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Authenticity

We begin with an assertion: All representation is transformation. And that transformation is always partial—in both senses of the word. Stories are never lifted from life intact (they are constantly sifting out the superfluous), and we can never know something separate from our way of thinking. It is important to emphasize this early in our discussion because, as the title of this book suggests, some theorists, filmmakers, and spectators associate documentaries with "truth."

Because of the camera's ability to capture things as they happen, the photographic media are frequently considered to provide an authentic record of what was in front of the camera's lens when the scene was recorded, the "profilmic reality." Art critic John Berger, for example, in a 1968 essay, "Understanding a Photograph," describes the still photograph as an "automatic record" of things seen. "There is no transforming in photography. There is only decision, only focus" (181). And theorist Roland Barthes says in *Camera Lucida* that a photograph is "never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents)" (5).

With the discovery that silver halides were sensitive to light and the invention of the photographic process in the early nineteenth century, the innovation was visualized as a tool of scientific investigation, a means to register the action of light on chemically prepared surfaces. It was claimed that the camera would join the thermometer, barometer, hygrometer, and the telescope as the latest scientific

instrument—a precision instrument for advancing knowledge (Winston, *Claiming the Real II* 133). By the 1870s still photography was already emerging as a tool for collecting scientific data about subjects in motion. Photographer Eadweard Muybridge constructed a special apparatus, a bank of twenty-four still cameras lined up horizontally twenty-one inches apart, in order to provide visual confirmation that a galloping horse at some point has all four hooves off the ground. Later, commissioned by the University of Pennsylvania, Muybridge recorded human locomotion in studies that were used for medical research. Étienne-Jules Marey, a French physiologist, devised the "chronophotographe," a camera that could record successive images of a subject in motion on a single surface. Physician Félix-Louis Regnault and his colleague Charles Comte used a chronophotographe to document West African villagers in an 1895 ethnographic exposition on the Champs de Mars in Paris.

This legacy, the idea of the scientific and pedagogical value of photographic images, was carried over to early cinema. One of the very first of the Lumière brothers' films recorded still photographers arriving at a scientific convention. And before their famous 1895 public showing of films at the Grand Café in Paris, the Lumières showed their films at scientific gatherings.

Certainly a documentary, which takes place over time, in which time can be manipulated, and which often includes a sound track, is not the same as a still photograph. Yet there is a residual sense of that ontological authority. Ethnographer and filmmaker Jean Rouch put it succinctly: "The camera eye is more perspicacious and more accurate than the human eye. The camera eye has an infallible memory" (quoted in Levin 135). We know what happened and how it happened because the camera was there to record it. The moving image recording media have the ability to preserve a time gone by. Like still photography, documentaries bear witness to a presence that is no longer there.

Consider, for instance, a very simple film, a view of a Wolpi snake dance taken in a single shot by a camera operator for the Edison Manufacturing Company in 1901. Shot on location in Arizona, the images were taken by a static camera positioned on a parapet looking down on the dancers. Unlike a painting, which organizes the pictorial field into a staged tableau, this film has the look of contingency, as if the world were a field of potential scenes and the filmmaker came across this one and caught it for us, registering it and preserving it forever. The inclusion of an audience in the image suggests that the scene was not created for the camera, that the subject preexisted the arrival of the filmmaker. And the dance would have taken place even if the camera had not been there. It was observed, not reconstructed, and the camera placement is "the best view possible of the action"

are, as we noted above, *representations*. The prefix "re" in the word "representation" implies an absence, presenting anew that which is no longer present. And whenever we present something anew, transformation is implied.

The Photographic Image and the Real

One of the basic aspects of the photographic media (compared, for example, with linguistic communication) is that they have iconic features; they resemble the sociohistorical world. A written account can evoke. But the photographic media are supposed to have such a strong resemblance that they can in fact show; they can demonstrate.

To this iconic aspect, we can add the physical dependence on the phenomenal world. A photograph only exists because light bounces off the scene in front of the lens and leaves an impression on the back of the camera. Therefore, we have not only an iconic resemblance but also an indexical relationship with the world, the trace of a presence that is no longer there but has left its imprint. Because the camera record certifies a presence, it is perceived to speak the truth—even if it is simply the truth that Grandpa really did attend that birthday party. This is one of the paradoxes of photography: although we know that photographic images can be tampered with or altered, we also believe them as records of events, a record of a particular moment in time. As Susan Sontag put it: "The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture" (*On Photography* 5). Roland Barthes writes of having received a picture of himself that he did not remember being taken. He inspects everything in the photo to try to figure out where and when it was taken, but cannot. "And yet, *because it was a photograph* I could not deny that I had been *there* (even if I did not know *where*)" (85; emphasis in original). Neither writing nor painting can give us this certainty.

The terms "iconic" and "indexical" come from the writings of the late-nineteenth-century philosopher and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce used these terms to describe differing relationships or orders of meaning between the sign—a unit of signification—and that which it signifies. Icons, which have a relationship of similarity or close resemblance, offer the most direct communication. The desktop icon on a computer screen, for example, resembles the real object in such a way that we hardly need to explain what the picture means. Indexes, by contrast, might not look so similar to the object they refer us to. But they bear a relationship of causality or proximity to the object they represent. A cough or a

sneeze would serve as indexical signs for a cold, just as footprints would indicate the trail followed by someone walking in the woods.

It is the iconic resemblance with the physical world, of course, that allows us to recognize and relate to the situations represented in a documentary. Yet when we look at nonfictional footage, we often expect more than an image that resembles the sociohistorical world. We expect a record of what was actually there. We expect documentaries to be indexically bound to the subject represented. The camera and its subject were there at the same time. As film critic André Bazin noted over half a century ago, the photographic image "shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction" (14).

We could extend this argument to the way documentaries use sound. The first nonfiction films had no recorded sound at all. And the term documentary itself was coined at a time when cinema was still silent. But sound technology introduced a new range of possibilities to documentary filmmakers. Just as the motion picture brought the photographic image one step closer to the world of lived experience, the sound track enhanced the similarity between the documentary film and the subject represented. Better yet, sound films could potentially preserve aural traces of the phenomenal world, thus reinforcing the sense of presence that is so compelling in documentaries. In part, we believe what we hear because of the microphone's ability to capture sounds as they occur in real life.

In Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason* (1967), for example, the direct record of the protagonist's uninterrupted speech serves as a way of enforcing the integrity of the profilmic situation. The film uses lengthy takes in an effort to match screen time and actual experience. At different moments in the recording process, however, the camera runs out of film, and the cinematographer has to stop shooting and change magazines. Rather than interrupt the "scene," the filmmaker chooses to continue recording sound. While there is no image of the subject, we can still hear his voice over black leader. The image is abruptly cut; the sound is not. In different circumstances, the absence of visual record could imply that the subject before the camera is no longer there, or that the profilmic event itself has been disrupted. In *Portrait of Jason*, though, it produces the opposite effect, suggesting that life goes on even if the camera is not there to record it.

All this supports the notion that documentaries offer authentic representations of sociohistorical reality. Even if we know that those representations are incomplete, the closeness to the phenomenal world that is imparted seems to ground their truth claims.

This may be changing, of course, if documentaries rely more on digital simulations. Seeing Forrest Gump with President John F. Kennedy is clearly iconic,

but not at all indexical. It resembles a real visit, but there was no concurrence of time and place. This kind of toying with history is fairly harmless, although not without meaning, in a fictional fantasy such as Forrest Gump (Robert Zemeckis, 1994). Yet in nonfiction film these manipulations can be more disorienting. One can think, for example, of a documentary created with stock sounds and images stored in a computer, or, better yet, made entirely of computer-generated images. While these images are becoming increasingly common in documentaries, they lack the kind of indexical bond with the world that we expect from photographic representations. Computer-generated images (CGI) are simulations, not "direct" records of lived reality.

Still, in appearance at least, these images can be virtually indistinguishable from photographic records, and that is one reason why they deserve further attention. The BBC documentary series *Walking with Dinosaurs* (1999), for instance, uses computer-generated images of prehistoric animals to (re)create the physical world as it might have existed millions of years ago. The makers of the series were not trying to fool the audience into believing that they could offer a photographic record of the actual creatures. But the strong photorealism of the images suggests that this kind of artifact could potentially replace the live action shots that we expect to see in a documentary. As new media theorist Lev Manovich has noted, "Filming physical reality is but one possibility" available for contemporary filmmakers (294).

Can we still talk about authenticity when the image, realistic as it may be, is not physically connected to a referent in the phenomenal world? Because of its relative autonomy from the physical world, digital imaging is likely to affect not only the making of documentaries but also the way we understand the relationship between representation and reality. Computer images remind us that documentaries are not mere traces of reality. They are conventionally accepted procedures that purport to offer credible representations of lived experience. By observing documentary conventions, filmmakers may claim legitimacy for the reality portrayed even if no photographic record is available. We will examine the conventional nature of documentary representations shortly. But first let's look at the way documentaries explore their indexical bond with the events represented.

The Real as Referent

In Robert Gardner's ethnographic film *Dead Birds* (1964), there is a sequence of an elaborate ritual for a child who died offscreen. We learn from the voiceover

commentary that the boy was killed by an enemy tribe. The commentary covers over the missing sequence of the child's death. The death in *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu/Moartea domnului Lăzărescu* (Cristi Puiu, 2005), a Romanian fiction film shot in a documentary style, is announced in the title, but it happens after the two-and-a-half-hour film is over. But even if the character's death were shown on screen, we would assume that the performer who plays Mr. Lazarescu would survive his fictional death, that his demise is merely represented. The young boy's death in *Dead Birds*, on the other hand, was not confined to the realm of representation. Documentary space is of a different order than imaginary space, and our viewing experience is different as well. We bring extratextual cultural knowledge and judgment to documentary viewing. As film scholar Vivian Sobchack puts it, "There is an existential . . . bond between documentary space and the space inhabited by the viewer" (294). This is one of the reasons why certain documentary subjects are so difficult to watch.

We all know of films that have affected us so much that we wanted to flee the auditorium or classroom. *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (1993) may be one of them. *Silverlake Life* is a video diary that chronicles the dying of the filmmaker and film teacher Tom Joslin from AIDS-related illnesses (edited after his death by one of his former students, Peter Friedman, and transferred to film for distribution). Like the event hidden from sight in Robert Gardner's film, this death was real; it existed beyond the realm of representation. Unlike what happens in *Dead Birds*, though, it is also visible on screen. *Silverlake Life* combines a relatively unadorned shooting style with a very personal approach to the documentary process, using both strategies as a means of authenticating the experiences represented in the film.

The documentary opens with an image of Mark Massi, Tom's lover of twenty-two years, lying in bed. The camera turns to the right and we see a monitor with a video valentine from Tom ("I love you Mark") and hear Mark's voiceover commentary, "What I remember most about Tom. . . ." The past tense is clearly established here. The precredit sequence continues with the camera on Mark as he talks of Tom's death: "It was very scary to look at him after he died. It's very strange to see a dead person staring." He recalls how he had tried to close Tom's eyelids properly, as they do in the movies, but they popped back open! "I apologized [to Tom] that life wasn't like in the movies." The opening of the film tells us what we will see: the death of Tom Joslin. Then we go back to witness it. What we see is what happened when the camera and microphone were recording, and much of it appears to be what would have happened even if the camera and microphone were not recording. (Indeed, it is clear that Tom would have died even

if the film had not been made and there is nothing that we could have done to prevent it.)

In many documentaries, major information comes from the sound track via voiceover commentary or interviews. But in *Silverlake Life* much of the information also derives from changes in the physical appearance of both Tom and Mark, who is waging his own battle with AIDS. The primary mode appears more descriptive than interpretative, a rendering visible of the observable. Made with a video camera, usually handheld but sometimes on a stand when Tom is shooting himself, the documentary tends to efface "style" and "suspense," so that it appears that the sounds and images speak for themselves. What stands out is the indexical presence of the documentary subject, the impression that we are directly connected to what we see and hear. In *Silverlake Life*, this "presence" serves as an authenticating tool, a way of indicating to the spectator that the events on the screen did happen, and that they happened the way we see and hear them in the film.

This sense of immediacy is reinforced by the ordinariness of the actions included in the documentary. While the film's underlying subject is by no means trivial, there are several scenes that focus on simple tasks and uneventful situations. "You haven't told me where we are yet," Mark asks from offscreen. "We are at Hard Times Pizza," Tom answers, looking at the camera. The shot adds no significant information to the story that unfolds while we watch *Silverlake Life*. But it helps situate the viewer in relation to the subjects in the film. It marks the presence of the documentary's protagonists in a particular place, at a particular moment—the here and now of the shoot, which we are invited to revisit in the screening room.

More than a witness to a specific event, the recording apparatus is a sort of accomplice to the video makers, a tool that makes their presence available to the audience. Seeing health care providers, performing chores around their neighborhood (the Silverlake section of Los Angeles), visiting Tom's family in New Hampshire for Christmas, or enjoying a short vacation in the desert, the two men are at ease in front of the camera, frequently camping it up. "Here we are on our fabulous European ocean cruise," Mark says from behind the camera as he shoots Tom bundled up on a balcony behind their home. In this case, we cannot claim that what happened would have happened even if the camera had not been there. But neither should we assume that the camera "embellishes" the material it records. The opposite, in fact, seems to be true, as the recording apparatus becomes a channel through which Tom and Mark share their thoughts and emotions with the audience—or simply comment on their daily lives.

This complicity with the camera and its microphone seems particularly striking in a scene in which Tom is waiting for Mark in the car. At one point, Tom gazes down at the camera (which seems to be resting on the car's steering wheel) and expresses his frustration. He is exhausted after a visit to an herbalist and a few errands. His voice cracks; his anger is clear. Then, acting this out, he clenches his teeth and says, "You try to be helpful [and end up] getting screwed time and time again. I hate being a nice guy!" Both confiding in the camera—

1.1. "I hate being a nice guy!" From *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman, 1993).

and thus in his audience—and performing his irritation and resentment, he then, in a melodramatic gesture, turns his face away. Since there is no one else around, we can justly claim that Tom is talking to us, letting us know how he feels and how he wants us to perceive his frustration.

The moments when the camera is acknowledged become, then, another way of confirming the authenticity of what we see and hear. They ground the shooting process itself in real, lived experience. In some cases, it is in fact hard to separate the act of shooting from the incidents documented in *Silverlake Life*, the camera serving as a sort of catalyst for the situations represented in the film. Later in the documentary, as Tom's condition worsens, Mark uses the recording apparatus as a means of prompting him to talk about his health. "OK, tell the camera how you feel," he urges from behind the video camera.

Documentaries are frequently associated with the style of realism. In the realist mode of representation, the complex means by which the world is denoted are repressed. The means of representation are so naturalized that there appears to be an identity between sign and referent, a direct correlation between the text and the sociohistorical world. In *Silverlake Life*, this assumption is encouraged by the artlessness of the shots through which Tom and Mark document their daily lives—the illusion of presence that seems to overwhelm our knowledge of the representational process. As the examples above suggest, however, some of the documentary's most convincing shots are those in which we are aware of the shooting. Because the making of the video was part of Tom's and Mark's daily routines, we do not see the intervention of the camera as strange to their lives. Our awareness of the mediation broadens our knowledge of the world represented in
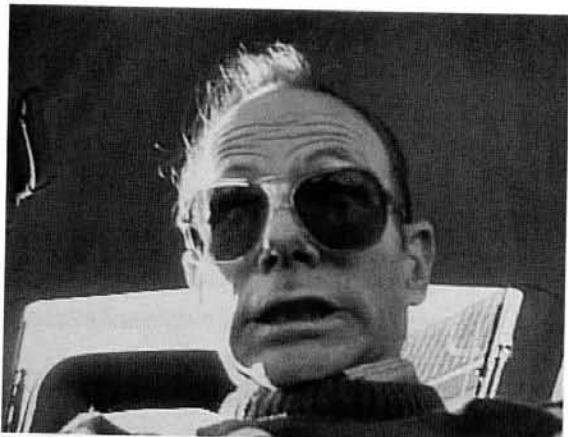
the documentary. Not only do we have access to Mark's and Tom's everyday life, we also know something about how they interacted with the camera, how they felt about the video diary, how they wanted it to be perceived by the audience.

The image of Tom's corpse toward the end, even though we are expecting it, comes as a shock. Surely it is Mark's love and grief that are most moving; however, the image of the dead body, the transformation of that lively, feisty subject into an inanimate object, seems not only premature but an unjustifiable violation of his life and our feelings. The dead body is too reminiscent of that man who has been onscreen for the past hour and a half. It is a token of his absence. This man has been. Vivian Sobchack notes that a corpse "engages our sympathy as an *object which is* an index of *a subject who was*" (288; emphasis in original). But this moment is not a freeze frame. The camera is once again where we have experienced it many times before, at Tom's bedside. Because the close shot of Tom's face is trembling, and we hear Mark's sobs, we know that Mark is behind the camera. So, in a way, we are watching Mark watching Tom's corpse,
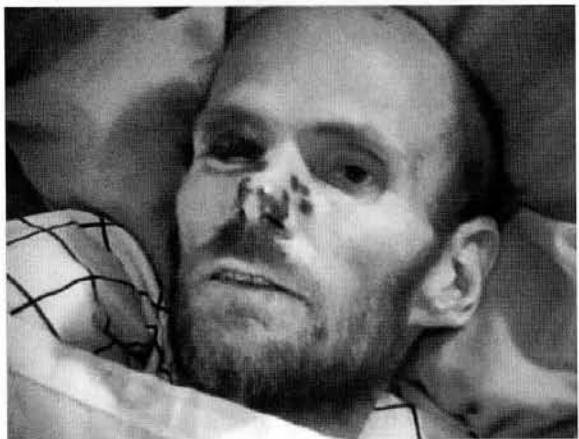
1.2. "Oooh! This is the first of July and Tommy's just died . . ." From *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman, 1993).

and the silence that we expect to accompany death is mediated by Mark's anguish. Mark's relation to Tom and to the death, the nature of his mourning, the way he inhabits his sadness, are clear and poignant. Although shot in Los Angeles, this is certainly not a Hollywood film.

This shot is also a powerful example of the way *Silverlake Life* entwines a first-person approach to documentary with the codes of realistic representation. The impact of Tom's death, conveyed by the close-up of his face, is magnified by Mark's reaction, registered through the unsteadiness of the frame. We do not see Mark, but his presence in the shot is unmistakable. Here the camera is not only the instrument but also the signifier that makes grief visible on screen. *Silverlake Life* brings us close to the experience of struggling with illness, of caring for those who are ill, and mourning the loss of a loved one. And because we see these experiences as grounded in the world we once shared with Mark and Tom, we find them touching. Video activist and archivist Catherine Saalfield describes the documentary as a "devastatingly real chronicle" (in Juhasz, *AIDS TV*

291). The "authenticity" of the sounds and images is an important part of the film's power.

Different Notions of Truth

We have established the appeal of truth. But what do we mean by truth? Defining truth is not an easy task. Philosophers have been talking about it since antiquity and have approached it from various perspectives. More importantly, the meaning and status of truth can vary from one sphere of human activity to another.

For both documentary filmmakers and spectators, truthfulness seems to involve an effort to establish an unequivocal correspondence between the representation and its referent. Although we know that nonfiction films can never be fully equated with the events they represent, we frequently expect some form of correlation between one and the other. In fact, knowing that the former cannot duplicate the latter only makes the question of correspondence more significant. We ask ourselves whether a certain documentary represents the world accurately. And if it fails to do so, we dismiss it as false, biased, or unreliable. Dirk Eitzen has written a carefully argued essay in which he notes that the question "Might it be lying?" can actually be what distinguishes nonfiction from fiction.

Seen this way, truth can be defined simply as agreement with the facts. We assume that a certain reality exists prior to the filmmaking process, and that the role of the documentarian is to honor that reality. Documentaries like *Silverlake Life*, which convey a strong sense of immediacy, are powerful in part because they make this correspondence seem direct and unproblematic.

In practice, though, truth can be a more complex matter. Agreement with the facts presumes that the facts themselves preexist the making of the film and that they are somehow accessible to the documentarian. But neither assumption is entirely correct. Inference can play an important part in the way a documentary makes its claims about the historical world, especially when there is no available evidence to support those claims. And there are cases in which the events recorded by the camera simply do not exist prior to the making of the film. Instead, they are part of the filming experience itself, as happens in *Silverlake Life* when Mark provokes Tom to talk about his worsening health condition. Here the question of whether the representation corresponds to the facts becomes inappropriate since one does not precede the other.

Matters of truth can get even more complicated when we consider the values involved in making and watching documentaries. Different people or different

groups of people might look at the same event and see different things. As a result, what is perceived as truthful, either by the filmmaker or the audience, can also vary depending on who is looking at the facts, in what circumstances, and with what purposes. This is not the same as saying that all documentaries are biased. Neither is it arguing that all claims to truth are equally valid. But there might be different ideas of truth, different types of truth, which deserve further scrutiny.

Legal scholar Richard K. Sherwin distinguishes three kinds of truth: factual truth, a higher truth, and symbolic truth (49–50). Factual truth is observable truth. It is what we usually look for when we watch a documentary, since it presumes some form of agreement with the facts. In O. J. Simpson's highly publicized 1995 trial for the murder of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend Ronald Goldman, a bloody glove found at the scene of the crime was introduced by the prosecution as evidence to establish the identity of the murderer, to establish factual truth. The question was whether or not it fit the man on trial.

But this is not the only truth that counts. There is also what Sherwin sees as a higher truth, a more abstract truth such as every individual has the right to due process. These principles supersede particular facts. For example, the bloody glove could not be considered evidence if it had been unlawfully obtained and violated an individual's rights.

And there is also a kind of truth that is more symbolic—national myths, archetypal stories, popular plot lines, and character types—our common knowledge and social values, that which we all know to be true, the conventional stories that we use to make sense of the world. In his defense of O. J. Simpson, attorney Johnnie Cochran told the jury to do the right thing and keep their eyes on the prize. These references to the Spike Lee film (1989) and the Public Broadcasting Service series on the civil rights movement (Henry Hampton, 1987–1990) told people that the issue is not the troublesome details of a glove that fits or not. The truth here is a long history that Cochran assumed the jurors knew about: the police do not treat black people well at all. These major truths—the shared knowledge we use to live our lives—can preempt the search for factual truths, and sometimes even those higher truths, the abstract principles that we all supposedly hold in common. These symbolic truths are also part of the way that we understand new material; they are part of the way we make sense of new information. We arrange this material into knowable stories—stories we can believe (Sherwin 24).

Let's return to *Silverlake Life* in the context of these three kinds of truth. There is a scene in the documentary in which Mark tells us that he has been asked to keep his shirt on while in a desert resort's pool so as not to "freak out" the other guests. Seated by the pool in a T-shirt and bathing suit, he explains the request

and how he feels about it to us. Then we see Mark from the waist up, without his shirt, sitting on the edge of the hot tub. His torso is covered with Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) lesions, a sign of his deteriorating health. As he smiles, then turns his back to the camera, we hear Tom ask from offscreen, "What are you doing? Flashing me your KS?" Mark replies, "I'm being political."

The factual truth is that Mark's condition is worsening. The higher truth, the abstract principle American culture holds dear, that is activated in this scene is the dignity that should be accorded to all individuals. But the symbolic truth, which may be even stronger, is that in a culture where sexuality, pleasure, and the body are strictly regulated, gay men and AIDS are coded with morality and lurid metaphors. All kinds of feelings have contributed to making gay sex secret, mysterious, and horrifying—something to hide.

If we understand "truth" in its complexity, it helps us to see what kind of story is being told. Seen in this light, *Silverlake Life* may be making a political argument after all.

The Conventional Nature of
Documentary Representations

We can usually recognize a documentary when we see one, and that's because of conventional procedures and techniques that distinguish it from other types of films. Documentaries rely on specific codes, understandings, and expectations that are shared by a specific community—the makers and viewers of nonfiction films and videos. In fact, their claims to truth often depend on the effectiveness of these conventionalized codes and procedures. Like the documentary's iconic and indexical qualities, these conventions help establish the authenticity of nonfictional representations.

To understand how they function, we might once again find inspiration in the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. In addition to icons and indexes, Peirce's study of signs includes a category that presumes neither resemblance nor physical connection to the referential world. This type, the symbol, is a sign in which these relationships are arbitrary or conventionally established. This is the case with most written and spoken languages, as well as more figurative kinds of representation such as maps and charts. Symbols offer the least direct communication; it is by convention that we call a tree a "tree" and not a "blick." The words you are reading draw their meanings from conventions that are shared and accepted by users of the English language. (Even onomatopoeia is somewhat conventionalized. Roosters

crow "cock-a-doodle-doo" in the United States, "cocorico" in France, "kiki-riki-kiiii" in Mexico, and "kukrookoo" in the Himalayas.) Such conventionalized visual analogies as maps and charts also have a symbolic relation to that which they represent.

Even photographic footage is often dealt with in conventional ways. Documentary interviews, for example, tend to follow well-established methods and predictable patterns, which reinforce the seriousness that is typical of the genre. The camera, in these cases, is normally static and self-effacing, positioned slightly to the right or left of its subject. The interviewees, in turn, speak in a somewhat formal tone but without addressing the audience directly. The result is a scene that looks sober and worthy of attention, and, at the same time, because we are used to seeing this in documentaries, authentic.

More generally, we can say that there is a conventional "contract" that binds nonfiction filmmakers to their audiences. Think for a minute about an interview with a college professor. We can hope that the spectators will pick up clues from her or his clothes, speech, and demeanor. Nothing in the image or sound, however, can assure the spectators that what they see and hear is not fake—that what we have is a scholar, and not, say, a professional actor posing as a scholar. What assures the viewer that the identity of the person interviewed is authentic is a sort of tacit agreement whereby documentarians are expected to earn the trust of the audience by offering truthful information about their subjects.

Breaking this agreement usually tests the limits of documentary representation. What happens, for instance, when public information is both compelling and untrustworthy? When a social document casts doubt on its own referentiality? When a documentary points us to the malleability of proof and truth? Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury's *Halving the Bones* (1995) does precisely this.

The film looks at three generations of women in the filmmaker's family. After her maternal grandmother, with whom she had little contact, died, Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury traveled to Japan for the funeral and came back with some of her grandmother's bones for her mother. She tells us the story of her mother's parents, Japanese immigrants in Hawaii at the beginning of the twentieth century. Based on her grandmother's autobiography and her grandfather's home movies, we see beautiful images of Hawaiian flora, a waterfall, and her grandmother as a young woman bathing in an idyllic setting. An accented voiceover commentary tells us what it was like arriving in Hilo, Hawaii, as a young bride to meet a husband whom she only knew through a photograph.

But then, twenty minutes into the seventy-minute film, as Ruth is finally going to deliver the bones to her mother in Connecticut, we get a surprising confession:

"Up until now, I haven't been 100% accurate. There are a couple of things that I made up. Like my grandmother's autobiography, for example. She never really wrote one, so I made it up from real family stories I heard from her and also from my other relatives. I did sort of the same thing with the home movies. I've seen a photo of my grandfather holding a movie camera, so I know he really made movies. But his cameras and films were all confiscated after Pearl Harbor." Using staged material is not uncommon in documentaries, as we shall see in a moment. But playing with the viewer's expectations puts at risk the "contract" between the filmmaker and the spectator. With Lounsbury's brazen acknowledgment of manipulation, certainties slip through our fingers.

Yet it would seem that the admission of wrongdoing makes us trust the rest of the film all the more. In *Halving the Bones*, the bond that ties documentarians to their audiences is broken by the filmmaker's mischief, but then seemingly reinstated by the confession. It is almost as if speaking the prohibition—a documentary that lies—inoculates the film against further transgressions. Also, the images that follow, images of her mother greeting her, the presentation of her grandmother's possessions and bones that Ruth brought back from Japan, seem to be sincere. Perhaps these later images seem so genuine because they are conventional talking heads, exactly what we expect to see in a nonfiction film. Toward the end of the film we see a silhouette of Ruth on a cliff in Hawaii, apparently heeding her mother's instructions, after her death, to throw both the mother's and the grandmother's bones into the ocean. How devilishly unexpected, then, to find out in the end credits that Ruth's mother is alive and well, living in Connecticut!

At one level the film does observe the conventions of documentary cinema: it uses voiceover commentary, interview setups, archival footage, and so on. At another, though, it upsets the overarching social contract that gives legitimacy to these procedures. But more importantly, it highlights the relevance of the agreement that makes us think of documentaries as credible sources of information— how a documentary proposes: "Believe me!"

Staging Truth

Filmmakers have fabricated sequences since the beginning of film exhibition. Reconstructing major events in the Boxer Rebellion in China was commonplace, as were reconstructions of the Spanish-American War. A U.S. film of the sinking of the battleship *Maine* in Havana harbor was made by blowing cigarette smoke over model ships in a bathtub. Jay Leyda tells of an 1898 film of the Dreyfus affair

cobbled together from footage of "a French army parade led by a captain, [a street scene] in Paris showing a large building, a shot of a Finnish tug [boat] going out to meet a barge, and a scene of the Delta of the Nile." "With a little help from the commentator, and with a great deal of help from the audience's imagination," these scenes told the story of "Dreyfus before his arrest, the Palais de Justice where Dreyfus was court-martialed, Dreyfus being taken to the battleship, and Devil's Island where he was imprisoned" (23). And as documentary theorist Brian Winston points out, these news film re-creations were not even reconstructions of what the filmmakers had witnessed, but were based on journalistic accounts they read (*Lies, Damn Lies* 136).

Re-creation, however, does not necessarily mean falsification. It is sometimes a legitimately accepted procedure in nonfictional representation. In later chapters we discuss dramatic reenactments in Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), as well as staging in Lin Tay-jou's *The Secret in the Satchel/Shubao li de mimi* (2007) and Mindy Faber's *Delirium* (1993). Here, let us look at *The Road to Guantánamo* (Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross, 2006), which tells the story of three British Muslims, young men from Tipton, who traveled to Pakistan for a wedding, then crossed the border into Afghanistan in October 2001 as the U.S. military campaign in retaliation for the 9/11 attacks started. The three were captured in Afghanistan by the Northern Alliance forces, handed over to U.S. authorities, and later transferred to the American military prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, where they were held for two years and eventually released without charges. *The Road to Guantánamo* uses interviews with the actual detainees after they were released, interspersed with occasional pieces of news footage. Most of what we see and hear, however, are re-creations of the events that led the young men from Pakistan to Guantánamo, enacted sequences that are clearly enacted and not meant to be misleading (what Winston calls "sincere and justifiable reconstruction" [*Claiming the Real II* 128]). The re-creations add dramatic intensity to the story. They also widen the gap between the actual events and what we watch in *The Road to Guantánamo*. But they do not impair the veracity of the film's truth claims.

While we know that this is not footage of the actual events, we still think of the reenactments as part of the story the film is trying to tell us. This disjunction may be similar to the reverberations in the spectator's experience of historical films that Jean-Louis Comolli writes about, in which a recognizable performer (such as Pierre Renoir) plays a well-known historical figure (such as Louis XVI). We never forget that Pierre Renoir is not Louis XVI, yet, at the same time, we want to believe in the truth of the representation. Perhaps there is a similar oscillation

in our experience when we see these plainly enacted scenes. Because of this, the staged material can function as an extension or illustration of the testimonies documented by the filmmaker, a filmic rendition of events that are firmly grounded in lived reality.

The filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard once said, "Realism . . . is never exactly the same as reality, and in the cinema it is of necessity faked" (*Godard on Godard* 185). And filmmakers use specific cinematic means to fake it. Peter Watkins's filmed simulation of a nuclear attack on Great Britain, *The War Game* (1966), used cinematic means that made it look so much like news reporting that the British Broadcasting Corporation banned it from television. It looked too real. (The BBC said the film would be too horrifying to viewers.) There were many, of course, who debated if this was really the reason why the BBC suppressed the film or if it was the fact that the film destabilized civil authority. But for our purposes, we should consider what made the film appear so authentic and how this functioned in Watkins's strategy for effectiveness.

The War Game was based on extensive research on thermonuclear war, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization guidelines for intervention, British civil defense policies, the consequences of the atomic bombings in Japan, and the firestorms in Hamburg and Dresden during World War II, projected onto an imaginary incident in the future, an outbreak of war between NATO and Russia. This thoroughness was prompted by a perception of urgency and potentially imminent events: the escalation of the arms race threatened full-scale nuclear war. The film begins with a set of maps, then postulates a fictional crisis and provocations, and proceeds to show the effects and aftermath of the ensuing nuclear attack. The voiceover and the interviews with officials are loaded with facts on thermonuclear war and, quoting from the manual of the Home Office, information on evacuation, feeding, and

1.3. "Do you know what Strontium 90 is and what it does?" "No, I feel I don't." From *The War Game* (Peter Watkins, 1966).

shelter plans. Watkins used scripted interviews with nonprofessional actors playing both authorities and ordinary citizens. He also included unscripted interviews with locals playing people on the street. A performer playing a reporter asks some residents of Kent, members of the cast, "Do you know what Strontium 90 is?"

Person after person depicted gives an opinion, in a close shot with a puzzled look on his or her face, either thoughtfully admitting not to know, or offering a wildly incorrect answer. This combination of scripted and unscripted material coexists without undercutting the film's authority.

In a classical Hollywood fiction film, we see and hear only what is needed to further the narrative. The story is made manageable by the reduction of information. In philosopher Noël Carroll's words, "The flow of action approaches an ideal of uncluttered clarity" (180). In Hollywood films, even those based on a "true story," we do not see, for example, people taking out the garbage unless they are going to get mugged or kidnapped. The Hollywood fiction film is much more economical than daily life, where not all of later events are related to, or make sense in the context of, earlier events. In daily life, some actions—taking out the garbage, perhaps—seem to happen with little effect. And certainly some actions and events seem less clear, more cluttered, sometimes even fragmented.

But what about documentaries? The degree of control that documentary filmmakers have over profilmic events varies. Sometimes the sounds overlap and may not be fully audible. There may be some hesitations and stumbling over words. Occasionally someone walks between the camera and what it is shooting. Or there may be a lens flare. Documentaries are certainly more structured than daily life. But they may not seem as clear or uncluttered as a Hollywood narrative.

The War Game employs this lack of clarity as an aesthetic strategy for the sequences of the aftermath of the nuclear strike. The fantasy of the future is built with newsreel-like techniques. (It is shot with grainy black-and-white film stock, synchronized sound, available light, zooms, rapid panning, quickly changing focus, and an intrusive, participating reporter's handheld first-person camera.) Some of the dialogue is deliberately unintelligible. Performers were handed scripts complete with stammering and pauses. People look at the camera as they pass. Someone bumps into the camera operator and says, "Excuse me." At one point the camera is waved away by a soldier; at another it is given a gesture of defiance by a rioter. (The blocking was prearranged, as was the camera movement, but it comes across as spontaneous and unorganized.) The film uses this documentary mode (associated with truth and reality) to portray an unreal event.

Watkins also uses scripted interviews based on statements from authority figures about policies of the day: Civil Defense personnel, an Anglican bishop, a scientist, a doctor, and a psychiatrist. In contrast with the cluttered look of the futuristic scenario, the present-day interviews are shot with a straight-on look at the calm, complacent, well-groomed expert, nicely framed with his books, blackboard, and statistics, well-lit, well-miked, and the camera stable on a tripod.

Paradoxically, the present tense is rendered with the control one would expect in a Hollywood fiction film.

The War Game makes use of the future conditional tense, what might be (e.g., "It's more than possible that . . ." "Such scenes as these would be almost inevitable"). The future as Peter Watkins imagines it seems probable. What seem improbable are the current civil defense and military policies. The future conditional seems plausible and the present tense emerges as a strange flight of the imagination. It seems appropriate, then, that it was condemned for being too realistic, not for being untrue.

Falsification and Documentary

Bontoc Eulogy (Marlon Fuentes, 1995), an archival footage re-creation of the "Philippine" village at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, is also based on elaborate research. Words uttered by Markod, a fictional Bontoc warrior who is supposedly the narrator's grandfather, were originally an English transcription of an interview conducted with a Chief Famaoley while he was in a traveling show performing in Coney Island two years after the closing of the fair. Passages were selected from this document, translated back into old Bontoc, and read by a Bontoc elder, Fermina Bagwan, based in Southern California. Some of the archival footage comes from a faked film of the Spanish-American War, a reconstruction of the Battle of Manila Bay. In Fuentes's own words, *Bontoc Eulogy* "straddles fact and fiction, mixing imagination and interior dialogue with history" (in Juhasz and Lerner 116).

Watching *Bontoc Eulogy*, according to Fuentes, is like watching "an Indonesian shadow puppet performance (*wayang kulit*), where one can watch on either side of the screen. Watching the puppeteer's side shows the movements of the craftsperson." Watching from the other side, it is easier to become involved in the story (118). *Bontoc Eulogy* presents the narrator's search for evidence of his "grandfather's" history and Markod's first-person reflections on the tragedy of his ordeal. But at times, the narrator's voice and Markod's voice become interchangeable. Fuentes has said that he wanted the film's seams and sutures to show. He wanted viewers to realize that they were viewing an "optical illusion." And he wanted them to be aware of their process of perception "at the very moment of perception," what he calls the "bidirectionality of the act of observing" (118–119). For Marlon Fuentes, authenticity can be anti-illusionist. The filmmaker intends to engage the viewer with the process of storytelling.

Other forms of falsification can be more insidious, misleading the audience both about the events represented and the nature of their filmic representation. Rather than allow "the seams and sutures to show," these films mimic the conventions of documentary cinema in such a way that we can hardly tell fictional from nonfictional material. This is the case with *David Holzman's Diary*, a 1968 fiction film by Jim McBride. Although staged, *David Holzman's Diary* scrupulously copies the sound and camerawork of a direct cinema diary. The film portrays a young man, David Holzman, in July 1967, having just been declared A1 (draftable), making a 16mm film that he believes will tell him some truth about his life. Like *The War Game*, the film uses a specific means of representation in an attempt to make it seem more realistic. Because it looks unrehearsed, because much of it is awkwardly framed and unevenly lit, and because all the sound is direct and some of the musings are mumbled, we associate it with lived reality.

At the beginning of the film, David Holzman (played by Kit Carson) directly addresses the camera and introduces us to his equipment. Quoting Godard, he rhapsodizes on its ability to evoke "truth 24 times a second." The film is an ode to his Nagra portable tape recorder, unrivaled at the time for its ability to document sound under local conditions, and to his Éclair camera, with its ability to shoot for long durations and in low luminosity, unshackled by lights, tripods, and cables, and hence more mobile and flexible—as if these attributes of cinematic technology could induce people into uttering a truth that they would not reveal in ordinary situations; as if this unobtrusive, lightweight portable equipment could show us aspects of actuality that otherwise would have been obscured from view.

1.4. "The noted French wit Jean-Luc Godard said, 'What is film? Film is truth 24 times a second.'" From *David Holzman's Diary* (Jim McBride, 1968).

David Holzman's flight of fancy, his attempt to faithfully preserve "the real" on celluloid, suggests a higher aspiration, a self-indulgent, sentimental effort to transcend his life via this equipment. Yet, as several scholars have noted, technology grows out of a particular ideology. The image-making technologies that Holzman celebrated grew out of, as visual anthropologist Jay Ruby once said of all Western image-making technologies, "a profound need to have an irrefutable witness—to control reality

by capturing it on film" (219). Imagine how much "purer," unfettered and easier, this must seem with the new compact digital cameras!

It is not until the credit sequence at the end of the film that audience members are cued that the film is a fictional enactment. Discovering that the film is a fabrication, we understand the text to be a lie. *David Holzman's Diary* playfully suspends the contract that binds documentary filmmakers to their audiences, but the abrogation of that contract has consequences. After all, we process fiction and nonfiction differently. The existence or absence of the sociohistorical referent, the real world and characters that exist in it, fundamentally alters our mode of reading the text and changes our position toward it. Unlike *The Road to Guantánamo* or *The War Game*, *David Holzman's Diary* uses staged material not to render visible an experience that is unavailable for the camera but to upset our faith in documentary representation and the presumptions that are often associated with nonfiction cinema.

If Kit Carson and Jim McBride saw *David Holzman's Diary* as, in Brian Winston's words, a "slap against the new documentary's truth-telling pretensions" (*Claiming the Real II* 202), Marlon Fuentes must see his film as striking a blow at ethnographic and historical films, films that offer smoothed-over surfaces and embedded truth claims that purport to be unambiguous and consistent, and where all the actions and evidence serve the anthropologist's or historian's argument. Fuentes respects gaps and ellipses, as well as the fragility and fallibility of memory, which "are just as important as the materials we have in our hands. If they are missing for certain reasons, whether by accident or force of omission, perhaps these irregularities force us to reflect on the nature and origins of our own situation" (120).

Markers of Authenticity in Fiction Films

Some of the major reasons why we take *David Holzman's Diary* to be nonfiction are the direct address to the camera, the wandering narrative, the visual and aural disorder (muddy sound and blurred focus), and the compulsive use of dates to describe that day's shooting (even when it is clear that some of the footage was taken on days too cold to be July in New York City). These are formal conventions that normally function as markers of authenticity. They tell the spectators that what they are watching is a documentary, a nonfictional representation of the sociohistorical world.

documentary, we generally know beforehand that it is not fiction. And we make certain assumptions about authenticity based on that. Hence Eitzen's "Might It Be Lying?" But we must not forget that when documentaries assert "This happened," they do so through formal cinematic conventions. We explore these in more depth in the rest of the book.

Additional Filmography

One Way or Another/De cierta manera (Sara Gómez, 1974/77)
Killer of Sheep (Charles Burnett, 1977)
The Learning Path (Loretta Todd, 1991)
Imagining Indians (Victor Masayesva Jr., 1992)
The Blair Witch Project (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999)
The 3 Rooms of Melancholia/Melancholian 3 huonetta (Pirjo Honkasalo, 2004)
Death of a President (Gabriel Range, 2006)
Lakshmi and Me (Nishtha Jain, 2007)

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