge instead on its credibility as a drama, or story. So a documentary is “true” when it solicits cooperation and constructs a credible course of action as an option within a larger field of possibility. That is, it is true when it constructs space for a range of alternatives as valid options and imagines power relations as open. Compare this with right/wrong moralizing rhetoric, which tends to insist on a binary construction of power. This rhetorical ethic then sketches a proscription and a prescription: avoid masking rhetoric as fact, and *invite* identification.

In the chapters that follow, I propose to examine documentaries in order to demonstrate the basic point that the real world of events and material objects can be considered the “scene” of the dramatic action in documentary films, and in the examples I have chosen, the importance of scene is such that it overwhelms or dominates the other elements of the drama and leads us to certain kinds of interpretations and experiences. To

make this point, I use Burke's pentad of dramatic elements—again as a matter of convenience rather than analysis—to show that in particular documentaries, scene can be shown to dominate and affect “act,” for instance, or “agent,” or “agency,” or “purpose.” The following chapters explore documentaries that are interesting cases of rhetoric. In each case, I will argue that exposing that rhetoric and the particular “rhetoric of evidence” used there can be accomplished by showing the special uses of scene on the other major dramatic elements.

Chapter Overview

In Chapter Two I examine the ways scene shapes documentaries that feature action. Social environments, relationships and bodies all become evidence that characterize acts ranging from walking a high wire to eating fast food, but I focus on the recent film *Bully* (Hirsch, 2011) to highlight the use of vivid portrayals of acts of abuse to foster a complex identification that works to disrupt difference as an excuse for the act of bullying.

In Chapter Three I discuss the impact of scene on character-driven (or “agent”-driven) films ranging from back-stage certifications of celebrity authenticity to the scene depicting of George W. Bush as an inept leader in front of schoolchildren in the face of terrorist attacks in *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004). Then I analyze an unusual Australian documentary, *Naked on the Inside* (Farrant, 2007), as an example of the intricate ways scene can work as evidence of “character” that is both defined by and exceeds bodies working as “scene.”

In Chapter Four I turn to the ways scene functions within films that emphasize ways of doing things (agencies) to show how scene works as evidence that colors audience perceptions of processes that range from climate change to methods for educating poor children. I trace the use of scene in the film *Jesus Camp* (Ewing & Grady, 2006), to characterize the “evangelization” or religious indoctrination of children along two divergent paths sponsored by its scene of “culture war:” an authentic response to a divine imperative or a shocking manipulations of emotionally vulnerable children.

And in Chapter Five I attend to the operation of scene in films that specially feature purpose. Of necessity, this chapter veers most squarely into the complications of Burke’s discussion of his pentad of terms; purpose is perhaps the most ephemeral and least clear of his terms, and always at least hints at a telos, or ultimate purpose. Nonetheless, the impact of scene becomes fascinating in films that make this move toward ultimate purpose. In this chapter I give primary focus to a film about monks, *Into Great Silence* (Gröning, 2005), as an example of an all consuming depiction of material “scene” that destabilizes its own limits and invites contemplation of transcendence.

In the conclusion I reach back to some of the goals outlined in this introduction and seek some preliminary implications of a rhetorical, dramatistic approach to documentary for its ethical production.

While considering documentary films in categories that correspond to Burke’s pentad of terms is just one of many possible ways of organizing

various types of documentaries,¹⁵ I believe it offers insights into how documentary films develop their appeals to “reality” in order to create for viewers an *experience* of their claims as evidence.

Given the goals of my study, I have chosen to focus my fullest attention on film texts that highlight *documentation* as their central rhetorical strategy, that is, texts which 1) position themselves as “factual,” “fair” or “objective” depictions of events in the common world of everyday experience and 2) explicitly foreground their documentation of events and persons, for example by eschewing “voice of god” author-announcer voice-over. In other words, my primary analyses seek out documentaries that are clearly and primarily positioned as social documentation. This is not to suggest that reflexive documentaries or announcer (or on-camera host) documentaries do not also use depictions structured as documentation in interesting and important ways. Indeed, I consider many of these films throughout my study. But I have chosen the four primary films I feature for their explicit appeal to documentation as a primary frame.

Further, I am interested in films that use “scene” in rhetorically complicated or unusual ways. Once traced, the influence of the “real-world” scene of documentaries on the way audiences understand a film’s actions, characters, processes or purposes is in some cases quite straightforward. But scene can work in much less obvious ways that can hide rhetorical impacts on the one hand, or make the work of the film more rich and

¹⁵ For example Barnouw (1993) classifies films in historical phases, Nichols identifies “modes” of documentaries (1991, 2001), and Plantinga (1997, 2005) follows various definitions that are offered for documentary.

complex on the other. So I have I have sought out films that help me follow some of these sleights of hand and subtleties. I believe these lessons are valuable for filmmakers, for example, in considering how “objectivity” can structure “us-them” audience divisions in a film like *Jesus Camp* or how rhetorical techniques like those in *Into Great Silence* can generate a “scene” that actively works to exceed itself. As with the concentration on “documentation” described above, I am not attempting to define a stable subgenre, but limit the scope of the study to films most likely to fit with the research goals of this project.

Finally, I am primarily interested in attending to films over the last ten years or so, from the year 2000 through 2012. Studying recent films chiefly characterized by their predominate focus on documentation is interesting in part because these films would seem to be anachronisms given ways the “modes” or types of documentary are often described, positioning the documentaries studied here as the style of earlier eras (Barnouw, 1993; Barsam, 1992; B. Nichols, 1991, 2001).

Most of my attention is given to films that are also included among the top 100 grossing documentary films.¹⁶ Gross box-office receipts remain an important industry measure for measuring the “success” of a film, and those receipts help structure the funding possibilities of future similar projects. Nonetheless, there has been a profusion of documentary forms on television, and the support for documentary production by premium pay channels like Showtime and HBO (both in terms of broadcast time and funding), surely

¹⁶ I use data gathered by the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com) and reported at <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>.

points to the importance of made-for-television documentaries. So I also include a few examples of these films. Yet in the end, the four films I treat are rhetorical choices; they are chosen because I find them to reflect my own experience of the complications and possibilities that arise as documentaries feature "real-world" evidence in compelling stories and dramatic structures.

Chapter Two:

Documentary Scene and the Evidence of Acts

It is a bright sunny day and bright sunny things are bound to happen. Or if they do not, the irony of the misfit will make those events seem all the more striking.

The seemingly banal observation that we interpret the actions we see in light of the setting where they take place can belie the profound and complex ways that scene shapes the meanings of films, particularly in the case of documentaries, where the scene can seem a given, a happenstance, a matter-of-fact part of the events a camera happened to observe. Yet, as I have claimed, these, "given," "real world" settings of documentaries are crucial to their status as documentaries. They are part of the special work documentaries do.

The key questions in this chapter then are: How do documentary ways of depicting/relating "scene" influence our ways of viewing acts? How is this a notable form of rhetoric? and What difference does it make to observe this?

I have argued that the rhetorical logic and character of documentary films can be traced by understanding that they must work as dramas. The dramatic approach pursues the basic insight that the pragmatics of message construction, and thereby the rhetorical choices made, work to

create audience identification with and participation in the meaning making (via *enactments*) of the text.

In this study I have limited my focus to the ways that constructions and choices made about dramatic "scene" work in special ways to enable the particular powers of documentary realism to point the audience toward "reality" and real world facticity as the evidence of the truth of what is being depicted. This generates the many kinds of issues of representation, reality, and objectivity that are the preoccupations of documentary criticism.

As an organizational convenience in such a huge and conflicted subject matter, I have proposed to use the pentad of dramatic elements (scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose) to demonstrate that documentary powers of scenic construction are central to its rhetorical workings. My method is to show that the element of "scene" in documentary depiction comes to dominate and enable the other dramatistic elements.

In this chapter I turn my attention to the way documentaries use scenic evidence to redefine the quality and character of *act*. As far as drama and dramatistic analysis go, the link between scene and act is without doubt the most basic and obvious relationship, and most easily revealed. Simply put, we understand acts and their qualities, motives, and meanings by asking what the situation is that inspired the action (Bitzer, 1968). This is true when we explain ourselves, when we make legal and ethical judgments about actions, when corporations and politicians seek to explain their "mistakes," and any time we try to assess what causes people to do what they do. Burke describes the scene as the "container" of the action, just as a stage contains

the action that takes place on it, and actions only make sense, or make meaning, within the context of the scene that contains it (Burke, 1969a).

There is little doubt that the relationship of scene to act, therefore, is the most observed and studied of all the dramatic ratios, simply because it is the most obvious and basic reflex with which to make sense of the world: by defining the situation as one way or another, we justify past acts and persuade toward future acts; by getting audience members to identify with certain acts, we get them to accept "common ground" or a common sense that they are in the same situation.

Documentary Scene Structuring Action as Evidence

My focus, again, is on how the special abilities of documentary dramatism to depict scene are used to redefine or intensify our interpretations of certain kinds of actions. As the most basic relationship in drama, these uses are the most obvious, and most explicitly rhetorical examples of documentary. Frederick Wiseman, an unabashed and unrepentant practitioner of documentary rhetoric, seems to make "scene" his fixed trope, as he investigates high schools, prisons, shelters, and zoos for evidence of human abuse, corruption, and malfeasance (Benson & Anderson, 2002).

Therefore, we may say that documentary powers to bring visual experience—and evidence—of the scene is a mainstay of documentary rhetoric, and one of the chief rhetorical projects to be found in documentaries is to modify our experience and perceptions of various actions, and perhaps even induce us to action. This is most apparently true when the rhetorical

purposes of the documentary are most obvious. One familiar example of this is *Hearts and Minds* (Davis, 1974), a documentary used in the Vietnam era anti-war movement. Here the documentary shows us footage of planes strafing villages with napalm bombs while pilots, in tears, confess that they didn't realize what they were doing, and are filled with remorse and horror. We hear the infamous General Westmoreland, commander of our troops, now in civilian garb, explain that "Orientals" do not "value human life" in the same way as we Westerners, while the documentary *shows* us a mother uncontrollably wailing at her son's grave. The film is a powerful reframing of the Vietnam War, and was actively used in the anti-war movement.

Another example is Morgan Spurlock's *Supersize Me* (2004). While Spurlock himself is the subject of the film, its rhetorical task is to influence the way we understand eating fast food. The film argues using statistics and figures related to the fast food industry and obesity, but its primary focus is to show us the impact on Spurlock of eating all his meals at McDonald's restaurants every day for a month. More particularly, Spurlock's *body* becomes evidence for the impact of eating at McDonald's everyday. Before and during his experiment we see him, in just underwear, step on a scale to be weighed. We see him undergo everything from blood tests to rectal exams as his body and its processes become evidence showing the impact of his McDonald's diet. That is to say, Spurlock's growing, chemically changed body, and reports of his own embodied experience (he describes depression and anxiety, and his girlfriend describes reduced sexual function), is the scenic evidence that proves the central claim of the film.

Again, the boundaries of Burke's five terms of drama, and their interactions, or "ratios," are dynamic; as Hart and Payne note, ratios sometimes reconfigure *throughout* a text (1997, p. 279). Spurlock as a character, or "agent" is important because his likeability helps the audience identify with his project, but in the end we come to understand eating fast food in the context of the concrete, embodied manifestations portrayed by the film. Spurlock's body is the "scene" that reshapes the act of eating fast food as not merely nutritionally poor, but as nutritionally dangerous and debilitating. And our own bodies become uncomfortable as we watch Spurlock swell and sicken, and in our *identification* with this *situatedness* is the key to the rhetorical appeal. The evidence for the claims is not Spurlock's expertise nor even the testimony of the doctors. What becomes evident to the viewer through this scenic identification are her own feelings of repulsion at Spurlock's transformation and fearfulness of what could happen to her and others.

Another example of the interaction of the dramatistic terms and the impact of scene on "act" is *Man on Wire* (Marsh, 2008). The film uses a character sketch of Philippe Petit, who we come to understand as a quirky, adventurous and charismatic guy who attracts an interesting cadre of people around himself. Petit is obsessed with the aesthetic beauty, and the physical and personal challenge of tight-rope walking. We watch home-movie footage of him doggedly practicing on the wire for entire days in the bucolic isolation of the French countryside, and continuing this over the course of years. And the force of his personality draws others into his obsession.

Petit's personality interacts with what he does to define the act of walking on a wire strung between the twin towers of the World Trade Center in August of 1974 as a story of persistence and overcoming obstacles. So who Petit is as an agent, or main character, helps structure the act central to the film. But the story is told as *documentary*. The film repeatedly pulls viewers to scene, whether through the banality of everyday interactions among Petit's troupe, or shots emphasizing the enormous height of the World Trade Center towers, or the daunting distance between the two towers or the unpredictable and shifting winds. The act—walking across a wire strung between the two buildings—is structured by the “real” danger evoked by its scene. We feel vertigo as shots look down from the roof of the towers, or up from the ground to a tiny speck of a person invisibly suspended between the towers. We feel Petit's fragility in shots from the top of one of the buildings revealing the other – imposing, even sublime as it towers over a faint and misted New York cityscape. By contrast, Petit is a delicate, silhouetted miniature against this backdrop, only big enough to evoke the *idea* of a person, and standing on a wire we can barely see. For the viewer, it becomes proof that the flowering of human persistence is a work of art capable of triumph over the very real dangers of our shared world of fragile embodied experience.

Scene Structuring Action in *Bully*

The recent film *Bully* (Hirsch, 2011), is an interesting example of how documentary can be used rhetorically to redefine and intensify how we regard certain *actions* by showing them to us in scenic context. In this case,

the context of action is provided by selecting and focusing on scenes that give rise to, and color, our feelings about “bullying.” I treat this film in an extended analysis here for several reasons: first, it is a recent and controversial documentary because of its rhetorical content—it quite obviously courts and creates audience identification to move us; second, the ways in which *Bully* shows us scenic context are more subtle and nuanced, including the embodiment of the characters themselves; and third, the film helps to point up the contrast between a rhetorical analysis and a representational analysis, and helps to intervene in some of the controversies the film has generated about documentary rhetoric.

In *Bully*, Hirsch follows the daily experience of three adolescent “victims”¹⁷ of bullying and also tells the story of two more boys who have committed suicide. Fourteen year-old Alex is an awkward boy who does not fit in at his school in Sioux City, Iowa. We watch a steady, eventually exhausting string of taunts, physical harassment and humiliations at the hands of his peers while well-meaning school administrators awkwardly fail to intervene in any constructive way. (Alex is the target of most of the bullying we directly observe in the film because of the access Hirsch had to Alex’s school.) Kelby is a lesbian high-school student in a small town in Oklahoma. As part of her story, Kelby’s father describes the social isolation

¹⁷ While it does not fit the scope of my arguments here, it is worth noting Brian Winston’s (1995) important critique of the tendency of documentaries to frame the people it portrays as victims, and therein tending to hide the often more complicated structures of power at work in any social situation. Winston makes an important point about the way the practices and forms of the genre tend to shape the stories it tells about “reality.” Yet the argument refers us back to the problematic stance of critiquing a representation for being a representation rather than the thing (person, situation, event) itself.

imposed on the family by former friends who now refuse to even wave hello to the family since she has come out as gay. Ja'Meya is a 14 year-old African American girl who faced 45 felony charges after she pulled a gun on a school bus in what she describes as a response to years of regular bullying that she just couldn't take anymore. And Hirsch follows the families of 17 year-old Tyler Long and 11 year-old Ty Smalley, who both took their lives in what the film portrays as a response to being bullied. Both families describe their anguish and we see both families become active in the anti-bullying movement.

There has been praise for the film, in line with the 2012 U.S. anti-bullying zeitgeist. The *Time* magazine review is entitled, "Bully: A Punishing Movie Your Kids Must See" (Corliss, 2012). The *Entertainment Weekly* review describes the film as "an urgent and moral movie" (Gleiberman, 2012). Scott writes in the *New York Times'* review of the film that it "powerfully illuminates the bullying crisis" (2012).

Indeed, the film occurs in the wake of several-years of public attention to the issue following press coverage of, and popular response to, a spate of adolescent suicides purportedly related to bullying. The stories range from amped-up cyber bullying by girls,¹⁸ to a series of several adolescent boys (largely white) killing themselves after reports of streams of regular and virulent anti-gay verbal assault by peers.¹⁹ Notable responses ranged from a

¹⁸ See as an example the story of Phoebe Prince <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/02/us/02bully.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁹ 2010 seemed to be the watershed year for publicity about these suicides. Examples of coverage of suicide-linked bullying included stories about Seth Walsh,

Presidential summit²⁰ on the topic to Dan Savage's "It Gets Better Project" with its hundreds of self-made video testimonials that a life filled with adolescent anti-gay bullying will get better.²¹

Reviewers praise the ability of *Bully* to convey the withering experience of a persistent atmosphere of verbal debasement and lingering threats of violence. *Time* describes it as "a documentary as vivid as any horror film, as heartbreaking as any Oscar-worthy drama" (Corliss, 2012). The *Los Angeles Times* review also locates the force of the film in its emotional force, "'Bully' has an emotional impact that must be viewed to be understood" (Turan, 2012). Hirsch himself makes clear in an interview that the film isn't really meant to instruct, it's meant to have emotional impact,

To make it have the power the film has, I think it's so critical to see it... It's like, this is wrong, this is crazy, like, you feel it.

You walk in their shoes. And by the end of that experience you're like, how do I do something (Kim, 2012).

From this perspective, the value of the film is its role as the documentation of "real" events in the common world of experience. In terms of the drama of the film, scene evokes the "reality" frame as such—these images are about the world the audience shares with the filmmaker. This is a frame that always lingers in documentary, but in *Bully* is brought to the foreground as "scene" to help generate and support the emotional urgency the reviews

Billy Lucas, and Tyler Clemente. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/04/us/04suicide.html>.

²⁰ See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/03/10/president-obama-first-lady-white-house-conference-bullying-prevention>.

²¹ See <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>.

describe. Scene becomes evidence and is used to argue that the often verbal and social (and therefore seemingly ephemeral) character of the problem nonetheless has decidedly non-ethereal consequences—physical consequences.

I will return to the popular criticism and issues surrounding this film later in this chapter, as they help to point up the contrast between a rhetorical approach and a representational approach to these uses of documentary. My analysis of *Bully* is that scenic depiction is used to solicit audience identification and to inflame our passions about the kinds and qualities of acts that are being treated. The situations as depicted here *define* what “bullying” is, a definition occurring not in a language of psychology, sociology, political, or legal objectivity, but in the audience’s identification and felt judgment about the situations as presented.

I see four primary ways that the filmmaker uses scenic context and depiction to redefine and intensify audience understanding and perception of what is “bullying.” First, the film contextualizes these victimized children in their families. We, the audience, are made to feel parental about the kids; the kids are made our kids. By putting the audience member in the position of the parent whose child is suffering these kinds of abuses, our feelings about them are transformed. The situation of the parent is different than the situation of someone reading the newspaper or seeing a report on television of children being bullied—it is a situation of compassion and heartbreak.

Second, the film locates the act of bullying in verbal abuse. We see it and we *feel* it. The enactment of this abuse makes it *real* for us, not a

theoretic or academic description, but a physical and emotional violation, harrowing in its impact.²²

Third, we come to experience school bullying as nested in an atmosphere of institutional impersonalism. Administrators describe bullying in ways that depersonalize the act and situate it as an institutional phenomenon—a shocking under-evaluation of *our experience* of the acts as Hirsch has depicted them for us. This works to secure bullying as something that cannot be reduced to an abstraction. It is a name for experiences that are real and particular, and to the point, hurt real particular people like us.

Fourth, I argue that the depiction of the children’s physical appearance, emotional distress, and embodied difference is itself a kind of hyper-scenic rhetoric, wherein audience identification is brought to a sublime kind of tension. We are invited into a special kind of identification that holds “like me” and “not like me” together and works to short circuit our inclination to understand difference as a warrant to disidentification, or accept acts of cruelty that are understandable when they happen to “them,” but inhumane when they happen to “us.” What *if* we looked this way? What *if* our bodies suffered in this fashion? As I will discuss later in this dissertation, the use of documentary to show embodiment, physical appearances, and almost hyper-

²² There is an interesting parallel between the acts of bullying we see take place on a school bus in the film *Bully* and publicity surrounding a Youtube posting of footage of children abusing a school bus driver in June 2012 (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAgti_2uziA). As in the case of *Bully*, news reports suggest that watching the Youtube footage positioned scene (the visual evidence of the brutality of the act) as re-shaping how the perpetrators understood their own actions (see <http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2012-06-22/students-apologize-bullied-bus-monitor/55767990/1>).

real focus on surfaces is a special property of this scenic rhetoric and its manipulation of “evidence.”

Finally, I consider the coverage of *Bully* in the popular press as an example of how too exclusive a focus on the representational fidelity of the events it portrays, risks overlooking the experience of the film, how it works to influence its viewers.

Much of the rhetorical work of *Bully* hinges on the movements of the film to enjoin its audiences’ identification. And the most powerful evocation of identification in the film is via the parents of the children it features. *Bully* begins with David Long. As the *Los Angeles Times* review describes,

... as difficult as it is to watch children being bullied, it is just as hard to experience the look of unfathomable despair on the face of David Long of Murray County, Georgia, whose 17-year-old son Tyler hung himself in a closet in the family home (Turan, 2012).

The film starts with an agenda that is structured not by observable facts, but by relationships. Before we see the children featured in the film, we are asked to understand that they are loved. We are asked to measure the value of these children through the anguish their suffering brings to their parents. The Longs are depicted as grieving parents. This is the frame that governs the rest of the film and invites us to see Alex, Kelby, Ja’Meya, Ty and Tyler as our children too.

One way of helping to maintain this frame of parental love and anguish for viewers is by continuing to return to interview footage of the parents in

each section. But again, it matters that the film is a documentary. *Bully* continually orients viewers toward the "scene" of parenting. As we first get to know Alex his awkwardness, physically and socially, take the foreground. We see him bullied, yet it is a case of the "other" being bullied. We watch his parents awkwardly try to encourage and protect him. Some of what they say seems off key, other moments they are insightful and kind. We have a sense of bullying as a social phenomenon. Then Hirsch uses interviews with the parents to take us back to Alex's premature birth. We see pictures of the fragile premature baby that doctors did not expect to live—prenatal, yet out of the womb; impossibly tiny with tissue-thin skin showing wisps of veins below and tubes taped into his mouth pushing air into lungs not ready to breathe. Through Alex's parents we see the miracle of his survival and a boy who was/is a fragile newborn in need of protection. We *feel* the vulnerability of the child, and the subsequent footage of Alex being bullied is now more than the ugly awkward child receiving the sad but expected social response of his peers. The fragile, vulnerable child, the miracle child, is being savaged, and so together with his parents we long to see him protected. We see Alex as more than a subject, more than the form of his ungainly physical features. We see him literally as flesh and blood, depicted *embodied* and therein real in a way that goes beyond the merely observable. The observable, again, codes more than its surfaces. It works to evoke the psychological terror of bullying by appeal to the "reality" of the embodiment of the characters, by portraying material bodies *as* bodies. The message is "notice that this person isn't just a character, but is someone with a fragile,

vulnerable material existence.” Even the bullied individual has a “scene,” in this case a life history that only a parent—but now the audience—would know and use to understand the torment and injustice of his treatment.

We are drawn into this scene, the fragility of embodiment, throughout the film. For example we look inside a plain, mostly empty clothes closet as Tyler’s mother talks about his body hanging there. And there is vivid attention paid to physical objects that surround bodies—and have the potential to rupture and hurt them on account of that physicality. Again, the images of Alex as a newborn is a clear example of this work. The shots *linger*. A standard two to five second shot would code “vulnerable preemie.” Lingering on the photo invites us to relate to the reality of the body we see, its physicality, and puts us into a visual confrontation with him.

Lévinas (1979) describes our existential encounter with the “face” of another as forcing us to take account of the presence of another “I” and thrusting us into a kind of visceral ethical obligation. Film already removes us one step from the immediate presence of the other and passing over a powerful encounter with the other can be even easier when someone is depicted as a character, when we are invited to relate to them as *just* an agent in a drama. But when the camera highlights scene in *Bully* we are being urged to set aside other elements of the situation to notice that the person we see relates to this situation as embodied. As a viewer, I am relating to the character in a way that focuses attention on what she has most unmistakably in common with me: my raw physical existence.

The appeal to scene structured this way can tap into a very primal fear rooted in our day-to-day existential vulnerability, and the vulnerability of those we care about. Alex's social vulnerability is linked to and organized by the physical vulnerability of his newborn self, and the misshapen adolescent—awkwardly and unappealingly embodied—that grows from that newborn. The symbolic logic is that the fragility of Alex is an alter physical manifestation of my own terrifying and fragile embodiment, which can easily collapse or become mutilated. But there is no safe "it's just a story" frame to recover equilibrium or logic of justice to assure that the order of the world will be set right by the status quo. Alex will go back to school in the fall. Our fragility will be out in the world, limping down the halls, subject to the whims of bullies unless we do what some of the parents do, and work to stop "bullying," an act which has become a shape-shifting force that transforms 13 year-old bullies into monsters, and *feels* like physical danger and emotional isolation. It is powerful because we too are vulnerable.

Again, the film begins with and consistently enforces a relational context, one that invites and seduces the viewer into a special relationship with the children, and one capable of evoking tremendous emotion. The actions we are to understand, personally and emotionally, as bullying are therefore presented in this context—how we are supposed to *feel* about them and their human consequences has already been shown. The scenes that *are* bullying, as presented in this film, are those of verbal abuse.

For Hirsch, the *social* scene of bullying is not found in demographics or large cultural categories. The real world evidentiary status of *Bully's* images

works to link verbal abuse and social isolation to its situational context and consequences—its scene—rhetorically transforming the viewer’s experience from one of objective distance to immediacy and identification. Viewers are invited to identify with the *embodied* experience of social abuse in concrete manifestations that play out in social categories of inclusion and exclusion. The verbal brutality we see is bracing. At one point an older boy who rides on the bus every day with Alex tells him, “I will fucking end you, and stuff a broomstick up your ass.”

As Alex’s parents question him after hearing that he was harassed and threatened on the school bus, we can’t help but identify with the incredulity of his parents when Alex describes his tormentors as his friends, but we have also felt the isolation of the “good” moments at school when Alex is not being bullied and walking alone down the hallway—or worse yet, walking through a bustling, chattering group of classmates as though he were invisible. We both know, but can’t believe that the isolation is worse than the abuse we have experienced with him. The result is that the audience is drawn to understand “bullying” with an emotional logic that leaves rational argument as secondary.

A.O. Scott observes in his *New York Times* review,
At times I found myself craving more analysis, a more explicit discussion of how the problem of bullying is connected to the broader issues of homophobia, education and violence in American life. But those issues are embedded in every story the

film has to tell. Its primary intent is to stir feelings rather than to construct theories or make arguments (2012).

Indeed, the film makes little effort to address the intellect. There are almost no statistics provided. We get little sense of the demographic scope of the problem. There is no expert testimony explaining the dynamics of bullying with its causes and treatments. The film works hard then to discard objectivity as a lens to view bullying. The bullying that we see on-screen takes place in the context of having gotten to know and identify with Alex, and while there may well be stories to the lives of those doing the bullying that would make the tragedy we see more deep and complex, standing with Alex and his parents in their perspective feels like where we should be.

A third scenic element further intensifies our sense of injustice and identification with the alienation of the abused children—the impersonality and non-empathic responses of the school administrators who are dealing with this problem. The scene of abuse widens to include the insensitivity of our institutions to understand and respond in human ways—the ways the audience has been encouraged to feel. We hear the school administrators in Sioux City explaining to a traumatized Alex that he should be willing to shake hands with one of his tormentors who seems emotionally untroubled by what he has done and easily apologizes. We hear the logic of the school administrators in Georgia who casually explain “boys will be boys” and “Buses are notoriously bad places for lots of kids.” In light of what Hirsch has shown us, the attitudes of administrators, ranging from exasperation to detachment, seem inexcusable in their best moments and casually inhumane

in their worst. Again and again we hear administrators describing the situation in terms of the institution. Stacked up together and put in the context of our identification with the bullied children and their parents, this cool, detached point of view brings to mind the depictions of administrators and faculty in Wiseman's *High School* (1968), which starts with images of factories to evoke a dehumanizing school-as-factory image. As in *High School*, those in charge in *Bully* come across as well-meaning at times. But even in these moments their responses are sad in light of the abuse that we have come to see as all-too-real.²³

Yet, at one level, the identification *Bully* achieves is very subtle and sophisticated given the particular characters it features. The film implicitly reacts to the notion that people are enabled to bully through their capacity to see people as "other." A work on bullying that leads the audience to identify, for example, with someone easy to shift from form one of "them" to one of "us" would miss the point. Instead *Bully* gets us to identify with kids who are hard to see as one of "us."

Again, the unwarranted acts of cruelty in the film become emotionally engaging and shape our sense of what bullying is to the extent we identify with those being attacked. Yet, these are not beautiful children measured by the norms of popular U.S. culture. Students at Alex's school call him "fish face." He is lanky, moves awkwardly, and has a narrow face with protruding eyes and mouth. Likewise, Kelby does not fit standards for feminine beauty,

²³ While those in charge at the schools featured in *Bully* never come across with the authoritarian capriciousness that Benson and Anderson (2002, p. 111) see as structuring a double bind in *High School*, the same detached ethos of administrative concern seems at work in both films.

although she is more appealing physically, and, therefore not surprisingly, she is less isolated from peers. While the story of her abuse is harsh, for example signs on her locker at school that read "Faggots aren't welcome here," we see her together with a small cadre of loyal friends who offer her support and companionship, something Alex and Ja'Meya do not have. Ja'Meya is a dark skinned girl with a face covered in freckles and awkward features, who, like Alex, reads as physically unappealing. The material manifestation of each of these children is in various ways code-able as "other."

My final point about the way scene transforms the acts of bullying concerns these physical representations of the children themselves. Children are bullied because of their differences, and often those differences are physical. The phrase "a face only a mother could love," however unfortunate, gets at the way that these acts of bullying have been storied for us as viewers.

The physical characteristics of Alex and Ja'Maya lend a certain credibility to the film. The mediascape's (Appadurai, 1990) logic of beauty demands rewards for those who fit its standards and expects a price be paid from those who do not. That children in the film can read these standards of beauty and act accordingly becomes an unspoken, yet no less unsettling specter haunting the film. The bodies of the children do matter. Miss-shaped people can be expected to act in miss-shaped ways. A "blame-the-victim" rupture hovers over the film.

Bully urges us to push aside the visual logic of beauty and nonetheless identify with Alex and Ja'Meya through the identifications of parenting, and through the visceral impact of watching abuse scenically marked as "real" and set in relief as real by those who would turn it into an abstraction. But the same scenic work that locates the "reality" of bullying for us—and invites our identification with the parents—also pushes the physical appearance of the children into our sense of the situation. An explanation of the bullying as a response to the oddity of the children hangs in the background, ever present as rhetorical move not made. So Hirsch invites us to experience difference as something we must set aside when considering bullying.

Representing Bullying

Most reviewers engaged *Bully* for its rhetorical work and discuss its emotional appeal to audiences—to this end the film was heralded as advancing social justice and reform surrounding the social problem of bullying. I choose the film because its rhetorical purposes and potentials seem undeniable and unambiguous. The ways in which *Bully* achieves these effects, however, raise the kinds of issues that preoccupy scholarly criticism of documentary film. Scholars and critics concerned with the special privilege and objectivity of documentary film are typically concerned with how faithfully or accurately documentary *represents* its subjects and objects, and *Bully* inspired this kind of criticism in the popular press as well. *Bully* affords us the opportunity to contrast the two points of view.

The representational frame was also present in the coverage of the film in the popular press. A good example of this kind of critique is a review

of the film by *Slate*.²⁴ The subheading of the *Slate* article is “The new documentary dangerously oversimplifies the connection between bullying and suicide” (Bazelon, 2012). The “danger” is attributed to the concern of a suicide prevention specialist who fears that making too tight a connection between bullying and suicide invites a linkage of the two in the minds of adolescents, possibly leading young people to see suicide as an appropriate response. Bazelon quotes the suicide prevention specialist as saying that since the two suicide situations portrayed in the film (together with the stories of several other *still-living* bullying victims) are framed almost entirely by bullying, the psychologist fears the diminishment of the “mental illness” frame as the “cause” of the suicides,

Young people who feel bullied could harken back to the movie, and it could be a powerful draw to suicide for them. If Tyler had been accurately portrayed as a kid with mental health challenges that were very hard for him to manage, he wouldn’t seem so attractive (Bazelon, 2012).

And so the film is evaluated by the author of the *Slate* review for the “truth” of its portrayal of Tyler’s suicide. Bazelon catalogues possible reasons for the suicide including mental illness and pressure for grades from his parents, and goes through the written records documenting Tyler’s alleged experiences as the target of bullying to find the not-surprising presence of alternative accounts of events by those accused of doing the bullying. She

²⁴ The *Chicago Tribune* review of the film is much more positive, but raises a similar concern about “balance;” “There’s a significant lapse in “Bully.” We rarely hear from any of the tormentors” (Phillips, 2012).

also notes that bullying is not mentioned in Tyler's suicide note. In the end, Bazelon makes a valuable point,

But given the larger set of facts about the death of Tyler Long, does *Bully* portray it responsibly? There are real people on the receiving end of these blame campaigns" (2012).

But Bazelon's bottom line returns us to the *terra infirma* of faulting a representation for failing to do what it cannot do,

By taking the parents' side so completely, and leaving out all the information that doesn't fit his narrative, Hirsch oversimplifies and distorts. His film is supposed to be a teaching tool, yet it offers some serious misimpressions about the connection between bullying and suicide, misimpressions that could have real effects on young viewers (2012).

While only a straw man defends oversimplification and distortion, and the substance of Bazelon's critique is a valuable contribution to understanding the film, I argue that the rhetorical work of Hirsch's documentary is more subtle and credible than the *Slate* review suggests. The documentary asserts its "truth" as pathos, not logos. It wants us to *feel* the act of bullying as real. It doesn't want us to see bullying objectively but rather as a cultural phenomenon. It wants us to see bullying as something real happening to kids we come to care about.

Conclusion

In following Burke (1969a) and attending to how "scene" modifies the central acts presented in documentaries, it is clear that at minimum scene

works like a gravitational force, grounding the actions portrayed in the “real” world of our experience, but it often goes further to impart a specific character on actions to help solicit audience identification and intensify their impact on audiences.

More specifically, my focus on *Bully* (Hirsch, 2011) shows important ways that a documentary can accomplish this identification and intensification. *Bully* uses images to shape what it means “to bully” as something more than a social problem or unfortunate event. By drawing us into a powerful identification with the parents of the children it features, the film invites viewers to frame the actions they see through the perspective of parental care and attachment. This profoundly personal sense is enhanced by locating the scene of bullying in the midst of the power of social isolation—a scene capable of making Alex excuse his tormentors rather than think of himself as friendless. Through this intimate perspective, the context of the film is set up to resist any pull toward abstraction or “objective” distance by Hirsch’s depiction of the detached, institutional perspective of school administrators. And our identification with the young people featured in the film is made both more complex and more powerful by the work the film does to eschew any easy identification with the children themselves. We are invited to identify with characters that the film marks as different. *Bully* invites us to a place farther away than the predictable sympathy for the mistreatment of someone a lot like me. We are invited to *become* an “other,” and therein see the bullying of someone different as also profoundly wrong and profoundly in need of remedy.

This is Hirsch's purpose, to immerse us in the anguish of those being bullied and their families, and to see any discussions about what to do about it from their perspective. It is doubtlessly important to challenge the film for what it is not. However, the very statistical, demographic, "objective" frame that sponsors some of the critiques of *Bully* is also part of the implicit concern of the film; too much stress on the value of seeing bullying "objectively," as an abstract phenomenon, risks minimizing what he shows as the central importance of the pain of these children and their families. *Bully* shows the situations and bodies it depicts as every bit as real a properly balanced statistical correlation between bullying and suicide rates, or the probable circumstances that help account for the actions of the bullies or school administrators.

Chapter Three: Documentary Scene Building Character

In Chapter Two I argued that the work documentaries do to influence viewers often relies on the way a film's scene structures its *action*. I examined examples of documentaries that depict social environments, human relationships, and even bodies in ways that emphasize the status of these scenic elements as real, therein helping to shape our understanding of actions ranging from eating fast food to bullying. In these films "scene" is key to the way they work *as documentaries*, that is, the ways they position their sounds and images as evidence for arguments the film is making and impressions it is managing. Because of film's flow of sounds and images, these scenic elements are felt as "experience" by the audience.

In this chapter, I examine films that can be said to feature a different core element of dramatism, that of *agent*. While all of the dramatisitic elements are present or implied in any given drama, some dramas, as well as other kinds of dramatic texts, seem to focus on and pivot around the motives and tensions of central characters. For example, there are many movies about the holocaust, but *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993) tells the story by focusing on the drama of one particular agent. Hamlet features agent: his situation, his agency, his sense of purpose, and so forth are all

present as factors, and arguably “to be or not to be” puts “who Hamlet is” and “how to be that” forward as central questions and pivotal motives for his actions.

My use of these standard pentadic elements and formulas is to help focus attention on the particular rhetorical power of documentary to depict “scene” and to point the audience toward the scene at crucial moments of evidence—always with the implicit claim or authority that “this is the real, material world” that is being depicted. In this chapter, I focus on how these scenic powers have special consequences and potentials for dramas that highlight agents. Often documentary films that foreground “agent” feature the inner-world, or essential character of those they portray, but convey this interiority by appeal to scenic evidence so that when scene interacts with agent, the setting tells us something about how to understand a character.

Documenting Character

Celebrity identity documentaries are almost too-obvious as examples of films using scene to structure our perception of character—*Madonna: Truth or Dare* (Keshishian, 1991) perhaps standing as a prototype. “Real” behind-the-scene footage serves as evidence of the *real* person behind the famous façade, in this case an auteur at the creative center of an entourage in her 1990 *Blond Ambition* tour. She is an artist whose passion for her craft and willingness to transgress boundaries are verified and seen as infusing her every moment, including those off-stage moments which are ironically now on-stage in the film. In other words, these films tend to work on behalf of

the “authenticity” of celebrities by assuring us that the façade squares with the real person (Tolson, 2001).

The spate of biopics that have emerged in the last few decades illustrate the dramatism of the scene-act relationship. While most documentarians would not classify these as documentary films, the people are real and presumably the enlarged “scene” of their backgrounds and biographies is meant also to be perceived as such. The difference is not in their rhetoric or their purpose to document, but only in their permission to fictionalize and dramatize. Such films take real agents with whom the audience has media-intimate relations, and provides the backstage drama of their life as the ‘scene’ of their ascension to celebrity status. And it is not always celebrities who are revealed as agent in the backdrop of a documented scene: Werner Herzog’s body of documentaries seems especially to focus on individual characters, their interiority and their motives, but always with reference to the power and reality of their situations. We thus experience the unreality of the imagined identity of *Grizzly Man* (Herzog, 2005), confronted by the stark reality of the situation into which he put himself.

Another example of the how character can be modified and transformed by the documentary power of scene occurs in the Academy Award nominated documentary *Spellbound* (Blitz, 2002), about the drama of a national spelling bee competition. A *New York Times* review called the film “nail-biting suspense to put all the thrill-mongering screenwriters in Hollywood to shame” (Scott, 2003).

On one level, the shape of the drama is between agent and the act that forms the focus of the film: getting to know the children who compete, their quirkiness, their intensity, their passion, restructures the “action” of the spelling bee. We “get to know the children” because the documentary reveals their backgrounds, showing us a range of situations from privilege to new-immigrants striving for success. We come to see the extraordinary commitment they and their families devote to this competition in terms of time, money, and personal and family sacrifice. We come to understand spelling bees as more than a sterile academic oddity; the film structures its story in parallel with a basic situation we’ve seen before in almost *any* athlete profile. The film is compelling in part because we know the “thrill of victory, agony of defeat” arc it’s following, with its promise that all things can be bent under the force of human will. We are given a new, unusual example that extends the promise of success-by-hard-work-and-dedication to a group of egghead misfits that might otherwise seem to escape the eternal truth of the competitive glories promised by the great sports metaphor.

This of course could be told as a fictional account. So what difference does documentary make on the level of what the film *does*? We are continually re-immersed in “scene”—the details of the children’s lives and their physical surroundings. On one level, this constant scenic reference is just a simple framing technique, a repeated, general note to the viewer, “hey, remember... this stuff is *real*.” More fundamentally, the scene works to verify the *promise* of the film and the cultural narrative it plays into. Fully

giving oneself over to the competitive spirit, and approaching challenge with unrelenting passion in the face of great obstacles, is at the apex of what makes us human: our ability to bend circumstance to our own will. And, see, it really works, in real life!

A story can help us *imagine* something as possible, but a “true” story promises that something *is* possible. In rhetorical terms, the story becomes *evidence*. *Mad Hot Ballroom* (Argrelo, 2005), which shows the unlikely transformation of mostly-minority elementary school children into ballroom dancing champions, is another example of the commonness and appeal of this reality-success narrative. The lesson here is that the physical world will yield to those with enough passion and perseverance. The only higher grossing documentary in 2005 was *March of the Penguins* (Jacquet, 2005), where arguably the same powers were at work: we have the expansive, dramatic and breathtaking scene of the penguins’ “natural” behaviors, yet what emerges from the dramatization is a heroic character. It is a narrative of agenthood and agency, as the interpretation ascribes anthropomorphic motives to these beings, a common trope of nature documentary.

Character can be reduced, dissolved or contextualized by scene—but scene can also be used to build the identity of the agents and ascribe character to them. Here character is not built by what the agents say, but what is shown in scenic depiction of their “acts.” An interesting moment in dramatic logic is had. Because we identify with the “acts” of the birds, we create their anthropomorphic “agent” motivations, since in human terms only agents commit such acts. On the other hand, a strict materialist, physicalist

or behaviorist logic would have the birds and other animals simply “moving” through their world as part of nature.²⁵

Character as Scene

A very interesting case of how documentary technique can render *agent as the scene*, with powerful rhetorical consequences, can be had in Michael Moore’s famous depiction of George W. Bush in the film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), which is the top grossing documentary of all time.²⁶ Moore is the on-camera rhetor in the film. He directly and often humorously argues his case against the competency of the Bush administration, the folly of the war on terrorism and its corollary military occupation of Iraq. Yet the most powerful moment of the film—more crucial to the drama and rhetoric of the film than anything Moore could verbalize—is an extended shot of Bush in the minutes after receiving the news that a second plane hit the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. For seven minutes we watch the President seated and squirming, panic and uncertainty in his eyes, periodically biting his lip while holding the copy of *My Pet Goat*, which he had just been reading to second-grade school children in Florida. The film had already established the frame of special access to “behind-the-scenes reality,” by showing us people preparing for television interviews, with shots that obviously were never meant to be viewed by the public (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2008, p. 37). This helps establish the authority and power of *Fahrenheit 9/11*. It reveals the “real” scene behind the television

²⁵ This motion-action distinction is found throughout Burke’s *A Grammar of Motives* (1969a) where he lays out his pentad of dramatistic terms, and elsewhere in his work. See especially “(Nonsymbolic) Motion/(Symbolic Action)” (Burke, 1978).

²⁶ See <http://boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>.

performances and the staging of politics in general, a kind of “emperor’s new clothes” ethos for which Moore is trademark. The extended, seven-minute, almost torturous close up on Bush’s situation when he received the news, imbues a character to his presidency, and I argue, for the purposes of Moore’s dramatization, becomes the very scene of the 9/11 attack.

The *inaction* of the scene with Bush conjures the *missing* act of springing to the country’s defense, but the evocation of scene itself is devastating. We see the President’s aide whisper in his ear and then watch the static shot of the seated, inactive President. The scene continues, minute after minute, and viewers are left to wonder at the image of “Father,” sitting in front of children, remaining inactive and failing to respond to an alert of danger. As the time progresses, the miss-match of scene and the effect we expect it to call forth from the agent becomes excruciating. We are given no hint that there might be a plausible explanation to account for what we see/don't see.²⁷

The extended duration of the shot eventually exhausts the semantic interplay of the visuals and calls attention to the shot as shot. The viewer’s attention is drawn from content to form. The implicit process of gathering this footage is left to bubble up; this videotape rolled and a camera focused on this particular scene for seven uninterrupted minutes, and he just sat there. Scene is evoked *as scene*, and it invites the audience to interpret

²⁷ Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2008, p. 37) read this scene similarly, but ultimately as an effort by Moore to portray Bush as inauthentic; the scene is shown as a photo opportunity (an attempt to project an *image*) that he choose to go ahead with despite knowing the first plane had hit one of the towers.

President Bush in light of evidence that seems inexplicable as anything other than a staggering vacuum of leadership.²⁸

This one scene, more than anything that could be said or proven with other kinds of documentation, can be *experienced* by the audience as the context of the story of our reactions to 9/11 as a country and our subsequent involvement in Iraq. What gets said and done in the documenting of Bush administration rhetoric—from bold speeches and threats to the enemy, to declarations of “mission accomplished”—is narratively experienced *in the context of* a certain kind of character which has been revealed by this scene—a scene and revelation that we did not actually experience in “real history.” In short, I argue, the rhetoric of this film, its explicit and implicit argumentation, is accomplished to an overwhelming degree by this *transformation* of the “scene” of 9/11. The story told by administration rhetoric, progressively used to justify a definition of ourselves “at war” with terrorism and at war in Iraq as part of that effort, depicts the scene of 9/11 as an America at peace pursuing our freedom, with innocent women and children being brutally and senselessly attacked in an act of terror. Moore does not (and does not have to) “argue” with that context or declare it

²⁸ Borda’s (2008) rhetorical analysis of the conservative response films *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Celsius 41.11* offers an interesting contrast to the scene-agent rhetoric of Moore’s film. The response films claim to (and she thinks fail at) a dialectical engagement with Moore’s film’s “arguments.” Borda’s discussion notes, but doesn’t flesh out that the response films critique *Fahrenheit 9/11* as *representation*, that is, as inaccurate and misleading—not “true.” Borda argues that the response films fail to actually engage Moore’s film and instead advance their own arguments with imagistic “spectacle.” Borda (2008, pp. 74-75) quotes a *Washington Post* review to note the difference between Moore’s work and the response films: “Moore’s film not only preaches to the choir but also makes a creative effort to stir new emotions; *Celsius 41.11* presumes the emotional state of [its] audience going in—fear of terrorists, anger at the left—and limits itself to stoking more of the same” (Kennicott, 2004).

untrue: what he gives us, instead, is an alternative scene of the entire post 9/11 political history of anti-terrorism and Iraqi warfare; it began in the drama of the Bush presidency, where a weak and ineffectual President was reading to school children and unable to act to respond to this horrific incident. The *dramatistic* scene of Moore's narrative, therefore, is Bush's character as revealed in this *real* situation, and the story that follows is a response to and development of that basic situation.

Naked on the Inside: The Surface of the Self

A very interesting, albeit extraordinary and possibly extreme example of documentary's dramatistic power to fashion the scene for agents occurs in Kim Farrant's Showtime channel documentary *Naked on the Inside* (2007). Here, the bodies of six people become, under the filmmaker's scrutiny, *both* bare matter-of-fact surfaces *and* complex and overdetermined sites for social expectations and the negotiation of self.

As with *Bully* (Hirsch, 2011), *Naked on the Inside* is structured in large part by rhetorical appeal to embodiment as the form of its evidentiary status. As each character in the film is introduced, her or his body is quickly positioned as definitional: David Toole, a dancer born without legs; supermodel Carré Otis; Marcus, a transgender religion teacher in Taiwan; fat activist Shirley Sheffield; former gang member Jose Aleman; and Rick Stray, an artist with breast cancer.

Farrant locates what Burke (1969a) calls the "ratio" between scene and agent within the drama of each person's life. That is, each of them struggles for identity, acceptance, normality, and the kinds of things we all

wish to have for ourselves. Yet for each, the audience directly and materially experiences the disconnect between those expectations, or that desired self, and the reality of their physical bodies. In this way, each “agent” here is a dramatic story, and the scene for that story, as revealed and reinforced in the visual telling of the documentary, is their individual body and its particular exceptionality.

Again, Farrant depicts the *bodies* of each of these six people as a *scene*, and as a context that literally shapes and reveals each person’s identity. The film invites viewers to understand that these men and women are who they are in the form of a particular body that defines them in particular ways. This in turn is shaped and presented (through exercise, diet, interaction, gesture, clothing and so forth) in line with the inner hopes, fears and desires the six express verbally. In other words, *Naked on the Inside* uses depictions of the bodies of the six featured people to explain to us who they “really are” by inviting viewers to see those bodies simultaneously as formative of self-identities, reflective of self-identities, and insufficient to (and exceeded by) those self-identities.

Through this appeal to the existential situation of embodiment, viewers are drawn to identify with the characters of the film and experience their own bodies as the location of a complicated series of relationships between self, culture and physical limitation—and drawn to question “common sense” assumptions about what bodies must mean. The rhetorical agenda of *Naked on the Inside* is to induce a similar awareness of disconnect between our idealized senses of who we are (or seek to be) and the material

reality of our bodies—a sense of body-self tension that Farrant describes as inspiration for the film.²⁹ *Naked on the Inside* plunges viewers into situations that make it impossible to not *feel* the paradox of embodiment: our bodies both *are* who we are yet are *not* us. It does this by getting us to identify with the people it presents. Their interviews pull us in. They talk about pain, struggles and feelings of inadequacy, and we are on common ground with them. We see their bodies, which are meaningful to us because we know how society codes them. And thus as these people express themselves, we too feel the disjuncture.

Some of this dynamic of connection and disconnection has to do with Farrant’s approach. The film begins with lock-down shots and the stark, flat “unlit” style of documentation that will continue through the film. We are *observing*; the body is evoked as material surface.

The first sequence Farrant presents after the film’s introduction features Dave Tool. While the introductory scenes and its title have cued viewers to be aware of bodies as a theme for what will follow, we are first introduced to Dave through a title locating him in a particular real-world place, “Leeds UK,” and a shot of an urban street scene.

We don’t know yet that he has no legs.

The film cuts to a shot from a camera positioned extremely low and we see Dave, wearing a black T-Shirt and laying on the ground, reaching forward directly toward us with his arms, which then start pulling him quickly toward the camera. He comes right to the lens. We see part of his face,

²⁹ See Farrant’s interview on the DVD release of *Naked on the Inside*. I refer to this in more detail in the conclusion of this chapter.

distorted by proximity to the lens, break in to a smile. Meanwhile, we hear in voice-over, "How would I describe my body? Now there's a very good question. Interesting."

The shot cuts to Dave on camera, again, simply lit, with no obvious back-light and a plain white wall behind him—a subtle visual cue that this is not a formal interview with standard "professional" lighting and set-up. Dave's head seems unusually low on his torso, and his shoulder looks pinched in. We can see there is something unusual about his appearance, but we're not quite sure what it is yet. Dave continues, "I like my eyes. I like my hands. Um... my arms are okay, and then I start running out of options so... [he has now looked up at the interviewer and is smiling] I don't think about it too much." Farrant cuts to another title screen, "Dave Tool: Dancer," and we are set up to understand the film will be about body and identity.

The next image, which we now can view in terms of "dance," is a lingering lockdown shot showing Dave apparently walking along the beach from screen right to screen left, wearing the same black shirt we just saw him in. His torso seems hunched a bit, and he seems to be holding another human torso spilling out from the area of his stomach. The second torso is reaching forward with its hands onto the beach, and walking along on hands. The familiarity of the calm waters lapping against a flat, plain, sandy beach, while someone slowly walks through the screen, becomes confusing interposed with the image of one set of legs and two upper-bodies. The scene is impossible given the standard expectations we have for bodies. We

are in a documentary, and we see an image that seems impossible for documentary. A title comes on-screen, "The Cost of Living: DV8 Physical Theater," and the seemingly impossible spectacle of the image is held at bay a bit, bracketed as theater. Farrant refuses us yet the recognizable, clear-cut categories of "handicapped" or "disabled" and instead frames our experience of Dave's body for us as confusing.

In the next scene we see black and white photos of a younger Dave that include a hint of what might be a wheelchair, and our uncertainty is heightened. Over these images we hear a female voice begin to ask, "Do you see yourself as sexy?" Dave responds,

I think I give out an attractive persona. I'm quite good looking, I'm quite humorous, but sexy just suggests something, it's almost like another level to attractive and I'm not ready to accept that yet. I'm attractive reaching up to sexy at the moment.

He smiles and gestures up with his arm and finishes the point, then pauses a bit uncomfortably, "I've moved up from dull."

In the next shot, we are in a dance studio and the camera is again very low. Once more we see Dave in the foreground, dragging himself along the floor and moving toward us on his hands, swinging back and forth, left to right. We see shorts with no legs. What we finally see is the visual evidence that explains what we have seen: Dave has no legs at all.

His movements are synchronized with the same movement of the people behind him, dressed similarly and moving in the same way. But the

others have legs extending behind them. Because of the choreography and movement, Dave seems to move freely and the others seem to be dragging their legs behind them as a burden. Then once again, "The Cost of Living: DV8 Physical Theater" comes up as a title on the screen.

In this opening sequence Farrant introduces us to David Tool in a way that begins on the common ground of embodiment and personal identity. David Tool has a body, like we do, and he stands in relationship to his own body. He evaluates it, uses it as a means of self-expression, and feels its limits. He describes a kind of embodiment the audience knows: the matter-of-fact, primarily under the threshold of awareness, and largely overlooked ever-present given-ness of physically situated experience. By the time the audience realizes that Dave is quite different from them, he has been defined with the at-first-glance paradoxical identity of legless dancer. Viewers have been led into a depiction of body-identity relationship that makes sense of what we've seen, and also *fails* to make sense of it. Yet the scenic, bodily reality now governs our understanding of Dave Tool. It forms the context of everything that will follow.

Later in the film, when focus shifts back again from the other characters to Dave, we hear him talk about the ways his life is whole, the ways he has figured out how to "get by," to live a life composed of ordinary everyday activities the film's audience is likely to recognize: getting things down from high places, navigating past obstacles to his wheelchair, and so forth. We are seemingly in the familiar narrative terrain of the disabled person who lives a "whole" life just like everyone else. This is the

inspirational and self-affirming story of the value of “ordinary” life, certified in its value by the heroic efforts of a person achieving it through extraordinary effort.

Farrant instead leads us more deeply into Dave Tool’s vision of himself as whole and dramatizes this dynamic for us. The film shows Dave Tool talking about his girlfriend. We hear and understand his need to think of himself in these terms that echo the moment at the start of the film where he struggles to describe himself as sexy. As a person, he *needs* to feel he can be sexy, and we identify with this. Being a sexual person is part of being a person. Through countless films, songs, novels and television we are soaked in the cultural presumption that a romantic relationship is the very meaning of life. To have that excluded from possibility is literally de-humanizing.

Yet we are also wary of society’s verdict on the sexy question for Dave Tool. Farrant’s camera is unflinching. We are not allowed to forget that he is a man with no legs, or overlook the hunched, pinched shoulders that make physical sense when we see him walk on his hands, but twists him from the contours of the social norms of beauty as we have come to expect them to be portrayed.

We also hear his mother talk about Dave not “finding someone” as her biggest fear, and we hear her delight at his girlfriend. We seem to be being led down a path toward the cliché that there is someone for everyone—until we hear him tell us about not being with his girlfriend anymore. Meanwhile, Farrant shows us, and lingers on, his legless body. We know why there is no

girlfriend, at least in part. We *feel* the betrayal of his body. Dave Tool's body has become the context for understanding him, and we know how it defines him. And we feel the capriciousness of the likely exclusion of this kind, vulnerable, and resilient man via the cultural codes according to which bodies are sexy or not.

Ironically, the character whom *Naked on the Inside* introduces to us next establishes a kind of reverse of this scenic relationship. We remain in the context of body-as-scene, but the drama for Caré Otis is her struggle to control her body, the work of an agent to shape and modify the meaning of her bodily scene. The segment that introduces Caré begins with her exercising by jogging in a hilly countryside "nature" scene labeled for us by the film as Marin County California. Against this setting, Caré tells us,

What goes into the one snapshot that people go, "body beautiful" was hell, total hell... and that was my life, complete obsession to achieve body beautiful that I never even recognized for a glimpse of the moment.

The film cuts to modeling shots of her, and in contrast to David Tool, Caré Otis' body appears nearly perfectly aligned with idealized cultural standards of beauty.

She continues, "I felt like I was the biggest fucking con artist in the world."

As Caré continues, she describes the regime of exercise and dieting that went into maintaining this body, the cutting criticisms of her for being "fat" after gaining just a few pounds, and a constant worry about her body

being to fat. She describes a well of anxiety that she tells us made her crave reassurance about her appearance, eventually through sex. But the images we see of Caré Otis do not align with her words. The modeling images portray Caré according to the expectations of the genre. We can easily read these images of a confident, alluring woman—a flawless object of desire depicted in an advertising world of harmony and material fulfillment. We can see how these images correlate to Caré, and how they are images *of* her. Yet Farrant’s camera does very different work. In this sense, the “nakedness” portrayed in the film becomes powerful as it reveals Caré’s body.

Farrant’s camera shifts attention to the surfaces of her body in matter-of-fact detail. We are immersed in a raw physical presence that becomes so banal that the swirl of semiotic pretense seems to fall away, even if just for a moment. So when we see Caré Ottis’ naked body, the details we have heard from her about the constant struggle to make that body conform to the disciplines of the fashion industry seem oddly inappropriate to the banality that Farrant’s camera finds. The film pulls off what the early Russian documentarian Dziga Vertov (1984) called *ostranenie*, a making of the familiar unfamiliar—an idea he borrowed from Viktor Shklovsky. Ottis’ physical beauty is meaningful too as belonging the body we see. Still, we’ve been so drawn into the matter-of-fact physical presence of her body, that while we “get” that “beauty” and all the freight that it brings, we can also see that beauty as arbitrary, not *of* that “materiality.” It is something else.

The film invites us into the body *as a physical surface*, and into a consideration of the constructed-ness of the symbolic meanings that pass themselves off as material truth: fat is ugly; disabled is just sad and swaddled in limitation; gender is fixed. The film works to collapse these in two ways: first by inviting us into an experience of the tyranny of these social meanings for real people, and second by closely interrogating the surfaces that often carry the meanings. The social presumptions we casually attribute to bodies dissolve away under an intense scrutiny of those bodies as just matter-or-fact surface.

There is an interesting correlation then between the body, which oscillates continuously between given fact and profound social symbol, and the film image that is literally formed by an interaction with the physical surfaces of what it depicts. This is what Peirce (1931-58) calls indexical representation—images caused by light waves bouncing off material surfaces and chemically interacting with film or generating a reaction in digital pixels. Yet like the physical body, this physically shaped filmic image is capable of radical recontextualization—often simultaneously appearing as *both* particular and generalizable. Farrant’s project is echoed in the form of the medium. Literally giving form to the self, she explores the way our finite bodies are profoundly malleable while inescapable in their givenness and are always determined in a social world of meaning. Farrant’s film strips its characters in each sense.

Naked on the Inside shows Caré Otis’ success at transforming her body but depicts the cost of that as a distortion of her “self,” a self not plastic

enough to hold that body in place without in turn being contorted by it. *Naked on the Inside* then uses body-scene to show a tortured relationship between self and culture, and it uses that scene to transform our understanding of those bodies.

The others portrayed in the film also dramatize this tension between body-scene and self. For example, in the film's depiction of Shirley Sheffield, our understanding of her relationship to her body is modified through a reconfiguring of our understanding of her body as scene. In other words, in this segment the mode of disjuncture between body-scene and self is revealed through a transformation.

Shirley, a woman who is shown as very fat, talks about herself as being beautiful despite her description of years of derision from others, often being cast with the backhanded compliment, "but you have such a pretty face." We *understand* the experiences she describes about being taunted as disgusting and fat, and being pushed away by others. We know this is how our culture reads fat bodies. But we also identify with the *plaintive* tone in her voice as she describes herself as beautiful. We have heard her tell us about years of trying to get thin—and failing.

Over the footage of Shirley talking about being fat, Farrant shows us improbable footage of Shirley doing synchronized swimming with a group of other obese women. On one level, this footage is culturally recognizable as ridiculous—synchronized swimming is like ballet, done by beautiful (thin) women moving their bodies in beautiful ways. These women are fat! But we also see the languid elegance and shifting patterns of color of the swimming

suits against the blue water. The scene becomes an experience of gracefully morphing shapes when seen from a distance. These bodies are making something beautiful; they can be seen expressing beauty. In other words, the film reframes the body-scene from fat and unappealing to beautiful by shift in perspective.³⁰ As we move through this segment of the film, we come to feel both the relentless symbolizing of bodies coded as fat, *and* the disjuncture of those meanings with the embodied self we encounter in Shirley. We come to feel the unfair provisionality of the symbol.

The film helps us explicitly experience the often presumed or hidden symbolic work our bodies do. It invites us instead to resist those presumptions and thoughtfully embrace paradox.

The other characters in the film feature the same dramatic tension in similar ways.

Rick Stray exists in a rupture between a self that wants to create and express a passion for her life as a mother and artist, and a body being made frail by metastasizing breast cancer. We watch body and self diverge as she tries in vain to talk away, hope away, and paint away an embodied situation that will not submit. In the end, neither body nor soul yield; she dies, but to her last refuses the definition of a dying body herself.

³⁰ Burke uses the term "circumference" to help explain this sort of rhetorical move. According to Burke, there is an inherent flexibility in the possible scope of a scene and its capacity to interact with both act and agent; "implicit in the terms chosen, there are "circumferences" of varying scope. Motivationally, they involve such relationships as are revealed in the analysis of the scene-act and scene-agent ratios whereby the quality of the context in which a subject is placed will affect the quality of the subject placed in that context" (Burke, 1969a, pp. 77-78).

Jose Guzman's portrayal in the introduction of the film parallels the depiction of him that will be extended later. We see him sitting on a bed in a cheap hotel room, wearing shorts but no shirt, body facing away from the lens, his right forearm across himself protectively. We hear Farrant's soft voice off camera, "So... how do you feel about being filmed completely naked?"

Jose says, "Right Now?"

Farrant responds, "Whenever you're ready," And Jose looks away for a moment.

After a long pause, Jose says: "Can I get under the covers? And just stay there naked?" Jose's body—a body he later describes as inflicting death—is marked as awkward and fragile, the intimate surface of a self that is also an unprotected gateway standing between that self and the onrush of social scrutiny, judgment and expectation. But for Jose, perhaps as a man, the signifying of his body is awkward when he confronts it directly.

While the gendered cultural standards of embodied meaning and beauty can be seen a bit more directly at work in Farrant's portrayal of both Shirley Sheffield and Caré Otis, the link between gender and embodiment comes into full focus as the film tells the story of Marcus Van. Marcus, a black trans man teaching religion in Taiwan, is the most obviously conflicted of Farrant's characters about revealing his body, and never does completely expose the breasts that he usually binds, unwilling to expose the physical evidence that is both self and betrayal of self. His awkwardness about undressing becomes in the end almost frantic. Again, scene reveals and

omits. Marcus' voice, facial hair, clothes and demeanor all code for male, yet we learn that Marcus' experience as a young woman felt unsustainable to him in the context of his masculine-marked body. For him, his body codes for male except in the physical details that cruelly are the most privileged markers of gender. His body betrays his inner self and Marcus cannot bring himself to completely reveal it to the camera. For Marcus, the camera's scrutiny threatens to change the status of his body; it threatens to re-feminize him.

In one sense, the documentary is a meditation on the gendered gaze, relentlessly structuring self and social meaning according to the contours of divergent codes for the meanings of physical embodiment. For example, in the opening scene, the women all directly engage the camera, explicitly acknowledging the "looking" of the camera (Mulvey, 1999). Other than Marcus, the men do not. For the women and Marcus, we see a direct consciousness and self-monitoring of the attention of the camera on their physical selves and the active symbolizing of their bodies—the expected gendered engagement of women as self-consciously displayed for the look of the other, the male gaze of the camera.

Yet here, because the nakedness has neither the clinical close focus of the fetishistic particularity of porn, or the idealized formalism of "art" and commodified female form, it instead is linked to a very matter-of-fact *looking*, we are not invited to encounter these bodies as objects of pleasure. Their surfaces become dis-articulated from erotic symbol and become instead

a surface. The images of the male bodies remain a bit bracketed. We're not sure what to make of their inclusion.

But the address of the camera is the address of both subjects and objects. As audience, we are invited to identify with the predicament of embodiment as a little-controlled semantic imposition. We are drawn into these characters because we are, like them, living in bodies we do not choose and interacting in a world that imposes meaning on us based on the resistant surfaces of our physicality. Their anguish, their outrage at the radically random circumstantial character of the primary social symbol of their self-identity becomes ours. This move snatches away bodies as the expected containers for the emotion we are invited into. Instead of a distancing pity for the predicament of the individual who draws the bad cards of physical embodiment, affective energy has nowhere to settle but as frustration with the categories of social meaning that so rigorously determine the meanings of bodily appearance.

As a result, the signification of the body is opened up for critical analysis and discussion, and our emotional encounter with the embodiment becomes an argument about the assumptions we make about bodies and meaning. The emperor is wearing no clothes.

Conclusion

As I have indicated, to document something is to account for its existence in a context. One of the ways that documentaries shape our perceptions and attitudes is by placing characters in a context, a "scene" that defines them. Often our keenest questions about a situation are about

people and their setting, which often are central to making dramatic sense of them. Our interest in others is a key part of what makes stories compelling because their similarity or difference to us helps define our relationship to the story. To the extent these documentaries are working *as documentaries*, they use scene to draw us toward identification with characters and cast these identifications with an evidentiary aura. But as we have seen, scene can also work to destabilize our expectations about agents.

Naked on the Inside makes for an affecting and compelling narrative, and does this through the generative capacity of the documentary's portrayals. The text structures itself as an invitation to think about and discuss the ways race, gender, national culture, violence and beauty intersect in bodies—and the way bodies become the material point for negotiating self in and through culture. Farrant's documentary invites consideration of the ways the given circumstances of embodiment shape who we are, and the forces of convention that push us to shape our bodies to fit our social world and its expectations.

Kim Farrant says in her interview on the DVD release of *Naked on the Inside*,

I felt like I had a discomfort within my own skin. A separation between who I was and what my body was. And my body kind of defined me in a way, and I wanted to know if other people felt like that.³¹

³¹ This is my transcription of DVD bonus track interview.

In the interview Farrant described a disconnection between her intellectual desire to accept her body and her deep personal feelings of discomfort.

Farrant saw the raw fact of the body as perhaps a way to explore this:

It was this discomfort with being naked, in that when I'm naked it's not just that you can see my skin or my flesh or my curves or my flaws or whatever, it's that I felt I couldn't hide what was in here, what was my interior self, my vulnerabilities, my longing my hurt my love my desire... so nakedness, I suddenly realized, was like an access into something beyond words to a state that was I suppose like a deeper truth.

This existential foundation of body and "deeper" self as mutually implicated, yet alien parts, lures viewers into a nest of questions about the ways race, gender, national culture, violence and beauty intersect in bodies—and the way bodies become the material point for negotiating self in and through culture.

The film invites us to enter into the interplay of "body" and "soul" as a lived experience, and ultimately does this in a way that destabilizes the very connection it relies on. The impossible equivalency of "material" bodies and the "immaterial" psychological experience of self-identity both ruptures and holds, and a film with no explicit philosophical pretense leaves us with a kind of reflexive, Heideggerian sense of our own selves as existing in and relating to the world as *embodied*, social beings.

Chapter Four:

Documentary Agency

My central argument has been that the ways in which documentary depicts and refers to the "reality" outside of the film is a special vehicle for the doing of filmic rhetoric, and has special implications for how we assess the objectivity or representational fidelity of documentary. To explore these relationships, I have proposed borrowing the basic elements of dramatic analysis to observe that the *scenic* element of documentary drama tends to be amplified, and serves to anchor the other dramatic elements of act, agent, agency, and purpose.

In Chapters Two and Three, I looked at the ways in which documentary does "act" and "agent" through a special emphasis and use of "scene." Burke calls these "the big three" as concerns the pentadic elements (1969a, p. 274), and this makes sense: character (agent) and plot (action) are the two traditional Aristotelian components of drama, whereas "scene" simply, as Burke notes, is always there "containing" or framing them in a logically proportionate way. This leaves "agency and purpose," by inference, as the "little two." As Burke notes somewhat cryptically, these two have a special relationship to each other and to dramatism itself, as agency and purpose represent the "means and ends" by and toward which the

characters, and the drama's plot itself, move (Burke, 1969a, p. 161).

Dramatically our attention is easily drawn to the common ethical concerns implicit in means/ends relationships as our ends justify our means, and our means only make sense in relation to the ends we seek.

The central questions of this and the next chapter are therefore, "How does scene operate where documentary films feature agency?" and "How does scene operate where documentary films feature purpose?" In general, I have sought to avoid engaging any of the intricacies or complications of "pentadic analysis," which are both plentiful and interesting in Burke's (1969a) explorations and other scholars' use of these terms. Rather, I have used these elements primarily to demonstrate that documentary, considered as rhetoric, uses dramatic logic, and that considered as drama, documentary uses scene in predominant and special ways.

The *How* of Documentaries

In looking at particular documentary films and how these factors characterize their rhetorical rationales, it seems almost impossible to avoid some of the complexities of the relationship between agency and purpose. As we will see the special connection between means and ends is also reflected in their dramatism. That is, documentaries can treat rather concretely and specifically where something takes place, who the agent is, and what they did: to document someone's purpose, however, relies on interpreting what they say and do; to document someone's agency relies on a conception of what their purpose is. The dramatic logic is simple: to explain how someone

committed *murder*, you must first accept that they had the purpose of doing so.

A further complexity emerges when we consider "How does documentary film feature agency?" This complexity is relevant to the basic rationale of this study. As part of its rhetoric, documentary is constantly calling attention to its own "means" of acquiring and discerning reality and thus is infused explicitly with its "purpose" to discover and reveal "reality." There are, then, at least two clear ways that documentary films feature scene as it relates to agency: one way is *within* in the film's portrayals, the story it tells, its diegesis. The other way taps directly into the documentary filmmaking process itself; the filmmaking process interacts directly or indirectly with the story of the film to shape its meaning. In short, documentaries present themselves as agencies of revealing the truth, they therefore are possessed of an idealistic purpose (and by the logic of dramatism, documentarians become agents, either explicitly in many cases, or implicitly in ways that must be discovered).

Depictions of Agency

In the first case, a documentary works to arrange its images to help audiences focus on the means by which the depicted actions come about. The major rhetorical moves of the film call attention to *how* something is done as central to what a situation means. For example, Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006) is about the threat of global climate change, but the *way* modern economies power themselves, through the unbridled use of carbon-based energy sources, is raised as the key to

understanding the situation—and addressing an immanent threat to the planet. The “how” of the problem laid out in the film is mirrored by a “how” to respond called for from viewers. Rosteck and Frenz (2009) suggest that the role of the Al Gore’s narrative of personal transformation in the film invites the audience to take on take on the environment as their own quest, Al Gore himself provides a touchstone for our own desired reactions to the natural world imperiled by our actions. So, by the end, to move to protect the environment is to act as Gore has already acted—to be courageous (p. 16).

The rhetorical character of Gore’s documentary is quite apparent—in its subject matter as well as the tone of urgency it imports—and in classical rhetorical fashion these warrants fall on forming a belief in the “inconvenient truth” of climate change. Also apparent is the second way agency can be featured in documentary rhetoric: a crucial element is *how* Gore is able to depict and reveal this truth about our material world, from visible footage of the signs of global warming to the somewhat laughable cherry picker crane in which he traverses a giant line graph that depicts climatic trends. The rhetoric of evidence is explicit here, and is of course central to the hotly contested truth claims of the documentary (and also, one notes, justified by the extraordinary “purpose” the documentary undertakes).

Agency might be seen featured as key in any of the tens of thousands of “how to” films that populate various forms of education, news, commerce, and public information. At some basic level, the importance of documentary’s ability to reference “scene” is explicitly there, for example

when instructing on how to install a ceiling fan or automobile part. Being able to visually depict and show these elements and their context makes the film work in ways verbal instruction does not. More interesting, however, are the ways that “cause-effect” explanations feature “how,” and the kinds of forensic-like uses toward which these explanations are put: “How did 9/11 happen?” “How does fracking pollute the groundwater?” “How did the derivatives market sink the world economy?”

Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room (Gibney, 2005) also features profiles (a focus on agent), but uses these to highlight a series of business practices that make all the difference in structuring the collapse of the firm. These practices, the “how” of the situation, are shown as the corrupt means that twist business leaders and companies into a serious problem for the U.S. economy and seriously hurt very real people. The recent *Inside Job* (Ferguson, 2010) exposes the reasons for the 2008 financial crisis, winning multiple awards for best documentary, including the Oscar, yet explicitly arguing causes, consequences, and blame for “how” this could happen. *King Corn* (Woolf, 2007), shown throughout the educational system and public broadcasting, shows us the “how” of corn production and how its use in our society leads to a complex set of economic and social situations with health consequences. The film won a Peabody award.

“Agency” also comes into play in important ways in a wide variety of films that feature “act” or “agent” more prominently, but which nonetheless rely on the way an act is achieved as an important part of the cluster of associations that define their motive. For example, while I argued in Chapter

Three that *Spellbound* (Blitz, 2002) primarily uses scene to shape our understanding of act and agency—students participating in a spelling bee—the persistence and dedication that go into the study regimes the students use to prepare for the competition are also a crucial ingredient in shaping the way audiences experience the film. Agency matters for the film. And *Supersize Me* (Spurlock, 2004) demonstrates the effects of fast food in the physical transformation of the agent, Morgan Spurlock, but implicitly the “how” of these effects are shown both in his eating habits and medical examinations as we monitor that transformation.

Agency is a direct focus for *Waiting for “Superman”* (Guggenheim, 2010), which follows the stories of several students trying to get accepted into charter schools that they hope will give them opportunities they are unlikely to find in the public schools they otherwise will have to attend. The film was given the Sundance Festival award for “best documentary feature” and sparked a great deal of discussion and controversy in the popular press.³² The film was widely criticized by those in education for not looking at the “full picture,” and also eventually criticized for staging an after-the-fact scene of a mother touring a charter school. A *Washington Post* columnist lauded the absence of *Waiting for “Superman”* among the year’s Academy Award nominations,

³² The media coverage of *Waiting for “Superman”* often became opportunities for reporters to treat the broader topic of the education of poor students in the United States (Corliss, 2010; Gabriel, 2010; Knowles & Goren, 2010), and the film continues to have an influence in framing debates about the U.S. educational system (Kimmel, 2012).

The snub to Davis Guggenheim's tendentious film was well-deserved, given that classic documentaries are factual and straightforward, and don't, as did "Superman," fake scenes for emotional impact (Strauss, 2011).

Strauss's characterization of documentary aside, the film certainly failed to consider important aspects of how the education system works in the United States. What the film *did* do was dramatize the situation and stakes involved in the way parents and students must navigate that system, and their means for getting an education that might offer a way out of poverty. This is the scene for this drama: the dangerous, often hopeless neighborhoods that many children in the United States live in. *Waiting for "Superman"* shows us where the students live, and we hear about their worries and struggles, we hear and see statistics that mark their success as unlikely. And we hear Geoffrey Canada, an educational reformer featured in the film, describe the context of his own personal experience of growing up in poverty,

One of the saddest days of my life was when my mother told me "Superman" did not exist. She thought I was crying because it's like Santa Claus is not real. I was crying because no one was coming with enough power to save us.

In *Waiting for "Superman"* that power to save is the charter schools the film has portrayed for us as a way out, a place where even students from the poorest backgrounds can learn, grow, catch-up and succeed. The drama of accessing this "power to save" comes to life most compellingly as the film

shows the families' stress and anxiety while they wait to find out if their children beat the odds of a lottery that will grant them entry into this salvation—one of the students is one of 792 hoping for only 40 openings at a high quality school in Harlem.

The scene is powerful. We have come to know these children and care about them. We have come to know the challenges they face, and we feel their desperation. So a system of education that pins their futures on this kind of thin chance is infuriating. Scene, along with the identification we've established with these characters, works to invite the audience to understand the *means* of educating children as profoundly inadequate. But it is important to note here that the means of educating these children also implies and helps validate their education as a *goal*; the great attention and emotional weight given to finding a way to provide these children with the opportunity for a good education simultaneously establishes the importance of that as a *purpose*.

Documentaries as Agency

I have mentioned a second sense in which "agency" has a powerful, but often less obvious influence in documentary. Documentary films can draw attention to the means and processes of their own production, putting the profilmic "scene" or situation that is presented in a kind of dialogue with the filmmaking process. Documentaries that explicitly tell their stories as an account of their own production are a good example of this.

Roger and Me (Moore, 1989) documents Michael Moore's efforts to interview then General Motors CEO Roger Smith to account for the

devastation that GM plant closings had on Michigan communities. Moore's dogged pursuit of Smith—and more to the point, Smith's elusiveness and resistance to accounting for the actions of the company—reveals and characterizes the theme of Moore's film: a larger evasion of responsibility by GM officials for the communities that rose up around their factories, and then were left to collapse into poverty when the plants were closed. The devastation Moore shows in Flint, Michigan, and his reminiscences about the town and life there as it once was, pulls viewers into the place and situation that motivates what we see him doing with the film we are watching—a filmic quest to articulate why this happened. We understand the filmmaking we watch as an expression of the meaning of the rundown and jobless world of Flint. In other words, Moore's personal, heroic, and daunted efforts to make the film *Roger and Me* are central to the drama of the documentary itself, as he and his dogged quest are part of the *proof* of the politics he seeks to expose. This becomes a central formula in all of his efforts, as his ethos, and character and the *means* of getting to the truth—including the film crew and cameras—are all part of the story in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Sicko* (2007), *Capitalism a Love Story* (2009), and to a great extent *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). A similar transparency and reflexivity about the *means* (and as with Moore, the accompanying *purpose*) of documentary making is now widely used, especially in the work of Werner Herzog, Spike Lee, Ben Stein, Morgan Spurlock and other celebrity documentarians.

This dual sense of “agency” in documentary helps to clarify and advance the central thesis of this dissertation. I have argued that a special

character of documentary rhetoric is *the way* in which it invokes the “reality” outside the documentary; that is, the way that scene operates both within the drama that is being composed, but with a continual gesture or assurance that despite all the devices and drama of the film-as-film, what is being revealed is a true and real “scene” outside the documentary. Whereas documentaries are full of transparent rhetorical purposes, political agendas, social causes, hypothetical interpretations, and even metaphysical portents, these obviously non-factual elements are acceptable so long as the larger *frame* of documentary fidelity is maintained. Where individuals take issue with these truths, such as global warming, 9/11, intelligent design, etc., at issue is film’s capacity to sustain this frame for the viewer. Part of that documentary frame, it’s relationship to the “real” scene beyond the film, is created and validated by telling the story that the documentary is itself a means, an agency, with a purpose—documentary is a way of telling or revealing the “truth.”

Scene Shaping Agency in *Jesus Camp*

An interesting and multilayered example of how documentary can feature “agency” (and ultimately purpose) through the powers of scenic depiction can be found in the film *Jesus Camp* (Ewing & Grady, 2006), which also features “agency” in both the ways I have described. *Jesus Camp* is about a camp that inculcates religious belief in children. Within the internal structure of the film’s diegesis, preaching is a “method” for accomplishing the rhetorical goals of religion. The scenic elements of the film, the cultural location and context of the camp, work to structure the audience’s

interpretation of the “evangelization,” or effort to induce religious conversion. The second sense, of documentary itself as agency, is more subtle and interesting than the previous examples. An implied invocation of documentary practice works in conjunction with scene to certify the film’s reliability—the documentary sets up the filmmakers as “objective” by structuring two implied audiences. In other words, the film’s text structures two possible answers to the question, “What is this film about?” Both answers are anchored in the viewers’ understanding of *how* an act (evangelization) is achieved.

Jesus Camp focuses on the “Kids on Fire” Evangelical Christian³³ summer camp in Devil’s Lake,³⁴ North Dakota led by children’s pastor Becky Fischer. Fischer agreed to participate in the film after seeing the filmmakers’ work on *Boys of Baraka* (2005), about at-risk boys from inner-city Baltimore sent to a wilderness boarding school in Kenya. *Boys of Baraka* included footage of a boy who seemed to have a remarkable religious fervor and

³³ C. O. Lundberg (2007, p. 108) notes that “fundamentalism” and “evangelicalism” are not identical. He describes evangelicalism as a “compromise position” discarding fundamentalist retreat from the secular world, while retaining uncompromised adherence to “fundamental” doctrine and practice. The evangelical-fundamentalist taxonomy is troubled and the easy equivalency in common usage belies a complicated and uneasy conservative Christian unity. “Even the categories evangelicalism and fundamentalism implies a coherence of conservative Christian belief that is unwarranted” (108). Biesecker-Mast (2007, p. 100) links the traditional fundamentalist reluctance to engage with the secular world to its embrace of premillennial dispensationalism, the notion that the bible reveals the existence of different eras (dispensations) in history. What pertains to one dispensation (such as Jesus’ challenge of “exclusive social categories” or the communal living practices of early Christians) is not necessarily normative for other dispensations. History is considered closed, and efforts toward social justice risk hubris. Consequently, separatism and opposition to mainstream culture become markers of authenticity.

³⁴In the film’s DVD commentary track Ewing and Grady note the fecund symbolic potential of the camp’s location in “Devil’s Lake,” but leave its significance floating ambiguously in the film, their restraint from interpretation helping to position the authorial voice of the film as “objective.”

aspirations to become a fundamentalist preacher. Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady ascribe their curiosity over his combination of religious zeal and childhood innocence as a key motivation for their 2006 film *Jesus Camp* (International Documentary Association, 2006). Fischer facilitated wide-ranging access for cameras to follow her work and helped secure the cooperation of the families of the three children featured in the film. *Jesus Camp* was nominated for a 2007 Academy Award for “best documentary,” losing to *An Inconvenient Truth*.

The beginning of the *Jesus Camp* firmly establishes the scene of the film within contemporary “culture wars” political discourse. In the first few spoken words, President George W. Bush is heard announcing over the radio³⁵ the resignation of Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor. The program will end with a radio announcement of the nomination of Samuel Alito as O’Connor’s replacement, bookending the program with a political context and an allusion to abortion politics. The next radio audio is of conservative Christian talk show host Dr. James Kennedy.³⁶ Bush and James Kennedy are heard against the visual backdrop of a “God Bless America” sign, the United States’ flag, images of rural mid-America countryside, and iconic images of America like the golden arches of McDonalds, automobiles traveling down highways, and gas stations. Kennedy declares the country in

³⁵ Sounds of a radio being tuned are used to orient the viewer.

³⁶ For more about Kennedy, a Presbyterian minister leading a 10,000 member conservative Christian church in Ft. Lauderdale Florida, and his media ministry see http://www.coralridge.org/about_djk.htm. He actively promotes his evangelical vision in the political arena through his Center for Christian Statesmanship (see <http://www.statesman.org>) and the Center for Reclaiming America (see <http://www.reclaimamerica.org>).

a state of “culture war” and expresses the need to “reclaim America for Christ.” The juxtaposition of words and images locate culture war as an integral part of the American landscape—literally. Patriotism and religion are linked – a connection audiences see continue throughout the film.

As *Jesus Camp* unfolds the filmmakers present footage gathered at the summer camp, the homes of participants, and recruiting events for the camp. Religious rituals, preaching, home life and casual interaction, are all brought together with interviews with the camp director, Becky Fischer, and various other participants. We see a world where church and state are woven into every dimension of life, as when a cardboard cut-out of then president Bush is brought into the sanctuary to make the same link explicit for the children. And the emotional intensity of the preaching and elaborate effort that goes into the staging of the presentations for the children makes it clear that the adults in *Jesus Camp* work very hard to pass on their vision of God and country to their children.

Two Dramas, Two Audiences

That parents would want to pass on their values and beliefs to their children is surely neither surprising nor controversial to viewers. But Ewing and Grady feature *how* faith is passed on, and this is meant to play out in two different ways. The “culture war” scene of the film structures two different viewing positions. For an evangelical Christian audience, scenic depictions mark the way the children are “evangelized” as in line with a deep, and commendable fervor that is authentic to the all-encompassing demands of fidelity to religious faith. For an evangelical Christian, the “how” makes

sense according to purpose: the salvation of the children and their capacity to eventually structure their world (“Christian America”) in line with their understanding of Christian principles. Interviews with the children’s parents and Becky Fisher revisit this purpose as a context throughout the film and as a response to what they perceive as a lack of Christian values in the rest of U.S. culture. In other words, because of the context, the ends literally justify the means. So we see Fischer explain to the children that the seemingly innocuous Harry Potter novels are actually an example of demonic forces deceiving them, an example of the devil himself luring them in under the guise of innocent entertainment. The Harry Potter novels and films put their eternal destiny at risk. Fischer literally believes the stakes are heaven and hell, and this purpose warrants her seemingly extreme position.

For non-evangelical Christians, the “how” of the evangelization is structured differently. Without a buy-in to the logic of evangelical theology (purpose), the scenic elements work in juxtaposition to the commonplaces of childhood innocence and vulnerability to reveal the “agency” of the camp and the preaching as alarming.

For either audience, the way evangelical Christian beliefs and values are imparted to children carries the primary dramatic energy of the film. The text structures two possible answers to the question, “what is this film about?” Both answers are anchored in the viewers’ understanding of *how* an act (evangelization) is achieved. Agency is therefore featured as a major drama here: the children are either an agency of God’s work to purify us of evil or the children are an agency of a religious group that is using them for

its own ideological ends. Both of these possible anchorings of agency are felt by the way the scene (the material context for the acts toward and by the children) is depicted.

One particular event in the film illustrates the possible watershed of audience experience and interpretations. The children are shown in an ecstatic religious moment of fervor. Their faces are turned upward, angelic, yet weeping, as the preaching and music and group experience has brought them to this moment. How is an audience member to regard or experience this? Is this the divine agency working through children in a moment of rapture, purity, and beauty, where our collective sins of secular dissipation are, for a moment, vanquished in the sheer and pure commitment of these children's innocent souls to this truth? Or is this a shocking and maddening abuse of these children, sweeping their trustful innocence into a warped political and ideological cause? Something is acting here, but the children of the camp are its agency; and both scenic contexts for these interpretations have been woven by the dual story-telling of the film.

The first scene of *Jesus Camp* after the "culture wars" introduction takes us to a performance inside a contemporary looking church. We see a group of children performing, some wearing military camouflage pants and some even wearing camouflage face paint. Most of the children who perform are wielding sticks. They dance, striking the sticks together and swinging them like swords, and they march in place as they dance—all to the sound of ethereal but energetic and emotionally charged Christian rock music. As the performance unfolds as a kind of militaristic ballet, Ewing and Grady cut in

shots of the enthralled faces of the audience. At first there are both adults and children, and some people are obviously moved to tears. But the filmmakers feature the children, and they focus especially on Levi, who we will get to know as the film progresses. We see the presentation is having an impact. Thus the scene is drawn in terms of two elements that seem to conflict: childhood innocence and military violence, more specifically the children themselves being cast as soldiers.

Becky Fischer takes the stage and she is a warm and engaging speaker by any measure. And she is passionate. Still, the focus never stays long on her. The film continually returns to audience cut-away shots, and increasingly these are almost exclusively shots of children. It is clear that the point is not just what Fischer says, but the effect she is having on the audience.

In the midst of a series of extreme close ups of children, Fisher says to them, "How many of you know that this is a sick old world?" She pauses to look around the room at the children and continues. "This is a sick old world. Well then let's just fix it! Somebody get your tools out and let's just fix this old world."

We see another extreme close-up, this time with a child who appears no more than five years old, looking improbably still. We see evidence of Fischer's impact, evidence that her method of evangelization is connecting with these children. Fischer continues,

Kids you got to change things. We got too many Christian grown-ups that are fat and lazy. Do you know Muslims train

their children from the time they are five years old, to fast during the month of Ramadan? Listen, we hold the keys, we can change the world.

Fischer's entire presentation is punctuated with dramatic pauses, but now she pauses longer and voices a question for herself, "Boys and girls can change the world?"

She looks steadily at the audience, keeping them waiting for her answer: "Absolutely. [The audience breaks into applause and cheers] Absolutely." In other words, Fischer has dramatically led her audience to her purpose: her goal is to empower these children, to save the world, to make them soldiers for Christ.

Again, Fischer is a compelling speaker by any standard. She works her audience like a "pro," and if not her message, her certitude, passion and self-effacing warmth at least are inviting to any audience. Those watching the film are invited to identify with the captivated children and feel her draw. The children have been told they are powerful, that they can change the world. We see in their faces that they believe it, and the juxtaposition of Fischer's skill and the children's vulnerability is arresting. We *feel* the lure of Fischer's method, and are either thrilled or shocked.

The Agency of *Jesus Camp*

It is in this sense that the film itself engages the viewer with its own agency. At the heart of Ewing and Grady's representation of the people involved with the "Kid's on Fire" camp—and they intend their depiction as a "truthful" representation—is their "objective" approach to the filming and

editing of the documentary. They rely on a bank of commonplaces, or stock symbols, that seem intended to function differently for two different audiences. Oppositional audiences are constructed and viewed from the vantage point of a third position—the filmmakers' location of "objectivity." Ewing and Grady create a film that strongly positions evangelical Christianity³⁷ as different. The difference plays on-screen as dramatic deviations in language and behavior from the characters that typically populate the contemporary mediascape (Appadurai, 1990)—particularly commonplace understandings of children. This difference, though, functions in two very different ways.

A binary is structured by both the us-them oppositional construction used throughout *Jesus Camp* by those portrayed, and images of Pentecostal religious practices which are rarely seen in popular media representations of sympathetic characters. The film constructs its own audience on either side of the "culture war." As the film plays out, one is sorted to either the conservative Christian side of the equation, or the non-conservative-Christian side. That is to say, the film is operating to shape its depictions as authentic. If opposing stances toward the film are generated and the various depictions of evangelical Christianity fit either frame, the implicit reasoning goes, the film is assured as objective, authentic, and true, verifiable from either position.

³⁷ It is important to note that the conservative Christianity portrayed in *Jesus Camp* is in the Pentecostal tradition, which tends to embrace a variety of practices such as glossolalia—or "speaking in tongues"—which other conservative Christians may well code as outside of "ordinary."

The way this two-audience strategy plays out is in relation to the formative fiction of “normal.” This consensus image of “normal,” or “ordinary” works as a prototype (Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Non-fundamentalist Christian U.S. audiences are expected to identify with some aspects of the characters portrayed which are vividly marked as “ordinary,” yet reject other, dissonant markers belonging to the other side of the axis—and made all the more alarming for the juxtaposition.

This is an extension and development of the theme established earlier in the film: either “normal” children are being pulled away from the sinful mainstream and powerfully shaped into the cadre of faithful believers God desires, or these normal children are being exposed to indoctrination that seems so forceful and manipulative as to be abusive—and noticeably twisted by the experience. Either way, the opposing perspective is necessary for and built into *both* the viewing positions the film offers. Evangelical Christian fidelity is marked as authentic by its difference from the sinful mainstream, and non-evangelical Christian viewers see that the evangelical Christians portrayed see the camp and its preaching as fully appropriate, indeed virtuous.

The Dynamic of Oppositional Rhetoric

As noted previously, the scene of the film remains crucial. The culture war binary established in *Jesus Camp* is reinforced structurally by the decision of Ewing and Grady, late in the editing process, to insert throughout the program footage of radio host Mike Papantonio, who identifies as Christian but speaks against fundamentalist Christianity being enmeshed with

politics. In the commentary track on DVD copies of *Jesus Camp*, Ewing and Grady describe the decision to add Papantonio as a way to add “dramatic tension.” The Papantonio radio program excerpts function to highlight the oppositions of the film by periodically resurfacing to highlight a political contrast and serve as a counterpoint to the rhetoric of the film’s primary characters. The audience is repeatedly drawn back into the culture war scene. Despite the late-hour decision to incorporate the footage, it is no mere afterthought; the final words of the introduction, followed by a pregnant pause and the visual surfacing of the title, are Papantonio’s: “There’s this entanglement of politics with religion. What kind of lesson is that for our children.” The images of evangelical fervor that soon follow are given the context of their impact on larger United States politics. Yet all the while, space is made for an alternative reading.

Lundberg (2007) describes fundamentalism as an identity practice articulated to other identities and belief practices, an investment in a doctrine of otherness which frames the status of and way of relating to others...the specificity of others is not as important as the role that “they” are assigned in the fundamentalist fantasy (p. 106).

Culture war discourse creates and sustains both evangelical Christianity *and* its opposition in a dynamic of power. Both sides *together* use a mutually dependent discourse—constituted in a wide variety of particular manifestations—to produce identity, make sense of the “other,” police group

behavior, generate voting practices, and so forth (Foucault, 1990, pp. 93-95).

For those who do not fit the category of conservative Christian, the film constructs its characters as complex. The film works hard to position them as ordinary, something important for audience identification but also for the credibility of the film. Cowie (1999) observes

The "believability" of the documentary's world—its verisimilitude—is produced when that world and its people appear recognizable, familiar, and thus—in some sense—as the same as what we already know. The documentary film therefore presents the knowable world, not only or necessarily in order to enable us to know the world as new, but also—and perhaps more often—to know the world as familiar, to find again our known objects (p. 30).

The three children depicted as main characters in *Jesus Camp* are imaged as both ordinary and not-ordinary. The filmmakers themselves describe the dynamic in terms of "familiar" and "unfamiliar" in their DVD commentary track. For the three children who are focused on as main characters, identity is played out repeatedly, almost continuously, within the tension between two markers: ordinary behavior and images whose subject is "any child," and behaviors which are unmistakably extraordinary for the agent "any child" (Tolson, 2001, pp. 448-449). For example, nine year old Rachel is seen spending time at a bowling alley with friends, then approaches a stranger to hand out a religious tract and discuss salvation because "God

told me to.” Ten year old Tory is “hanging out” in her room surrounded by pastel colors and dolls discussing her love of music and dancing, then goes on to say, “I have to make sure that that’s [dancing] for God ... because people can tell when I’m just dancing for the flesh.” We see a small group of students beginning their day of homeschooling with the pledge of allegiance, “I pledge allegiance, to the Christian flag, to the savior...” These children are coded again and again as “ordinary”—any child doing the sorts of things any child might do—with images of domesticity and examples of language emphasizing their earnestness, vulnerability and good-natured likeability. As a result, their intense devotion to an evangelical worldview is positioned that much more outside the “ordinary” when the talk moves, in a very concrete way, to the children dying to promote their beliefs.

What is non-ordinary, even troubling for one kind of audience member, seems intended by the film’s binary structure of culture war to code just as easily as ordinary for the other. The Papantonio discourse of contrast is always presented as self-contained, discrete sections of the film—never mixed as direct critique or commentary on the primary characters in the film. Papantonio’s discourse helps to establish conservative Christian identity according to the familiar patterns inherent to fundamentalist Christian rhetoric. Again, Lundberg (2007) notes that oppositional discourse that seeks to undermine fundamentalist rhetoric is nonetheless essential to the very construction of that rhetoric, and may well serve as a source of sustained vitality.

So what functions for one side of the filmmakers' constructed audience as non-ordinary, is ordinary enough for the other; the children are coded for that audience as "any conservative Christian child." This construction of the film to function as reinforcing for both the audiences it posits, works to locate the film as "objective." Ewing and Grady reveal in their DVD commentary that both the children and their families, and Becky Fischer, the children's pastor, were pleased with their portrayals.

To the extent that a two-audience structure in the film *Jesus Camp* helps to certify the "truth" of the filmmakers' "representations," it serves to color the evangelization we see as real. Becky Fischer's preaching, from one side, can easily be seen as empowering—the children are given responsibility for literally changing the world, and told they can do it.³⁸ The children are told they can alter history, change culture and transform the nation. This scene of culture war, images of the children's innocence and seeming purity, reaction shots showing the effectiveness of the preaching—all point to the sanctified purpose of evangelical faith, and its mission to resist sin and transform the world for Christ.

Yet for non-evangelicals the images, dogmas and emotional drama of Becky's preaching is both "other" and manipulative. Given that the preaching is directed to an audience of children, susceptibility to manipulation suffuses the images. Yet Becky also has an obvious affection for the children, and is repeatedly humanized as she interacts one-on-one with the children, or for example, as she primps in front of the mirror.

³⁸ The theological distinction is of course made that it is God who affects change with human person's acting in accord with God's will through obedience.

It is in this sense that Becky's and the children's portrayals most powerfully situate conservative Christianity as disconcerting for its non-conservative Christian audience. They are situated within the markers of everyday-ness, in a series of images that particularize them. We get to know the children *as children*, yet using the language and images of militarism to express their belief, or we see these young people we have observed playing, now sob and express their frustration that they do not believe more fervently. We see what this evangelization, this way of passing on beliefs and values has wrought.

In this case purpose recedes. The eschatological vision of evangelical Christianity is not the purpose justified by scene; instead it becomes another scenic element coloring Becky Fischer's preaching and the experience of the Jesus Camp as "other." It defines those methods as a shocking manipulation of the innocence of the children. The ends do not justify the means; they are instead evidence of their danger.

Conclusion

The conjunction between ends and means that I have described points to the next chapter of this study: a consideration of documentary films that highlight purpose. It also points to the often multi-layered ways that the drama of documentary situations unfolds. Each of the dramatic terms Burke outlines, scene, act, agent, agency and purpose are present in any fully dramatized situation.

The films discussed in this chapter point to "agency" functioning within the documentary story elements, but also at times functioning through an

invocation of the filmmaking process itself. For example, at the level of the scene depicted within the film, *An Inconvenient Truth* uses the facts and images of a changing planet to show *how* climate change is happening, and does this as a way to show *how* to reverse it. *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* shows *how* corporate corruption happens. In *Waiting for "Superman,"* poverty and the desire to shape the way audiences understand how education works for the poor are presented to invite change: a *new* "how."

In documentaries like *Roger and Me*, films invoke their own production process to structure the way we understand the evidence they reveal. The filmmaking process shows an encounter with "observable" material surfaces and cultural artifacts that mark the "real" status of their depictions. So lost jobs, lost homes and lost dreams in Flint, Michigan justify a quest for answers. The film itself becomes a symbolic explanation of the reason why, and a refusal to account for the human suffering that General Motors' corporate choices have created.

Finally, *Jesus Camp* shows the "scene" of U.S. culture wars—a climate of divergent, conflicting moral readings of culture in the United States—as, in light of Evangelical theology, generating an extreme evangelization of children. The film itself forms an "agency" but this time through a self-aware "both-sides" storytelling that links the filmmaking of *Jesus Camp* with tropes of journalistic "objectivity." This works to raise up two viewing positions that sponsor two corresponding avenues for rhetorically engaging the film. One approach is from a perspective that embraces Evangelical theology as a

justifying purpose. In this case, the scene of "culture war" helps warrant an intense, no-holds-barred indoctrination of children where the ends justify the means. The other perspective, with no comparable justifying purpose, positions the *methods* of evangelization to receive the full intensity of the emotions and impact of the film's depictions, inviting an understanding of the preaching and interactions at the camp as a troubling emotional abuse of childhood innocence.

Chapter Five:

Documenting Purpose

As noted in the previous chapter, the focus of this chapter is the way scene operates where documentary films feature the dramatic element of purpose. As with the other elements, I wish to avoid too much involvement with the intricacies of the pentad and its rationale, and simply use these elements as a way of demonstrating that the scenic qualities of documentary tend to dominate the ways that documentaries make rhetorical statements through dramatic constructions.

In the case of "purpose," it is necessary to consider this element unto itself because it is almost surely the least obvious and most confusing of the dramatic categories. The reasons for this are interesting, and are especially interesting when considering the "purpose" of documentaries themselves.

Purpose and Mysticism

As one of the five key elements of drama, Burke argues, "purpose" is not merely reducible to the motives or explicit reasons why someone does something (Burke, 1969a). This is one source of confusion in the category, as the pentad itself is a way of identifying "motives" for action, and some motives come under the heading of "purpose." Purpose, rather, refers to a

sense of purpose or overall purpose—an ultimate justification—or answer to the question “why?” As noted in the previous chapter, the “little two” of agency and purpose go hand in hand as the means of doing things and the ends we seek: purpose refers to those ends, those ultimate outcomes that we hope inspire not only actions but events in this world. Just as the pentad has been associated with the “who, what, where, when, and why” of journalistic reporting, it has also been associated with Aristotle’s “four causes.” Purpose, accordingly, is somewhat like Aristotle’s final cause, or *telos*—it is the reason for things as we might believe such reasons “move” people and events toward their ultimate outcomes. It is for this reason that Burke sees a focus on purpose as corresponding to mysticism: the mystic sees such ultimate purpose as infusing and moving all of the actions and events in the world.

Intriguing as all of this is, one can fairly ask what mysticism and a belief in some ultimate purpose has to do with documentaries, which, on the face of things, are supposed to be factual, literal, and not at all metaphysical. In drama, such purposes and metaphysical or mystical motives abound for actions or outcomes—such as fate or the healing forces of nature—but in documentary? The most basic answer is that insofar as documentaries document human action and motivation, they must also depict these senses of purpose and mystifications that people have for what they do. When Werner Herzog presents us with the overwhelmingly evident “sense of purpose” that *Grizzly Man* (Herzog, 2005) bespeaks when he talks about why he does what he does and its ultimate value to nature, Herzog features

purpose and thus accordingly grounds it by taking us into the very scene—indeed the ultimate scene—of those words. When Herzog later takes us deep inside the *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Herzog, 2010) for the first revealed footage of the oldest cave drawings ever discovered, he immerses us in the scenic experience of seeing these drawings as one might in the cave (for this reason, justifying 3D photography), yet his own commentary becomes quite mystical as he contemplates the ultimate “why” of these drawings and what they tell us about universal human experience.

As we observed in treating “agency,” means and “ends” almost always imply each other, even though one or the other may be the featured member. In *Jesus Camp* (Ewing & Grady, 2006) *methods* of evangelization depicted in the film—the heavy-handed emotionality, the use of fear, and so forth—is aligned to make sense to an evangelical Christian audience because of the ultimate stakes of its purpose: no less than God’s will. Evangelical Christians, no doubt, see the agency of *Jesus Camp* and the children’s indoctrination as a fulfillment of an ultimate, mystical purpose. Purpose becomes an all-encompassing anchor for meaning, while on the other hand non-evangelical or non-fundamentalist Christian audiences are presented a style of preaching and evangelization that positions those in the film as “other”—thus complicating their identification with the children and shifting the dramatic focus from ends to means. Since the spiritual ends are not accepted on the same terms, the means, or agency takes center-stage. Rather than intensifying purpose to warrant the means of the evangelicals, the culture war frame of the film colors the evangelization of the children as

just using them to perpetuate a largely political divide that separates them from mainstream U.S. culture.

In a similar way, documentaries that primarily rely on the interaction of scene and "purpose" as the goals associated with the action in the film tend to, at least implicitly, also bring "agency," or the how of their drama, into the film. We will see this connection between means and ends throughout this chapter.

Purpose as Evidence

Another reason purpose is a complicated and interesting term of dramatic motivation in documentary is the odd disjuncture between scene and purpose.

As I argued in Chapter One, to the extent "scene" is a special characteristic of documentary, it is so because it highlights the aspects of a situation that accomplish what documentary portends to do: it *shows* the situation, it offers context as an identifiable ingredient for sense making, and does so in a way that makes its depictions seem evident. And this holds true broadly. As Sobchack (1992) describes, the sensory experience of film is homologous to the way we experience our immersion in lived experience. The sights and sounds of filmic experience offer the same sorts of context cues about time and place we use more generally to orient ourselves. But even the social dimensions of scene are often accessed observationally. At the level of everyday experience, social status, important cultural symbols, and so forth are often deduced from direct observation. To the extent we observe these cues for ourselves and participated in the meaning making by

assembling them and drawing conclusions, they work as evidence—barring any disruption that re-frames them as illusion or fiction. Yet while purpose may be *evidenced* in the observable, it is precisely something that is *not* accessible by direct observation. It takes us to the limit of language and symbols, and offers no sure access into another person’s consciousness. So any purpose other than my own is not directly observable; it is something wholly other than what might be displayed. This is true of every dimension of motive, but the other terms of dramatic sense making anchor themselves more surely in the cultural commonplace. Purpose presumes an “other” that like us, is good at deception. In other words, there is always gap, always room for mutation built into the way purpose works—and this locates the rhetorical function of purpose in documentary inherently complicated.

As Burke notes (1969a), to invoke *purpose* is to step toward mystification because it always opens the door to ultimate purpose—as the child discovers when she responds to each successive answer she receives with another “Why?” There is always another possible level until some *ultimate* purpose is offered. That is, purpose is susceptible to mystification because it is susceptible to the ultimate. Burke writes that mysticism “develops an ideal of contemplation in which the distinctions of individuality disappear and the finite spirit achieves utter union or identity . . . a oneness with the universe” (Burke, 1969a, p. 287).

In this chapter I will briefly consider a few examples of documentary films that feature reasonably clear examples of scene structuring purpose. I

will highlight where appropriate the mutual relationship of purpose and agency, and then finally discuss examples of some especially fascinating instances of the relationship between scene and purpose. In particular, I will focus in an extended way on the film *Into Great Silence* (Gröning, 2005), which showcases the capacity of documentary scene to reveal purpose precisely in the gap between the observable, tangible dimensions of scene and the more ephemeral, intangible realm of ultimate purpose.

Scene Structuring Purpose

In a straightforward way, *The Corporation* (Achbar & Abbott, 2004) wants us understand that “corporations” are the product of changeable legal and cultural structures with destructive consequences that are not inevitable. The facts, descriptions, interviews, stories and images of this documentary film all revolve around that purpose—in fact there is little else but the persistence of that agenda that gives coherence to the film.

The documentary *Waste Land* (Walker, Jardim, & Harley, 2010), which was nominated for an Academy Award in 2010, shows the work by Brazilian artist Vik Muniz to portray overlooked poor people as richly textured human beings. The film itself echoes Muniz’s purpose as both a fact of his work and something to be documented. *Waste Land* uses “scene,” the garbage-strewn world of the “pickers” who comb through the mountains of debris in Rio de Janeiro’s colossal Jardim Gramacho landfill to earn their livings by finding recyclables—and the stories of the desperation that have led them to the dump—to validate and explain the artist’s goal. We are drawn into the reason Muniz is creating his portraits of these people, and that reason offers

us the chance to see these Brazilian garbage pickers through Muniz's eyes as complex, dignified and beautiful. Interestingly though, Muniz's art—the *means* by which he invites us into his vision of these people—is crucial to the rhetorical action of the film.

We watch Muniz “begin” his portraits not with a brush or a camera, but by listening and observing. We see how the process of getting to know his subjects and asking them to tell their stories, then involving them in the creation of the art and using the substance that defines their world—garbage—as the material to form the portraits, leads to beautiful images that reflect those stories. So scene shapes purpose, but purpose also interacts with agency. The story told here is about the ends of his art and the means of achieving them, reflecting again why these two elements exist in a special and necessary relationship. Near the end, the film includes interviews with those featured in the portraits Muniz creates. These people describe a newfound sense of their own beauty, value and potential to inspire others around the world.

The documentary film *Confessions of An Eco-Terrorist* (Brown, 2010), like its reality television counterpart *Whale Wars*, is another clear, and perhaps also typically complex example of how scene shapes purpose in documentary. The film features the work of Sea Shepherd Conservation Society founder Captain Paul Watson and those who work with him, often volunteers, as they use ships and their own physical presence to interfere with whaling operations around the world. Nearly every act we see in the film is explicitly framed by purpose: saving whales who are precious because

of their rarity. They have been hunted near extinction, but they also are portrayed as beautiful, and sentient. The *rhetorical* purpose of the film is also clear: to invite viewers into common cause with the characters featured in the film.

The title of the film itself is an ironic appropriation of the characterization of the work of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society by their opponents—that the work of Watson and Sea Shepherd is “terrorism.” The film never really directly “argues” with that characterization. Instead it lays out the situations that constitute their work, the *actions* they perform on behalf of the whales from the perspective of their goal of saving whales. The filmmaker identifies his own connection and commitment to the Sea Shepherd cause. *Confessions of An Eco-Terrorist* works to dramatize the work of Sea Shepherd as appropriate, indeed morally necessary given that purpose.

Watson’s crews are an odd collection of misfits and nerds, but the film and TV series play into the dorky-but-smart-and-capable commonplace staple of U.S. media seen in everything from the alter egos of superheroes like Spiderman to characters in TV programs like *Big Bang Theory*. Even if the audience has reasons to disagree with the crew’s interventions with whaling operations or the audacity of their methods, we get to know them too well to see their motives as anything other than well-meaning. At a minimum, we are invited to identify with their deep commitment and good-natured optimism as we observe them working together, teasing each other, and so forth.

But in the end it is scene that shapes everything. The film dramatizes both the constant danger of the sea and the social danger of standing in opposition to government opposition and inaction, moneyed interests and whaling cultures. Images and descriptions highlight the physical vulnerability of the crew to arctic cold and exhaustion, and the vulnerability of their ships to storms and the sublime vastness of the ocean and its ice flows. Shots from below show the Sea Shepherd ships as huge compared to people, then in overhead shots the same ships become tiny against the ocean of ice below. Or the sound of massive waves thundering against the hull of the ship and the roiling camera perspective of shots from the deck of the ship as its bow plunges into a massive wave set the scene. We see shivering crew members on deck with frost on their eyebrows. We see governments and news reporters from places that support whaling like Japan and the Faroe Islands characterize what Watson and the Sea Shepherd crew do as terrorism. But this doesn't square with the characters we've gotten to know, and it doesn't align with the scene the situation the film presents: we see the blood of whales coloring the sea red, and those calling the Sea Shepherd crew terrorists beating small pilot whales to death.

The crew is willing to put itself at risk and do risky things for the sake of the whales. The almost comic stereotype of quixotic hippies holding up "save the whales" posters becomes transformed to the story of courageous true believers willing to put life and limb in harms way for a righteous cause.

The methods that the crew uses—for example positioning their ship along a collision course with whaling ships or in front of the guns of a

Norwegian Navy vessel, or riding in small inflatable boats alongside of and harassing massive Japanese “research” factory ships that process whale meat—are the pivot point around which the rhetoric of the film succeeds or fails. As in the case of *Jesus Camp*, the film offers two viewing positions, but in this case the alternative is a straw man; either the all-consuming physical intervention to stop whaling, marked by heroism in the face of death, certifies the value of saving whales, or one must abandon the purpose of the seemingly sane-but-daring characters as incomprehensible or crazy. Here scene works as evidence for the seriousness and importance of stopping whaling. And the danger of human death is crucial here. It sets up the equation that defines the purpose of *Confessions of An Eco-Terrorist*: the value of the lives of the whales, who (in the film’s context not “which”) are in all cases treated by the Sea Shepherd crew with reverence.

Scene, Purpose and Mystification

One particularly interesting way that purpose can be seen at work in documentary is through a kind of implicit presence in *absence*. Documentary films can focus almost entirely on scene to the exclusion of the other terms we ordinarily use as we make sense of situations. When a filmmaker shows only scene, audiences might make sense of this through an implied act, agent, agency or purpose, but if this is not possible, if the audience is abandoned to only scene with no other accessible purpose, only ultimate purpose, or “mystery” remains as an explanation for the scene; we are invited in to a kind of mystification. On the level of ordinary experience, standing still at the shore in front of the ocean, or quietly sitting and listening

in the woods might be an example of this dramatic collapse of scene into purpose. Another example might be the notion of “sacramentality” that undergirds the Roman Catholic notion of bread and wine as a substance for divinity, or that becomes extended in the theology of Teilhard de Chardin (1959, 1960) to characterize all of the material world as an unfolding according to divine purpose and fulfillment in divine mystery.

Godfrey Reggio’s *Koyaanisqatsi*³⁹ (1982) and Ron Fricke’s *Baraka*⁴⁰ (1993) are examples of this playing out in documentary. Neither film attempts to tell a story, or introduce characters or dialogue. They are rather made up of montages of images that provoke sensory and experiential stimulation and invite meditation. In *Baraka*, Fricke arranges his images thematically—viewers are immersed in nature scenes, pictures of holy places, scenes of pollution and destruction, but never with the directness of language. The *New York Times* review of the film observes,

The essential message that the film conveys is really a question: How is it that in the face of a collective spiritual aspiration that inspired so much exalted art can humanity still be embarked on a path that seems perilously self-destructive (Holden, 1993)?

There is no real answer, and even this casting of the question is just one take on a profoundly open text. There is only an invitation to enter into the scene and engage its images as meaningful—and the effect is mystification. The meaning of mystification here is not in the sense of an expressible theological

³⁹ It is also interesting to note that Reggio is a former member of the Christian Brothers, a Catholic community of religious brothers.

⁴⁰ Fricke was Reggio’s director of photography on *Koyaanisqatsi*.

agenda, but rather as an invocation of the sublime via the unanswerable question. A compelling hour and a half of film experience must have a motive, and absent alternatives evokes for itself ultimate motive, purpose as such, to fill the void. *Koyannisqatsi* uses film technology to show us a physical world, absent words or verbal arguments, that is impacted by human society and its technology. Scene becomes active here; the agent is humankind's "out of balance" society, namely technology as agent, agency and purpose. But what it forces by giving us "pure scene" (albeit enhanced) is a contemplation of purpose: the mysticism of native American pantheism—to be in balance with nature—which is contrasted with the technological *telos* of modern western society, and therein is the rhetorical statement of the film.

Another example of a documentarian's goal to capture the mystical purpose of a people can be found in Alan Ereira's *The Heart of the World* (1990), produced for BBC television and discussed in two subsequent books (Ereira, 1993, 2009). Ereira's specific goal was to bring to modern westerners the message from the "older brothers," a tribe of pre-Columbian Indians living in self-enforced isolation high in the mountains of Columbia, which is perhaps one of the last remaining intact examples of the indigenous cultures that existed before Western invasion. The "older brothers" had decided to break their isolation and make contact, allowing in Ereira so that he might deliver the message to modern society that they were destroying the natural world. Ereira's use of the documentary to communicate the mystic world view of these people—a philosophy wherein the natural world is

infused with a purpose which human society must conform to and advance if it is to thrive (the forces of nature and human society and acts become the means which are sanctioned and governed by this end). The remarkable thing about Ereira's film is how well it communicates this world view, so alien to modern life, and allows the viewer to understand its truths as complex and deeply mystical by immersing us in the scene of that society and its practices.

Ironically then, documentary becomes a particularly effective means for invoking the invisible and ultimate, precisely through its capacity to focus an audience's attention on scene.

Pure Scene, Ultimate Purpose

In another example of "pure scene" giving rise to "ultimate purpose," Philip Gröning's (2005) film *Die Große Stille*, released in English as *Into Great Silence*, documents the experience of Carthusian monks as they seek "transcendence" through tending to the details of daily life according to statutes laid out by St. Bruno of Cologne in the ninth century. The film has no traditional plot and no real organizing set of ideas. Instead it uses a study of surface and detail, stretching the conventions of the genre to their limit, pushing photographic depiction to its edge to suggest more. A. O. Scott's review in *The New York Times* observed,

At first, as your mind adjusts to the film's contemplative pace, you may experience impatience. Where is the story? Who are these people? But you surrender to "Into Great Silence." . . . by the end, what you have learned is impossible to sum up, but

your sense of the world is nonetheless perceptibly altered
(2007).

The work of Gröning's film parallels the spiritual mechanisms of the monastic life it depicts. Unadorned, mundane physical existence suggests something non-physical; the "material" stands as simultaneously incommensurable with and evocative of the immaterial in an oscillation between presence and absence.

In other words, purpose looms large in *Into Great Silence*. With no real "acts" to consider, stripped of any real attention to character, and with no clear process being depicted, the audience is presented only with scene. In the absence of any immediate reasons for the scenic images we see, we are left to experience that scene under the influence of the monks' ultimate answer to the question, "Why?" The physical and material experience of this environment as brought to us by the purely sensory experience of the mountains, monastery, and the monk's attempt to merge with its silence, attempts to communicate the mystical purpose these monks themselves must have: it uses the technology of film to invite the viewer into this experience. The total immersion in scene itself insists on an answer to questions about the experience: Does the natural, physical world itself have a purpose? Is spiritual purity itself to be had in merging with this purpose, entering the "great silence?" The mysticism of the monks is thus documented in a way that necessarily features scene-as-purpose itself.

Carthusians are noted, even among other monks, for the austerity of their life and Gröning's film offers a rare glimpse into their highly cloistered

world. It is a world marked by severe simplicity, silence and isolation. The monks eschew the distractions of ornamentation and material abundance. The Grand Chartreuse, the “mother house” of the order nestled in a remote area of the French Alpes near Grenoble, is shown in Gröning’s film as a place of plain, grey stone walls and spare monastic cells with simple wood furnishings—no soaring gothic arches, no swirling frescoed depictions of heaven, no images from the great and vast tradition of Christian art evoking divinity. Two minutes into the film, in white sans-serif font on a black background, Gröning cites text from the story in the Hebrew scriptures⁴¹ of the prophet Elijah seeking God:

The Lord passed by. Then a great wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but He was not in the wind. After that, there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After that came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire came a gentle whisper.

Mountains reduced to a whisper, time unadorned with distraction, place without the elaboration of imagination—we are positioned to understand that for the monks these point to the limit of materiality and temporality. Gröning lays out for us the spiritual presumption that governs the experience of asceticism. We are directed to the *border* of the spiritual; an *absence* is exposed that signifies an ineffable *presence*. One can only press up against the surface and imagine what lies beyond in faith.

⁴¹ The Bible text is from 1 Kings 19.11-12.

In 1984, as a twenty five year old filmmaker interested in “radical” explorations of “truth” (Sample, 2006), Gröning sent a letter to the monastery asking for access to film. He heard back from the monks sixteen years later. The austerity of that time-frame inflects the film; Gröning’s audio-visual documentation of the monks matches their asceticism. He strips filmmaking to its barest forms. The film does not use voice-over or music other than the plainchant of the monks at liturgy. Gröning shot the film using available light and mostly from fixed camera positions, except for some 8 mm film used sparingly as a counterpoint to the rest of the work, which is shot with the starkly “present” feel of high definition video. We are invited to linger over the images we see, exploring their contours, contemplating their form and wondering about their significance.

Physical Presence as Scene

I have described documentary as a genre especially attuned to scene, and often especially attentive to the physical presence, the “materiality” of its depictions. Surface and facticity, the realm of the observable and verifiable, is crucial to the authenticity that documentary filmmaking claims for itself (B. Nichols, 1991, pp. 3-4). This is the case even when it does so to self-consciously persuade, and even when it works to trouble its own depictions as enmeshed in perspective and construction. Emotion and the dramatic force of good narrative are also integral to the genre, but as is the case with film in general, these things must be evoked through surfaces, captured light reflected from the outside, and the visible edge of things. Surface is called upon to convey the immaterial; the medium collapses if

both the observable and the ephemeral meanings it evokes are not narratively intelligible. In the case of *Into Great Silence*, unelaborated scene is called upon to evoke transcendence.

Gröning's film uses the conventions of realist documentary filmmaking but stretches them to establish a sense of presence so accentuated as to suggest absence, and then by further extension, "pure presence". For example, the first minute of the film is a still shot of the dimly-lit face of a monk at prayer. For one minute, there is nothing else. There is no noteworthy movement, just a subtle shift of facial muscles—the barest hint that we are not watching a photograph. There is no music, no speech. There are no far off sounds in the background, only room tone—the ambient noise of the room, raising every creak or rustle to awareness. There is no cut-away shot to salve impatience. The film depicts utter stillness, nothingness, as the face of a monk—shot as pure surface. We don't know this man, only the muted contours of his face and his stillness. There is no music to cue our emotion; there is no context clue to explain what we see (or don't see), just one minute of quiet slowly ticking by, one second after another, sixty times—relentlessly ambiguous, both absence and presence.

Periodically throughout *Into Great Silence*, Gröning also presents short interludes of the almost clinically lit, full-on, close-up face of monks looking frankly at the camera. Since we only hear directly from one monk (near the end of the film) and all other words spoken by the monks are the words of the liturgy (and one brief discussion that does not reveal the identity of the speakers), these moments are our only hint at intersubjective access to

these people who we observe for the nearly three hours of the film. The monks' expressions are blank, reminiscent of Lev Kulesov's famous film experiment in the early twentieth century showing the capacity of context editing to bestow deep meaning on blank expressions—except without the context. We see the faces, for a full 20 seconds each, in groups of threes, with each shot separated from others by a dip to black. The effect, like the film itself, is both disconcerting and profound. The still, blank faces are not really blank at all. With nothing else to attribute meaning for us, the subtlest facial movement or look of the eye seems intense. The raw physical presence of the individual faces of the monks is stark—it is simultaneously powerfully particularizing and thoroughly anonymous. Men are reduced to faces, and because of the frankness and duration of the shots, the reduction draws attention to itself as such. Because the images fail to signify, the only meaning left for the presence we experience is unknown purpose, or mystery—and in the monastic context, this ultimate purpose transforms absence into transcendent presence.

Here absence is figured *through presence* (scene) because the monastic experience we see, bereft of other avenues of meaning, collapses into pure scene. Put another way, the film collapses into pure mystery; it figures an absent-presence that obliterates the nothingness of the void and replaces it with something—a something that *means nothing*, an incomprehensible void that is pure mystery resolvable only in pure meaning: an ultimate purpose.

Evoking an Experience of Purpose

The documentary frame also is important here. Scene is working not simply as an abstraction, but in specific ways by approaching mystery *experientially*. For example, the changing seasons that help establish the rhythms of life at the monastery are depicted in successive reiterations of an establishing shot of the grounds of the monastery—the same view revisited several times to note differences of the seasons throughout the film. Yet the shots hold longer than the ten seconds or so that convention would dictate. The scenes draw attention to themselves and fix themselves as particular moments passing at the pace of daily life. The continuity editing that can be used to naturalize filmic time compression is absent. Instead, extended “real time” shots are juxtaposed with time-lapse shots and same-perspective montages to suggest the cycle of seasons in a visceral way. A cyclical sense of time as “eternal circle” is evoked *in the time of the present moment*, under the scrutiny of silence and awareness. At about three hours, the time-experience of the film also works to disrupt cinematic expectations.

At times Gröning uses continuity editing to construct traditional Hollywood style realist sequences: a long establishing shot of a scene followed by a succession of closer shots to direct viewers’ attention as desired by the filmmaker and to compress the temporality of the scene. Yet more often, the film defies these conventions and distends the temporal standards for shots; the camera stays put for a minute or longer. Rather than sharing the freedom of an omniscient camera roaming across the scene, we are fixed in place as unmoving observers, quietly watching, as still as the

monks themselves. Gröning tends to frame these shots through doorways or looking past walls. We are positioned outside the room, peeking in, unobserved ourselves. As viewers, our sense of being located outside the space we are observing works with the conventions of the genre to position our situation as “authentic” and “objective”—the logic is that if we are unseen, the one observed must be unaffected by our presence and so is behaving “naturally.” Yet, the temporal distention also breaks apart realist conventions⁴² and their pull toward identification. Instead, the frame of the film is broken to enhance a sense of observation. We are not located by the film within its scene, but reflexively positioned as viewers of a film, quietly observing the filmic depictions of a real place. The elements that make up the scene we witness are “cited” as something real, but also to conjure an emptiness pointing to more. Again, we are left only with scene, and in the unfulfilled desire for meaning led inexorably, experientially, to mystification and ultimate purpose.

In this sense, the filmic *depiction* of monastic austerity found in *Into Great Silence* might be said to offer a kind of hint at the insights of monastic practice. The stark limits of bodily experience, the life of ascetic deprivation, prayer, silence and isolation, the monks’ path to the edge of transcendence, is shown as particular and real. And Gröning’s film offers an experience of what it depicts; film becomes perhaps a performative shortcut to some measure of the contemplative’s experience. Audiences too are invited deep into the grey stone walls of the monastery, to their edges, and then into a

⁴² For example, compressing time and navigating space according to the logic of narrative subjectivity within a “world” created by the film.

gap of meaning that cries to heaven to be filled with transcendence. We don't have to believe what the monks believe to feel the hunger for a ultimate purpose to fill the gap that Gröning opens for us.

Conclusion

The role of purpose in documentary can be both straightforward and also slippery because purpose is tangled up with agency, and ends are directly related to means. Further, purpose is susceptible to extension, as all the terms are—scene act, agent, and agency too. The scope of a scene can be drawn in terms of the soldier, the battle or the war. This inherent ambiguity is a key reason the resources of drama are so rich, flexible and capable of transformation. But purpose is also susceptible to *mystification*. Burke refers to this expansion of scope as a change in circumference, and purpose readily expands to become ultimate purpose, an ultimate ground that offers certainty in its all-inclusiveness. It absorbs all further questions into a cloud of mystery, the unknowability excused by its sublime character.

Yet, at the most basic level “purpose” operates in a very clear way when documentaries are unambiguous about their own rhetorical purpose. Thus *The Corporation* arranges its facts and images to shape our understanding of how we think of U.S. corporate structure and convinces us that that understanding must change. *Waste Land* wants us to see garbage in a new way to help us see poor people in a new way—as profoundly beautiful and suffused with dignity, even in their weakness. *Confessions of an Eco-Terrorist* tries to draw us into its own all-consuming purpose of saving whales. And some documentaries like *Koyaanisqatsi*, *Baraka*, and *Into Great*

Silence lead us to purpose through a wholesale immersion in scene, arranging images to invite us to receive them as meaningful. However, they offer no acts, no characters, no processes to help us make sense of the context we see. They leave us adrift until the only explanation left is our own answer to the final “why”—an awareness of ultimate meaning, that is, an absence of meaning—a mystery-shrouded hope that can be left undefined or described as divine, according to one’s own inclinations.

These cases explore this kind of ultimate level: when scene is considered unto itself, by itself, does it not emerge as a kind of mystical purpose itself? In pantheistic philosophy, or in the expansive spirituality of someone like de Chardin, we see something like this happening. In documentary’s technological power to present the “scene,” and in its zeal to document the “real,” is there also lurking a kind of implicit mysticism? In the previous chapter, I explored the feature where documentaries often become transparent or explicit about their own “agencies,” and the documentary itself can become part of the film drama as an agency of finding and revealing the truth. The “means-ends” relationship, as the purpose of documentary, while seldom explicitly announced, is always implicitly there: documentary is documentary only when its means are used to find and tell the truth, to “show” us the real world of human experience, and provide the “evidence” for correct judgment about that world. It is, in that regard, an idealistic rhetoric that claims power and control over the material real. When documentary fails to embrace and pursue these ideals, when its “purpose” becomes tainted by politics, propaganda, commerce, or emotional

ingratiation, the purists of documentary cry “foul” and invoke the ideal means-ends ethical position of documentary. It is perhaps for this reason that documentary has been so little explored as “rhetorical,” despite the obvious infusion of rhetorical purpose throughout the many uses toward which it is put. This brings us to where we began this exploration, and to the conclusions that we may draw.

Chapter Six:

Conclusion

At the most basic level, the need to address the “rhetoric of documentary” has never been greater or more obvious. The five-year period from 2007–2012 accounts for 37 of the top 100 grossing documentaries of all time at the box office, and the top 12 grossing documentaries are all from 2004 or later.⁴³ While documentary film has exploded in theaters, Reality TV, documentaries produced for cable channels, and documentaries distributed online, added together with wide-spread, low-cost access to high-quality cameras and editing software bespeak a virtual explosion in our exposure to materials using documentary forms and techniques. Quite simply, “documentary” as a voice in our culture has never been more prominent, it’s basic language and grammar more used, and its influence more felt. As part and product of this presence, its rhetorical uses are more pronounced. Through documentary Spike Lee raises our consciousness of race and its history, Michael Moore is heroic for liberals and vilified by conservatives, Al Gore seeks to save the world, and Ben Stein seeks out Moore’s rhetorical techniques to counter the “exclusion” of religious belief. As I write this in a busy political season, I recently heard a political pundit

⁴³ Data as of September 21, 2012 from Box Office Mojo:
<http://boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>

opine that republicans are remiss in not producing “documentaries” the way the democrats have—this, at the same time the film *2016: Obama’s America* (D’Souza & Sullivan, 2012) received nationwide release in theatres and became the biggest-earning documentary of the year, followed distantly by *Bully*, (Hirsch, 2011).⁴⁴ The film *2016 Obama’s America* is itself a documentary with a political cause (an anti-Obama film written and co-directed by Dinesh D’Souza, a famous culture war speaker and author, not a documentary filmmaker).

The special status of documentary as a form of media that presents “reality” and documents “the truth,” no doubt has everything to do with its power and prominence as a rhetorical voice. Understanding documentary film as a constructed rhetoric, and observing that among rhetorical voices and media it has a special ethos and special ways of invoking *evidence* for a truth revealed, would be a worthy contribution of my work.

My own interest in these issues and what has drawn me to considering documentary as rhetoric has much more to do with my experience and practices as a documentary filmmaker. As a documentarian, my voice is not as a propagandist, but as a storyteller. What is *revealed* to me, and I hope to my audience, as I work is not so much an explicitly political truth, but a special awareness of how this art weaves together the strands of real images, information, and events with the fibers of our consciousness, our emotions, our connections to the world. As much as the genre may be thought of as providing a window to the real world, my experience of making

⁴⁴ Data for *2016 Obama’s America* and *Bully* as of September 21, 2012 from Box Office Mojo: <http://boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm>

documentary has been of something simultaneously smaller and more interesting: partial truths and very human stories, yet all the while no less true and no less real.

Kenneth Burke describes literature as “equipment for living” (Burke, 1974), that is, we tell stories because they are a kind of preparation for life; they offer patterns for understanding and responding to the things and events we encounter in the world around us. Likewise, we make and watch documentaries, at least in part, because they help us make sense of and interact with the world we experience. While most stories promise this at least implicitly, that they will eventually get around to a valuable perspective, documentaries promise a more direct route to relevance because they portray objects and events unmistakably located in the “real” world of our experience.

Considering documentaries from this perspective, in their functions *as documentaries*, invites a criticism that pays special attention to how that context, that “real” world of common experience is depicted. In this study I have borrowed Burke’s notion of “scene” as a way to watch what films do as they *use* this “realness,” that is, I have tried to follow the way the context of a situation (time, space, objects and relationships all happening within a social world) determines the ways documentary films invite us to understand what they depict as true.

I have argued that documentaries, when they work as documentary, establish and verify their depictions as evidence by drawing on the elements of their scene, and that we can trace the rhetorical work of this evidence, its

rhetoric, by following what these scenic elements *do* as they shape the way we experience a film text. Burke suggests that scene is one of the key terms at work when we use language and symbols to make sense of the world as drama, that is, as a meaningful human situation, and that these terms, scene, act, agent (character), agency (the means by which things are done) and purpose, work together in combinations to form and transform the way we make sense of that situation. So I have borrowed these other terms, act, agent, agency and purpose, to organize my analysis of the evidentiary work of "scene" in documentary, the work these films do to show us that the perspectives they offer—the people they focus on, their portrayal of events or processes or reasons—can be trusted and should be merged with our own perspective.

Or from the perspective of the filmmaker, when I make a *documentary*, I make a film that invites you to see the world of *your* experience from a vantage point that I show you is "real" according to the physical and social markers by which you understand something as "real" in your ordinary lived experience. This is more than a physicalist "indexical" correspondence that says "look, this film shows that this object really existed with the observable colors and shapes that you yourself can now observe." That material indexicality offers "reality" to us only when it becomes an element helping to constitute a *situation* as meaningfully real. In other words, reference to the material existence of a thing is only one of the markers for "real." The verisimilitude of a filmic image or sound and objects we see in our immediate experience becomes relevant and persuasive in

documentary when it helps constitute an event that corresponds to the socially constituted world of our experience. Documentary depictions take their force when they are rhetorically constituted as evidence.

The Rhetoric of Evidence

Life is full of the unexpected and hard to explain. The difficulty of establishing sure truth as a guarantor of claims is of course a perennial problem of deep cultural consequence, fueling a desire for one or several unshakable foundations. The promise of sure truth is as alluring and elusive in film as anywhere else. But photorealism itself does not accomplish this in documentary.

Hollywood filmmaking in general, and its world of special effects more specifically, has long and ever more convincingly used the photorealism of film as a way of enhancing storytelling with the parlor trick of "real appearance." That images are often transformed using Photoshop and its video equivalents is not only widely known, it is widely appreciated for its virtuosity. We readily frame our experience of a Hollywood films as *just* story; the "scene" adjusts to "fiction" and we easily engage "realism" as "fantasy." Photo-indexicality, the physical relationship of images to the profimic relationships they depict, does not alone constitute images as evidence. They only become evidence of the real when a text convincingly establishes "real" as the image's "scene." This study has shown that filmmakers have a broad range of tools to use to help set "real" as their context.

The general verisimilitude of audio-visual film experience to everyday embodied experience is certainly one very effective tool. Documentary conventions are another tool. Hand-held camera shots, fly-on-the-wall observational camera placement, the use of interviews and testimonies, and so forth are easily read by viewers as marking off a genre associated with making truth claims. Filmmakers also commonly depict the scenes they show us to resonate with commonplace notions of "everyday" or "typical," or by matching their storytelling to the expectations of the world as they are shaped by. And moment-by-moment, according to the unfolding of a filmmaker's purposes, filmmakers can easily shift our attention from other story elements to the photorealism of a scene by attending to material surfaces. Through these rhetorical techniques, documentary truth is no longer a matter of the correspondence of a match between filmic and pro-filmic events. The film has become a story, its rhetoric unfolds dramatically and its truth is established on narrative terms: its coherence and flow as a story, its fidelity to lived experience, and so forth (Fisher, 1984).

In this study then, I have described a documentary rhetoric of evidence. In the films I have analyzed we indeed see documentary "scene" interacting at key moments to locate the events of films in the "real world." But we have seen that "scene" also does other rhetorical work. That is, documentary images are not just evidence that something is real, they are evidence that something is real in ways that become meaningful for particular arguments and rhetorical moves.

So in *Supersize Me* (2004), Morgan Spurlock's changing body becomes the scene of the film that colors our understanding of the risks of eating fast food; we can see it makes you sick. In *Man on Wire* (Marsh, 2008), the scene shows us that there is real, physical risk to Phillippe Petit as he walks on a wire strung between the twin towers of the New York Trade Center, but the scene also works as evidence of the heroism of the act. In *Bully* (Hirsch, 2011), scene characterizes the seriousness of bullying as an act, but also structures and intensifies the way we identify with the characters who are bullied, and defines bullying in a way that works to deactivate the kind of emotional distancing through difference that often underwrites our capacity to accept the mistreatment of people.

When documentaries chiefly operate by referring to the inner world of characters, again, the films often anchor viewers in the "real" scene of a situation, positioning their images as real, but again this evidence also works in more complex ways. Celebrity identity documentaries draw on "behind-the-scene" footage to use "real" backstage selves as guarantors of the "authenticity" of front stage celebrity. *Spellbound* (Blitz, 2002) and *Mad Hot Ballroom* (Argrelo, 2005) use the real images of children immersed in an all-consuming preparation for a competitive event as evidence for the American myth that hard work guarantees success: race, class and personal circumstances all appear to be of little consequence in these "real" examples. *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004) shows us "real" extended footage of George W. Bush sitting, frozen, in front of school children instead of reacting decisively to the attacks on the World Trade Center towers, which within the

film evidences Bush's lack of leadership as real, and serve as an explanation for the subsequent problems of his presidency. And in *Naked on the Inside* (Farrant, 2007), bodies become scenic evidence for selves, but do this in a way that reveals the fissures of the self-body relationship and become instead evidence that the social meanings of bodies and the impacts of those meanings, do not sustain; bodies become real evidence that cannot be trusted as representations of selves.

Another way documentary films work as evidence is to structure the way we understand the method by which something occurs. So *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006) establishes a scene of rising carbon dioxide levels and looming catastrophic climate change as evidence that the unbridled use of carbon-based energy is a recipe for doom, and *Waiting for Superman* (Guggenheim, 2010) shows concrete manifestations of poverty, and uses the stories of real poor children as evidence of the cruel way U.S. schools fail the young people who turn to them for hope. *Roger and Me* (Moore, 1989) shows the devastated landscape of Flint, Michigan to characterize General Motors' business decisions as inhumane, but also uses the story of its own production (and the challenge of getting access to CEO Roger Smith) as evidence of the remoteness and disregard of GM for the consequences of those business practices. Likewise, the film *Jesus Camp* (Ewing & Grady, 2006) uses the scenic portrayal of the Evangelical Christian evangelization of children to characterize that indoctrination as powerfully intense, but the scene also gives evidence to the production process itself within the film through a palpable "both sides of the story" structure that

helps intensify the images as evidence, since the portrayals are thereby “objective.” In this way, the same scene becomes understandable as working rhetorically in two ways at the same time for two different audiences (either shaping the evangelization as troubling, or reinforcing the importance of a legitimate theological purpose that justifies the methods we see in the film). The dual operation helps intensify either perspective.

Finally, documentary scene can be “real” evidence that structures and supports an abstract purpose. So in a direct way, the film *The Corporation* (Achbar & Abbott, 2004) uses factual information, testimony and stories as a “scene” that certifies the validity and relevance of its arguments about the recent genesis of corporate structures that we tend to take as unchangeable and “given.” And the film *Waste Land* (Walker et al., 2010) achieves its purpose, the audience’s appreciation for the value and beauty of the poor Brazilian garbage pickers it shows, by using documentary scene to depict these people as real by intensifying our understanding of the severity and gravitational force of that poverty—therein intensifying our sense of that value and beauty in an ironic contrast to the ugliness of their situation. *Confessions of An Eco-Terrorist* (Brown, 2010) uses the “scene” of ocean, ice and governmental bureaucracy to color the work of the Sea Shepherd “eco-terrorists” it depicts as a heroic, and in a life or death struggle against whaling that is shown as worth the sacrifices and dangers it entails. But for films like *Koyaanisqatsi*, (Reggio, 1982), *Baraka* (Fricke, 1993), and *Into Great Silence* (Gröning, 2005), scene itself can become so intense that it leaves no room for any clear motivation, and in that mystifying absence of

motive, scene becomes “evidence” of a kind of ultimate, or transcendental meaning. In the case of *Into Great Silence*, scene becomes so present to audiences that it oscillates between the presence of the surfaces it features *as surface*, and leaves that void of meaning as a vacuum that insists on being filled. The result is scene becoming evidence of the necessity of its own transcendence—an invitation into the monk’s experience of ultimate purpose.

Important in all of these cases though is that the rhetorical force is not just at the level of idea; it is not only a matter of these scenes being framed as “real” but that that “realness” *does* things: it encourages and intensifies our identification, it transforms the way we understand things, and it involves us emotionally, even bodily in the films we see. We are offered patterns for understanding (and responding to) our encounters with the situations we experience in that same, common, material and social world.

And for all the social change a documentarian might hope to bring, documentary film texts generally show a keen awareness of the self-selection of documentary audiences members. Indeed, as we saw with the film *Jesus Camp* (Ewing & Grady, 2006), the rhetorical structure of a film can be finely tuned to the sensibilities of its intended audiences. But even when these films aim toward broad “general” audiences, they “work” to the extent that they show us what we want, or need, to see, although perhaps in unexpected ways. The “real” *elements* of a documentary, its scene, characters, events, methods and expressed reasons, must be plausible given its audiences’ direct and mediated experiences of similar situations. Only then can a film play off

these understandings, often to merely reinscribe existing social scripts and reinforce and deepen them with new examples, but sometimes a film can also offer an explanation for a yet-inadequate understanding of something (the slippage we feel in our grasp of a situation), or they can expand the way we understand a situation.

So *March of the Penguins* (Jacquet, 2005) assures audiences that the cultural imperative for stable heterosexual pairing and child-rearing is echoed, verified and dramatized in a close observation of nature itself. Or *Naked on the Inside* gives “real-world” examples of a self-body disjuncture that audience members likely experience but don’t often (if ever) see dramatized. Or *Bully* works to reinforce our sense of outrage at bullying, but also stretches our understanding of what bullying is by stretching our outrage to overthrow the ways we might diffuse its impact. Or *Fahrenheit 9/11* offers its likely viewers an explanation that gives form to their own need for compelling narratives explaining the mistakes of the Bush administration. George W. Bush’s inaction and collapse of leadership in the wake of the second 9/11 twin tower attack becomes what Burke calls a “representative anecdote” (1969a) that can stand for and give meaning to his presidency.

Put another way, documentaries invite audiences to salve all manner of psychological incoherences and resolve them symbolically. And there are two risks here: symbolic needs can facilitate and sanction remedies and structures that involve real physical suffering—For example, Burke offers an insightful analysis of the dynamics of scapegoating (1969a, 1984); and on the other hand, a dramatized experience can introduce a sense of resolution

that dissolves the urgency of action—I can go to see *An Inconvenient Truth* to show symbolic concern for climate change, then not bother doing anything else once I have resolved the problem symbolically. And this is just one way in which approaching documentary from the perspective of rhetoric raises the issue of ethics.

Documentary Ethics

I began this study by explaining that it was prompted for me by my own experience of *making* documentaries. In that context, a questions remains: What difference does this understanding of a dramatistic, scenic “rhetoric of evidence” make for filmmaking? One important answer is that a fuller sense of the resources in the rhetorical toolbox gives filmmakers more options for their work. Filmmakers might make better use of these resources to offer new visions of the possible; our avenues for expanding imaginations and challenging the status quo might be enriched. But this points to more questions, to ethical questions that I have so far largely sidestepped.

Put in terms of the way documentary films work as “equipment for living,” if I am to make or show documentary films, propose them to others as an invitation to shared perspective and possibly shared action, I am proposing to influence others, and so ethical questions begin to emerge.

Does the rhetorical perspective I offer in this study have any answer to questions about how one might responsibly make documentary films, especially given the centrality of ethical questions for so much of contemporary documentary scholarship? While a full answer to this question

is beyond the scope of this study, a preliminary sketch indicating resources available for a rhetorical approach to documentary seems in order.

I don't propose these considerations to point to a "rhetorical ethics of documentary" as *the* ethical approach for documentary filmmakers or critics. The important questions raised by explicitly tracing the work of power in documentary films is crucial, and I in no way offer what I present here as a refutation or replacement. I offer these considerations rather as an indication that approaching documentary as rhetoric does not necessarily require silence about the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers, and indeed, may offer some very practical insights for documentary practice. Indeed, I believe a rhetorical approach to documentary may offer an alternative to the seemingly unresolvable and potentially paralyzing ethical quandaries that seem to consistently emerge from perspectives governed by approaches to documentary through the lens of "representation."

Contemporary Documentary Ethics

A perhaps inescapable problem with any ethical framework is the extreme elasticity by which we can understand a situation. As we have seen, the pentad of terms that Burke outlines show the possibilities for ascribing the human meaning of a situation according to a broad array of perspectives. That is, one might identify and apply a fixed set of ethical principles in widely divergent ways because, as I have argued, the complexity of events always exceeds the capacity of language, and the terms we use to understand situations are themselves highly elastic. Words and symbols leave things out and focus on some things rather than others according to the structure of

language, not events; since there is no direct match between events and the ethical language that structures them, applying ethical principles is necessarily interpretive, human, and structured by language and motive.

One particular set of problems that emerges in many discussions about documentary flows from the presumptions embedded in the notion of representation, and which lead to a framing of the discussion in terms of the accuracy, or “truth” of those “representations.”

Butchart (2006) identifies “three central and related problems” shaping the ethical debates in recent documentary literature: “participant consent, the right to know, and the claims of objectivity” (p. 428). In his analysis, each problem is a matter of conflicting individual rights, yet also is structured by notions of truth. For example, participant consent is concerned with a “true” correspondence between the way documentary subjects understand their participation and the subsequent film and filmmaking process. Ethical debate takes shape around the issue of avoiding the manipulation and victimization of people by the filmmaker who is in turn exercising her rights of artistic expression. The structuring role of “truth” emerges perhaps more clearly around objectivity—the insistence that filmic representation not distort what it records. This objectivity problematically presumes a scene has a “true essence,” which should remain untrammelled by bias or distortion. While approaches vary, many of the most prominent discussions of documentary theory (such as B. Nichols, 1991; Ruby, 2000; Winston, 2000) become embroiled in sorting through the tangles of rights and responsibilities engendered by morality-based ethics (Butchart, 2006,

pp. 428-429). Butchart notes the insight of major psychoanalytical theorists such as Badiou, Mouffe and Žižek that ethics based on rights and duties are structured around presumptions of right and wrong and good and evil. In Butchart's analysis, right and wrong, good and evil, expand the focus of concern beyond a concern with ethics (what to do) to morality.

There is a twofold consequence of grounding ethics in consensual moral opinion (an opinion that defines human being as Western or as potential victim of evil.) First, the quasi-theological basis of the moral imperative to respect all difference—"Do unto others as you would have done unto you"—can lead to the dead-end of identity politics ("No one is more other, more alien, more deserving than me!"). Second, the role of Western values in securing moral consensus—"God is on our side, evil is not"—can lead to violence morally legitimated in the name of a singular, ideological difference ("Live free or die!") (Butchart, 2006, p. 438).

If Butchart's analysis is correct in its characterization of contemporary critical documentary theory as structured around issues of "truth," the ethical alternative his article offers seeks to escape the linking of truth to moral absolutes structuring existing debates. Butchart's proposal invites the consideration of a documentary truth not anchored in moral absolutes. The shift is from evaluating the degree to which a film is "true" to discovering how the truth of film might guide what we should do in light of Badiou's notion of truth, "The truth is what holds together a specific set of elements in

a given context and configures them in a particular way” (p. 433). To find this singular truth, Butchart turns to Sobchack’s phenomenology of film experience as significantly similar to ordinary subjective experience. This characteristic of film, its self-structuring as an experience of perceiving agency, becomes in Butchart’s analysis the hidden, invariant truth that might serve as the foundation for a an ethic of documentary truth (Butchart, 2006).

On the practical level of making ethical documentaries, locating the truth of documentary in its homology with visual perception leads Butchart to reflexivity. We are encouraged to raise the perceptual operation of film to visibility, to “double” that visibility “via footage of participants looking directly into or in some way addressing the address of camera” (p. 439). The task is to unmask documentary “as a receiver, a kind of witness whose capacity is not simply to mirror appearances but rather to reconstruct, recreate, or reconstitute an image of what first gives itself to the visual field” (p. 439).

Locating the Truth of Documentary

While I am not as concerned in this context with the theoretical details of Butchart’s proposed alternative singular “truth” of documentary, resistance to documentary depictions as “mirror of appearance” and the salience of his analysis of the problem with many of the ethics-based critiques in recent documentary scholarship seems on target. But the ethical quandaries of documentary run deep.

Indeed, there is no “ethics” of documentary based on moral absolutes, nor can there be, that is anything more than a rhetorical strategy for containing rhetorical strategies. Ethics based on moral absolutes are

necessarily themselves exercises in the discursive coercions they see in documentary—efforts to modify the actions of others. Although ethical frameworks seek to limit power, they exercise it in ways that are necessarily crude because universal principles engage particular situations reductively. The point is not to deride the value of such ethical critique or principles, but rather to suggest that the reach of such ethics exceeds its grasp (and ceases to be “ethical”) as soon it attempts to do more than trace the work of power.

There remains no easy way out of ethical ambiguity. The elastic possibilities of language in naming or “identifying” a situation (Burke, 1969b) put ethical stability out of reach. More specifically in terms of reflexivity, It seems that Butchart’s (2006) proposed focus on doubling vision risks oversimplifying the ethical demands and issues of a situation. For example, a standard documentary interview is marked as a *performance* by its adherence to the convention of the genre. But does “doubling,” in the very earnestness of its self-revelation, impart an aura of “honesty” that misleads—an integrity that is necessarily false in that all symbols are necessarily exceeded by what they are meant to represent?

In other words, while reflexivity is laudable to the degree it positions knowledge as contingent and situational, it may also position a profoundly *social* text (any documentary shown to others is a social intervention, and therein rhetorical) outside of social critique (the authorial claim: “what do you mean, my perspective is “wrong” or “not helpful”... it’s truly *my* perspective”).

What is needed perhaps is an acknowledgement of the constructedness of truth, and an insistence that this does not *weaken* its value, but *enhances* it. A fact never speaks for itself, but always enters into a conversation. While an addiction to the stabilizing and comforting reliefs of authority might tempt us into imputing to facts such as “photographic indexicality” a kind of sovereignty (even when we know better), it is perhaps a better bet to live tentatively with our best assessment of the evidence, always ready to re-evaluate. And when we present the evidences of our arguments or perspectives with this same, old-fashioned humility, we are in the realm of a Burkean conversation. We cannot hammer with the truth, but we can still solicit cooperation with the considerable resources of language and symbols. And when we embrace the rhetorical character of truth, we are not set adrift with the false choice of an unyielding faith that refuses contrary evidence, or radical uncertainty. Instead we are consigned to the hard work of weighing evidence on the slippery terms by which it is constructed. In this, documentary film evidence, like other kinds of “facts” will not, of their own accord or inherent properties, do the work of truth for us. We must (and do) use them according to our purposes. Neither does this strip from us the possibility of confronting un-truth, and the strategies of domination.

A Rhetorical Ethics of Documentary⁴⁵

From the vantage point of rhetoric, the key strategies for ethical documentary production may have to do with configuring scenes in ways that

⁴⁵ Interestingly, Chase (2009) suggests rhetoric as a foundation for a contemporary approach to ethics and suggests a path to this via Burke’s (1984) notion of piety and attempts to lay theoretical groundwork for it through a performative reappropriation of Isocartes, but never sketches the form such an ethics would take.

point to a world that exceeds its depiction, and making those depictions *explicit as contingent manifestations of rhetorical intent*. If there is a singular constitutive constant of documentary it is that it performs and enacts symbolic reality about the world of experience. And to the extent we depict something as a real situation, it has a symbolically meaningful social context, therefore the one *given* is sociality itself; to use symbols is to be ethically engaged in a social context. Without this a situation is pre-rhetorical and arguably pre-symbolic. Once they enter the world of symbol-making, situations are rhetorical and we are thrown into a world of social relationship. We enter into the realm of the other "I;" the other *as a self* who must be encountered a self, and who positions us in ethical obligation via what Lévinas describes as the "face" of the Other: "The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation" (1979, p. 201). And Lévinas insists on the ethical integrity of human subjects as exceeding any possible depiction; "... the face [the other] is present in its refusal to be contained" (1979, p. 194), that is, "The face resists possession, resists my powers" (p. 197).

In this context, the ethical question for documentary shifts from how to make an honest factual presentation of reality to how to make responsible claims about social truth, and the ethical focus is reflexivity, not so much in terms of the subject position and power agendas of it's author, although that may be an important move, but reflexive in terms of the film's position as a rhetorical act: the filmmaker makes explicit its rhetorical intention. We are perhaps led here, ironically, to valorize artistry that draws attention to itself

as artistry, style that shows itself as style—the exact opposite of what would be considered good rhetoric in the traditional Aristotelian approach to rhetoric. If an entity is portrayed in a way that makes it clear that it exceeds the possibilities of the film, a univocal engagement of the world is resisted and space is opened for transformation. Absence of *the* truth does not preclude a truth.

Put in rhetorical terms, filmmakers are free to use symbols to engage others and invite them into transient coalitions of cooperation and solidarity; space is made for change and tools become available so that that space can be more than just a theoretical gap. This is an ethical stance that seeks to expand the possibilities of the status quo, and structure situations as expansive, rather than contained.

Given this perspective, documentary is on more sure ethical—and epistemological—ground when it presents itself as rhetoric, rather than according to a logic of representation. When, as a filmmaker, I depict a scene as partial, or show it for its role in the presentation of an argument, or feature it for its capacity to evoke a feeling or idea, when the scene I depict is *also* evidence that the limits of discourse or cultural presupposition are more elastic than previously thought, when my depiction avoids presenting itself as complete, definitive, or final, I am aligning my filmmaking with the implications of an ethics built on rhetoric. So when *Jesus Camp* invites us to consider the evangelization of children from one of just two vantage points, the problem is not that the film is limiting or narrowing its focus on the phenomenon. The problem is instead that the film presents itself as

objective representation, as though these two positions are *the* possible positions for understanding the phenomena. If these positions were instead each evoked as a kind of obvious metonymy, as two key distillations of the range of possible viewpoints, the filmmakers would lose their simple, shorthand reference to objectivity (the “both sides” trope), but the universe of the film would more clearly reflect its own rhetorical character. On the other hand when the film *Bully* allows the off-putting quirkiness of the “victims” it features to show through and interrupt the facility of its own arguments, taking the more difficult and complicated route to earn our identification, the director invites us into a complex world that is acknowledged as such, and bullying is allowed its complexity even as its real-world consequences are felt with a kind of brutal clarity. The persuasive work is harder, and demands more of the audience, yet is perhaps more compelling. It remains capable of working as coherent evidence of the real, and can seem more faithful to the vicissitudes of everyday experience.

We are on an ethical ground that is powerfully focused on a capacity to stretch the disciplinary hold of the status quo and leave room for resistance and social change.

African novelist Chimamand Adichie warns of the dangers of a single story,⁴⁶ that is, of narratives that only re-inscribe existing ways of understanding a culture or situation. In her example she describes extra-African characterizations of African poverty, lack of education and tribal life that simply miss the broad and deep richness of the continent, ignoring

⁴⁶ See http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html

middle class professionals, universities, literature and so forth. And this same insight is perhaps the moral lesson of dramatic criticism.

Throughout his body of work Burke is always interested in *dialectic*, ... any development (in organisms, works of art, stages of history) got by the interplay of various factors that mutually modify one another, and may be thought of as voices in a dialogue or roles in a play... (p. 403).

There is a sense here of the interaction of perspectives working together to help us lessen the danger of a viewpoint governed by the limits of its own "psychosis," or elevation of its own perspective to an essential and controlling "truth." Dramatism points to the plastic, multi-dimensional character of "truth." For Burke, however one understands the metaphysics of knowledge, it is always symbolic once humans engage it. So the bad news is that the cultural and material circumstances we encounter are formed—and limited—according to the way symbols work. But this is also the good news. Symbol making has an amazing capacity to shift, deepen and offer completely alternative views of situations.

It is interesting to note that in Burke's description of "master tropes," or linguistic strategies for approaching "truth" (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony), he aligns "perspective" with "metaphor," "representation" with "synecdoche" (the part stands for the whole) and "dialectic" with "irony" (Burke, 1969a, pp. 503, 507). For Burke, "perspective" and "representation" both risk a relativistic reduction when a

situation is defined by either in absolute terms. On the other hand, “dialectic” offers a “perspective of perspectives” where

none of the participating “sub-perspectives” can be treated as either precisely right or precisely wrong. They’re all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another (Burke, 1969a, p. 512).

No documentary film can adequately represent the situations it depicts. The choices made by the filmmaker—from what to shoot and where to place the camera, to what to edit out and how to juxtapose words and images—are always rhetorical; they always imply claims about reality.

In summary, there are perhaps two central, related ethical questions for filmmakers that flow from a rhetorical approach to documentary ethics.

First, does my film portray its message as complete and definitional, or does it allow itself as one possible way of understanding the situation—albeit the one I am advocating for your consideration. Sometimes this may happen through the incorporation of a kind of reflexivity that positions the film as my subjective vision, or doubles back and reveals the filmmaking process itself, its own production methods of choice-making. Other times this might happen narratively, with a film destabilizing its own depictions and entertaining the plausibility of other interpretations, or offering many voices or interpretations of events.

The second question: is the primary work of my film the re-inscription of existing, dominant ways of understanding situations; am I just re-telling a single story, or do I instead foster a vision of the situation I portray as richer,

more complex than the audience may have ever thought. This is not to set filmmakers to the impossible task of telling stories that audiences don't want to hear. Indeed, documentary films probably self-select their own audiences; they must tell their stories in ways that link with the existing world-views and expectations of their audiences. Yet within this broad horizon of common understanding is a multitude of possibilities for telling stories about reality, truths that reveal themselves as partial and constructed, yet no less true.

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