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