CHAPTER 17

POINT OF VIEW AND STORYTELLING

MONOLOGICAL VERSUS DIALOGICAL FILMS

The early sound documentaries did a good deal of lecturing and nowadays strike us as authoritarian. Old habits of disseminating improving tracts to the unwashed masses die hard, of course, but documentary is now less *monological* and more *dialogical*. That is, today's makers are using the complexities of language, thought, and purpose once the province of older art forms like literature and theatre. Today's documentaries plumb people's inmost thoughts and feelings, and are open to the contradictory elements of human identity. They do this by sharing evidence with, rather than lecturing conclusions at, their audience. The benevolently authoritarian narrator—a legacy of comfortably colonial power structures—has given ground to a contrapuntal chorus of experience from the grassroots, where we all truly belong. This multiplicity of viewpoints has made the documentary far more richly textured, nuanced, and human.

POINT OF VIEW

The expression *point of view* (POV) suggests tools of political or psychological analysis, but in literature or cinema it implies feelings and perceptions that draw us into empathic relationship. A mature film tries to convey not just a perception *of* its characters, but perceptions *by* them too. This draws us into a feeling of emotional fellowship, so that we *identify* with them. You surely know that exciting feeling, in a book or film, of temporarily vacating your own existence and entering someone else's emotional and psychological experience. You sense the author's involvement with the characters, and share in it, yet its nature is evasive and its workings nearly impossible to pinpoint.

Filmmakers able to convey POV seem to do so viscerally rather than consciously. Inevitably, some of this chapter is about your state of mind as you shoot, but don't expect to feel you have any control over POV during the mechanics of a shoot. Point of view is about human vantage, and mostly what you need is a lively one as you shoot, and the faith that it will somehow translate into the film.

FILM, LITERATURE, AND GRAPHIC ART

A human vantage is present in humankind's oldest artworks. Twenty thousand years ago the Paleolithic cave painters at Lascaux painted bulls, stags, horses, and a single dying man. Each

portrait suggests a viewpoint that is tangibly human, though not easy to interpret. Is this how a hunter sees his prey? Or is it the mind and emotions of a devotee picturing spiritual meanings? And what about the fallen man?

Through the painters' visions you sense their preoccupations and the intricacies of their spiritual cosmos, but mainly what you sense is vast and unfathomable. You confront something similar in Homer when he conjures up his brave but vulnerable heroes as they sail before the winds over the "wine dark" seas of temptation and danger in the ancient Mediterranean.

Art reveals not only *what* is seen (the subject's denotation), but also *how* it is seen, and *by whom* (form and meaning as human connotation). Painting and literature are significantly different from cinema: they initiate a pensive, contemplative inner activity within which the meanings assemble in your mind. Film on the other hand is an onslaught of here-and-now happenings. Literature can direct the reader into the past or the future, but film—like life itself—embraces the spectator within its relentless, advancing torrent of the present. A flashback or flash-forward, though it can transport us temporarily in time, soon swallows us up in a new present-tense cascade. Watching an engrossing film is thus like dreaming. What a difficult medium for its authors to control! Yet control of a kind is possible, and here is how I think it happens.

WILL AND EMPATHY

When you direct a documentary, you use your storehouse of experience to guess at your participants' agendas and infer their inner lives. You look for evidence of their *will* as you try to determine what they are trying to get, do, or accomplish. At the same time, you are conscious of changing levels of *empathy* in yourself as you ask, with whom do I identify? What situations, feelings, and motives can I sense at work, in myself and in this person? A director has to become conscious and articulate about sensations that normally develop half-consciously and by instinct. The aim is to use the medium's "point of view" capacity to sensitize us toward what characters perceive and feel about each other. Where the writer can take us directly inside a character's mind, and reveal their thoughts and feelings, the cinema usually makes us read characters from their outward verbal and physical actions. As in life itself, we face the mystery of other people's motives and actions. We try to read what they feel and want, so we can anticipate what they may do next.

USING YOUR EMOTIONAL SELF

Film techniques, we have often said, are modeled on the psychic and physical actions we take while negotiating the tensions between perception and emotion. Thus, to connect us with the hearts and minds of your participants, your own heart will have to rule over the tools of your trade. I do not mean you must inject sentimentality, only that you will have to recognize, share in, and record whatever emotion is present. You are not a scientist who demonstrates, weighs, and measures at a distance: you are immersed in a living artform, and are present and active within the very process you are recording.

Is this a problem? Yes, because everyone has armed himself against vulnerability while growing up. We learn to master our emotions, to distance ourselves—to hide them from others and ultimately from ourselves. Making documentary helps undo this numbing process, and each of your films will chart your progress. For fully evolved filmmaking, see the Maysles Brothers' *Grey Gardens* (USA, 1975, Figure 17-2), a work that fully accepts its highly eccentric mother and daughter. Never does it patronize or mock them, as would be so easy. Rather, it embodies the faith that "nothing human is alien," and, like a Samuel Beckett play, brings us two people in the act of endlessly sounding out the margins between memory and imagination.

Shifting points of view begin to emerge spontaneously when the filmmaking,

- Is fully mature in its embrace of others, however different they seem.
- Has a clear guiding purpose for telling the tale.
- Relates empathically and not just intellectually to the characters and their story.
- Knows at every point what it wants the audience to notice and feel.

FIGURE 17-2

Grey Gardens—eccentric characters taken on their own terms. *(Photo courtesy of The Kobal Collection/Portrait Films.)*

POV IN SCREEN DRAMA

Film can convey a range of points of view, and how the camera embraces them is highly influential. In the diagrams that follow, the camera outline symbolizes a recording eye and ear, but it transcends the mechanical because it is directed by a heart and mind resonating to each new situation. The diagrammatic lines connecting the camera, director, and participants represent their awareness of, and complex relationships to, each other. These you can think of as *lines of tension*, pathways of significant danger to which you and your camera are instinctively drawn. However, see any of the accompanying film examples, and you will understand that each diagram is a simplified view of a subtle and complex range of possibilities.

OBSERVATIONAL OR PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

In **Chapter 3: Documentary History** we said that filmmakers found themselves having to choose between *observational* and *participatory* modes. Figure 17-3 represents filmmakers collecting evidence with an observational camera, and doing their utmost as onlookers to exert minimal effect on the proceedings.

Figure 17-4 represents participatory cinema, in which camera and crew are avowedly present and inquiring, and ready to catalyze as necessary an interaction between participants, or between participants and themselves. Few documentaries in fact take a purist attitude, and most use whatever strategy best serves each situation. If 15 fire engines are hard at work putting out a fire, you probably won't need to intervene and apply any formative pressures. But if a naked environmentalist has chained himself to the Department of the Interior railings, you will have to interact with him, or the filming won't transcend a single enigmatic image.

The distinguished American documentarian Fred Wiseman, a former lawyer, only ever uses observational cinema. To minimize any compromise with his ethnographic intentions he shuns artificial lighting or questioning and directing his participants. He shoots massive amounts of footage and fashions his films without narration from the evidence he collects.

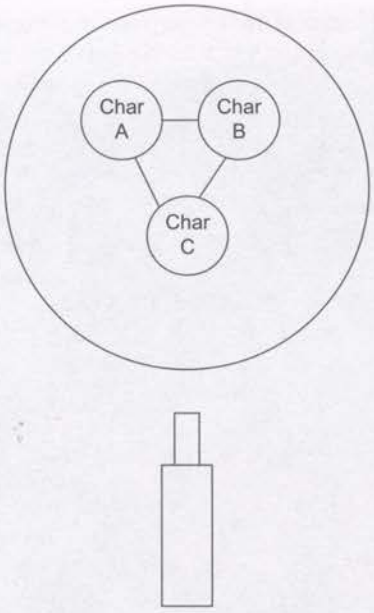

FIGURE 17-3

Diagram representing direct or observational cinema, in which the camera records life by interceding as little as possible.

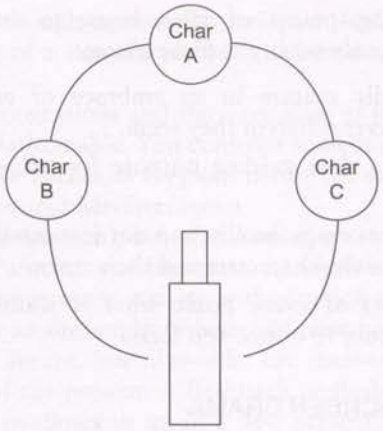

FIGURE 17-4

Diagram representing participatory cinema, first called *cinéma vérité*. The camera and crew may be discreet onlookers or step in to precipitate responses and situations.

If you have similar convictions about learning from life, then you may well choose subjects suitable for this approach. But asking a single interview question means you've catalyzed the record—even though you may subsequently edit out every sign of your input. A fairly recent purely observational film is Yoav Shamir's *Checkpoint* (Israel, 2004), discussed in **Chapter 5: Story Elements and Film Grammar**. It has no central characters and observes without comment the social process of one set of human beings filtering another at arbitrary boundary points.

OVERVIEW OF GENERATING POVs

You begin discerning likely points of view during *ideation* (the process of elaborating the central idea), and they solidify during the film's creation (researching, writing, shooting, and editing). Maintaining your empathic involvement will help you withstand the endless distractions that come with making films. Novelists and painters are lucky: they work alone in silence with a brush, pencil, or computer. You however must work in a hubbub of equipment, lights, and onlookers. No wonder that inspired cinema is rare.

Points of view will strengthen during editing as you crystallize your film's identity and purpose. The clearer and stronger your inner attitudes are—both toward your participants and to the film's function, the more your film acquires heart and soul, and the better it finds and serves its authorial purposes. This is the reason that this book reiterates the idea of self-knowledge as the bedrock of creative identity, and creative identity as the springboard to purposeful and inspired filmmaking.

RANGE OF POV ON THE SCREEN

SINGLE POV (CHARACTER IN THE FILM)

Figure 17-5 represents filming that is channeled through (and perhaps narrated by) a single main character. This person—observing, recounting, participating in, or re-enacting an event—may be a bystander or major protagonist. This type of film is often a biography or autobiography, with a critical tension developed between biographer and subject.

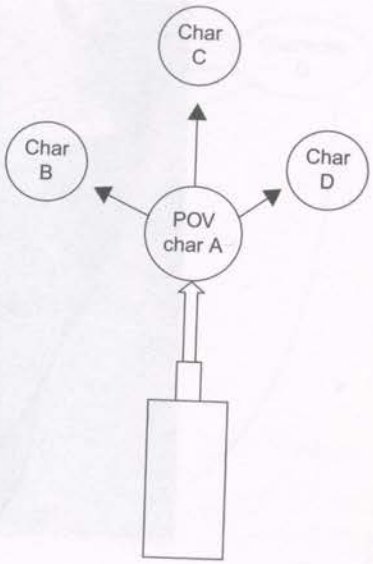

FIGURE 17-5

Diagram representing a single point of view (seeing through a character in the film).

The seminal, single point of view documentary is Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (USA, 1922), with its heroic central figure struggling to uphold his family unit's survival. Though the film is silent, it nonetheless creates a strong sense of intimacy with the father of the family. It establishes that *POV emanates from what a person does and feels*, and that actions are often more eloquent than anything a person might say.

Vesting a film's point of view in a leading character does however restrict its scope. We only experience what that person can legitimately know, understand, and represent. By making Nanook represent the Inuit nation, Flaherty places a heavy onus on a single nominee, who must enact Flaherty's vision of the heroic, unspoiled native fighting on behalf of an endangered people. The man who played Nanook (real name, Allakariallak), and the two women who played his wives, had a strong historical sense of their people, and assuredly agreed to represent their survival prowess. Paired with one DVD version of *Nanook* is George Stoney and Jim Brown's sympathetic documentary *How the Myth Was Made* (USA, 1978), which revisits the scene of the film, talks with some of Flaherty's surviving participants, and makes clear the apolitical selectivity of Flaherty's gaze. From *Man of Aran* (USA, 1934) onwards, Flaherty's "noble savage" idealizations became more uncomfortably visible, and in his later work, Flaherty declined to collaborate. By *Louisiana Story* (USA, 1948) the passion in his storytelling has become sentimentality, and his dramatizing, manipulation.

A rather different biographical documentary is Werner Herzog's *Land of Silence and Darkness* (Germany, 1971, Figure 17-6), which follows the deaf-blind Fini Straubinger, who lay cut off from humanity in an institution for 30 years until someone taught her the deaf-blind tactile language. We see her journey around Germany in search of others as isolated and despairing as she once was herself. Their world is one of such cruel and complete isolation that Herzog's film needs only to observe while Fini, with her restricted communication, travels from encounter to encounter. Even so, it includes a few interviews, but Fini's eerie, prophetic simplicity as the film progresses gives you the shivers. Before our eyes she becomes a gauche angel personifying the love and nobility latent in the human spirit. Because of her, you realize how profoundly we take human contact for granted, and how devastating its absence must be for those whose senses have shut down. This situation reaches its nadir among those never awoken by social contact, like Vladimir who has mental handicap added cruelly to his deaf-blind condition.

Though Pernilla Rose Grønkjær's *The Monastery: Mr. Vig and the Nun* (Denmark, 2006) chronicles the interaction between two central characters, the main POV comes through the director's evident fondness for, and fascination with, the eccentric old Mr. Vig. He owns a dilapidated castle, and has always wanted to start a monastery. Now nearing the end of his life, he offers it to

FIGURE 17-6

Through its character-within-the-film point of view, Werner Herzog's *Land of Silence and Darkness* shows that for the deaf–blind, contact with the rest of the world is by touch alone. *(Photo courtesy of New Yorker Films.)*

FIGURE 17-7

The Monastery: Mr. Vig and the Nun—an austere and unlikely love story.

the Russian Orthodox Church, who send a graceful but very businesslike nun from Moscow who will soon set about organizing the project and the exhausted Mr. Vig (Figure 17-7). This delicately beautiful film is set in a huge, crumbling building that is returning to Nature, just as Mr. Vig himself will soon do. It tells the contradictory story of friction but growing respect between these two very unusual people. Grønkjær mostly observes with her camera, but sometimes interacts with her subjects from behind it.

MULTIPLE CHARACTERS' POVs WITHIN THE FILM

The viewpoints represented in Figure 17-8 are of multiple characters, in which none need predominate. The combination of camera and editing may look *at* the other characters, or *through* each individual's consciousness of the others. Through what each sees, we intuit what he or she is conscious of, and feeling. The Maysles Brothers' *Salesman* (USA, 1969) is such a film, and so are Michael Apted's longitudinal study films in the *Up* series (GB, one every seven years from 1964–present).

Barbara Kopple's classic *Harlan County, USA* (USA, 1976, Figure 17-9) chronicles a protracted strike by impoverished Kentucky coal miners. Since the central issues are the exploitation and class conflict between workers and big business, the film has prominent characters but no ruling point of view. Ironic protest songs often carry the narrative forward—timeless laments that create a powerful aura of ballad and folktale, making the film live on powerfully in memory afterward like a Berthold Brecht play. Shot mostly as observational cinema, there are moments when the filmmakers become participants in the events—most memorably one night when company goons shoot at the crew.

Andrew Jarecki's *Capturing the Friedmans* (USA, 2003) and Doug Block's *51 Birch Street* (USA, 2005, Figure 17-10) are each about the extraordinary dynamics within a family. The first concentrates on the closet homosexuality of the father, and the second on the unfulfilled love life of the mother. By exploring their family's multiplicity of views and allegiances, each film looks for the underlying sources for the "questionable" and atypical behavior. *51 Birch Street* must be one of the most revealing journeys yet made into the hidden pain of an outwardly normal, comfortably middle-class family. Block's diary style creates an intimate portrait of his family while he was growing up, and of himself uneasily forming in its crucible of mysterious pressures. We come to understand the intolerable role that women had to play in the mid-twentieth century, and the cost to them in terms of stunted personal fulfillment. Surprisingly, the film's outcome is constructive and positive. Here is the emotional liberation that making an intelligent documentary can bring its participants, and which becomes the ultimate posthumous tribute to Block's mother.

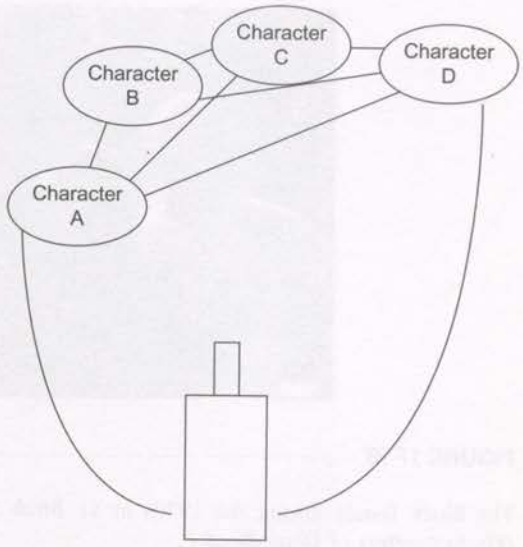

FIGURE 17-8

Diagram representing multiple points of view. We may "see" anyone by way of anyone else's perspective.

FIGURE 17-9

In *Harlan County, USA*, music adds expression to the multiple characters' viewpoints. *(Krypton International Corporation.)*

FIGURE 17-10

The Block family during the 1970s in *51 Birch Street*—concealing their stresses like any normal family. *(Photo courtesy of Doug Block.)*

OMNISCIENT POV

Typically narrated in the third person, the omniscient documentary often expresses a collective rather than personal viewpoint. Omniscience works well for complex and far-reaching subjects such as war or race relations: there an individualized point of view would seem egocentric or parochial. The omniscient POV may be institutional, corporate, or that of the filmmaker, who as Storyteller need make no apology or explanation. Omniscience is sometimes likened to the eye of God, who is said to be everywhere, and knows everything. The limitations of my diagramming (Figure 17-11) suggest that omniscience is mostly free camera movement. Certainly the POV is no longer limited to what one character can see or know, and the eye of the omniscient Storyteller moves freely in time and space. Much favored by corporations and governments, omniscience can be veneer for authoritarian instruction, but in subtler hands, the Storyteller can speak for a nation or generation, and convey a distinct outlook and moral purpose.

The early documentary seems to have acquired its stance of omniscience from the nineteenth-century gentleman's scientific slide lecture. By modestly presenting his travels as science or ethnography, he (rarely she) could avoid speaking egotistically in the first person. Older documentaries that adopt this stance sometimes skip the humility. Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (Germany, 1935, Figure 17-12) and *Olympia* (Germany, 1938) use an omniscient camera to camouflage a proudly partisan view of Hitler and Nazi Germany. Her masterly use of narrationless documentary serves to ascribe power and inevitability to her subject, but the exercise warns us that "art for art's sake" can be dangerously deceptive.

Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (USA, 1936, Figure 17-13) and *The River* (USA, 1937) use poetic narrations that turn each film into a long, elegiac ballad—a folk form that legitimizes the films' omniscient eye and seemingly egoless passion. Their powerfully aesthetized imagery and ironic montage establish a grim vision of a land plundered through ignorance and political opportunism. This is propaganda at its best, though my late friend and mentor Robert Edmonds, author of *Anthropology on Film* (Pflaum, 1974), contended that since all documentaries seek to persuade, all are propaganda. He liked to be provocative: all documentaries argue for

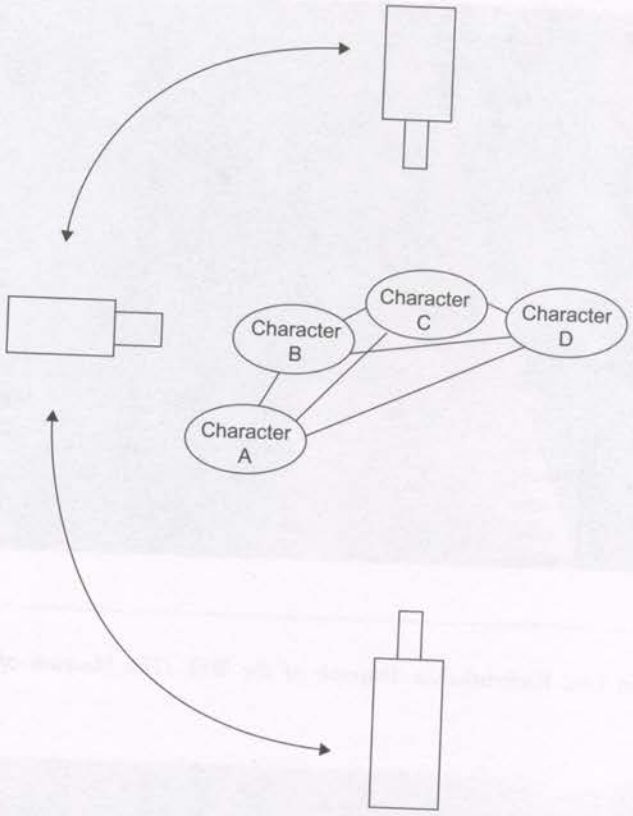

FIGURE 17-11

Diagram representing the omniscient point of view, in which the camera moves freely. Since POV comes from the storyteller, not a particular character, it's free to roam in time and space.

something, but one that simplifies the evidence to make its conclusions unavoidable is seeking to condition, not educate. To propagandize is to condition.

Few documentaries are set in the future, but Peter Watkins' *The War Game* (GB, 1966, Figure 17-14) appropriates a breaking news style to posit the nuclear bombing of London. Here the omniscient POV, appropriating the authoritarian voice of the newsreel, relocates the facts of nuclear bombing in Japan, and the fire-bombing of Dresden, to a hypothetical but highly credible present. With grim impartiality, it constructs an infernal, incontestable vision of nuclear war, one made mesmerizing by its ferocious social breakdown. Passionately seeking to persuade, the film shuns the resourcefully heroic central character that routinely provides reassurance in disaster movies. The absence of any reassurance makes us include ourselves and our loved ones with the doomed. Seeing the film as a new parent made the experience nearly unbearable.

PERSONAL POV

The personal point of view is unashamedly and subjectively that of the director (Figure 17-15), who will sometimes narrate the film, as happens in *The Tourist* (USA, 1986, Figure 17-16). In it, Robb

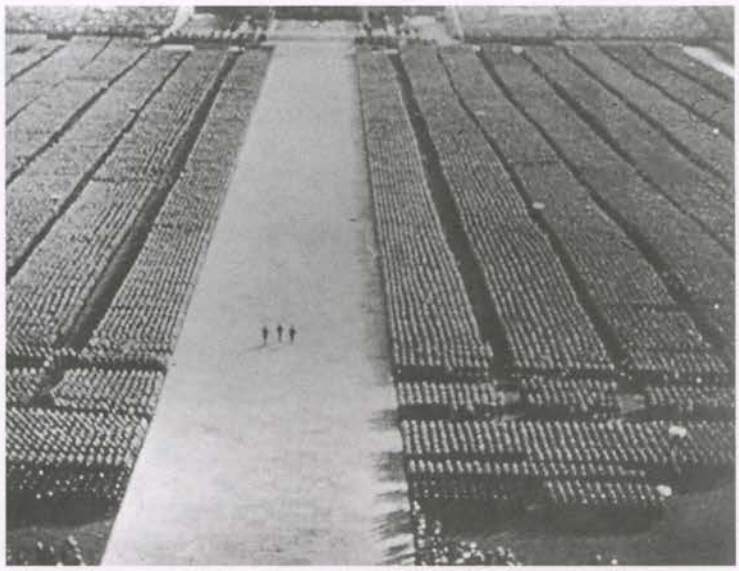

FIGURE 17-12

A Hitler mass rally in Leni Riefensthahl's *Triumph of the Will. (The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.)*

FIGURE 17-13

In his omniscient classic *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, Pare Lorentz uses stark imagery and ironic montage to convey a haunting vision of implacable Nature. *(Museum of Modern Art.)*

FIGURE 17-14

Peter Watkins' *The War Game*, a frightening view of nuclear disaster that broadcasting kept from the public. *(Films Inc.)*

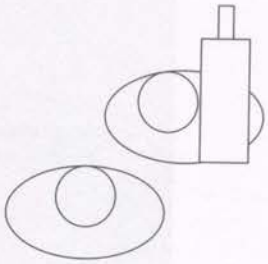

FIGURE 17-15

Diagram representing the personal point of view, in which the author/storyteller becomes the point of view character.

FIGURE 17-16

A happy couple in *The Tourist* whose marriage seems set to be childless.

FIGURE 17-17

A hall of mirrors: the director Banksy's alter ego Thierry in *Exit through the Gift Shop*.

Moss ruefully looks back over his still-childless marriage at a time when his job requires him to film huge families in Third World countries. A limit to the personal point of view is that the film cannot credibly venture outside what the author/storyteller can demonstrably see and know. This becomes interesting, however, when a story is guided by an *unreliable narrator.* We quickly realize, for instance, that Timothy Treadwell in *Grizzly Man* has a fatally skewed perception of his beloved bears.

A double POV emerges, mirror fashion, in the controversial *Exit through the Gift Shop* (Banksy, USA/UK, 2010, Figure 17-17). Thierry Guetta shows us his addiction to documenting everything in his Los Angeles life, an obsession with preservation whose poignant roots lie in childhood with the death of his mother. Ever since, he has recorded anything whose memory might be snatched away. Fascinated by the nocturnal sorties by graffiti artists, he gathers a vast footage of them, culminating in a relationship with the reclusive genius Banksy, who is visiting from Britain to give a show. Thierry accumulates thousands of hours of footage but proves incapable of making a film, so Banksy takes over. The result is a highly articulate account of turning Thierry into Mr Brainwash, a conceptual artist whose highly publicized show becomes a runaway social and commercial success.

Critics claim that creating Mr Brainwash was just another brilliant Banksy hoax, but the film deliberately raises questions about the relationship between art, money, and marketing. By the film's end you can hear spectral applause from Marcel Duchamp, who in 1917 outraged the New York art world by entering a urinal in a show and titling it "Fountain." By caricaturing art that is eye-pleasure, *Exit through the Gift Shop* makes art serve the cause of caustic, radical questioning so that it belongs with the Dada movement. Thierry becomes Banksy's alter ego, and the documentary becomes Banksy's displaced autobiography—all of which augments my private theory (don't tell anyone) that much documentary is displaced autobiography.

REFLEXIVITY AND REPRESENTATION

Reflexive documentaries are those that acknowledge and even investigate the effects of filmmaking. In Figure 17-18 the filming can now reflect the directing, shooting, and editing of the filmmaking process itself. Jay Rosenblatt is an experimental filmmaker whose mastery of the medium's subtleties and history shows in his *I Used to Be a Filmmaker* (USA, 2003, Figure 17-19).

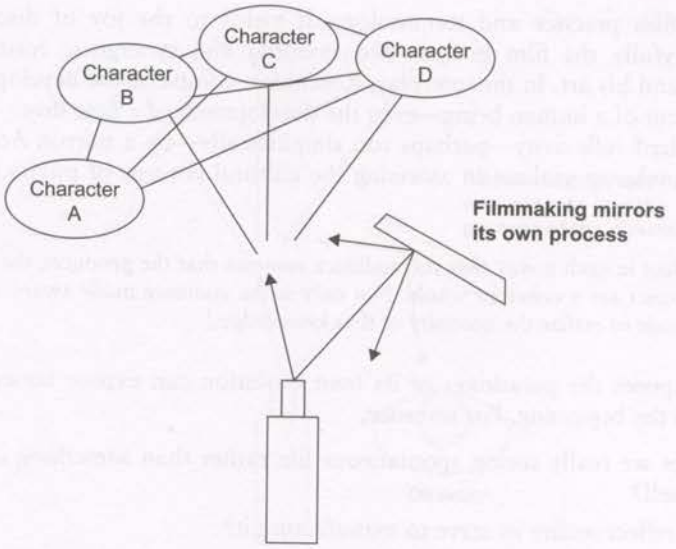

FIGURE 17-18

Diagram representing the reflexive point of view, one able to reveal salient aspects of the filmmaking process itself with the audience.

FIGURE 17-19

Jay Rosenblatt faces the new force in his life in *I Used to Be a Filmmaker*. *(Courtesy of the filmmaker.)*

Ostensibly about film practice and terminology, it yields to the joy of discovering his infant daughter Ella. Playfully the film bridges two essential and synergistic relationships—between Rosenblatt's child and his art. In the interplay, Rosenblatt compares the development of a medium with the development of a human being—even the development of a new love.

I have symbolized reflexivity—perhaps too simplistically—by a mirror. According to anthropologist Jay Ruby, who specializes in assessing the cultural content of public imagery, reflexivity means that you,

> structure a product in such a way that the audience assumes that the producer, the process of making, and the product are a coherent whole. Not only is the audience made aware of these relationships, but it is made to realize the necessity of that knowledge.[1]

A film that exposes the paradoxes of its own evolution can expose issues that have dogged documentary from the beginning. For instance,

- How often are we really seeing spontaneous life rather than something instigated by or for filmmaking itself?
- Does the film reflect reality or serve to manufacture it?
- How much of a film's purview is inhibited by ethical concerns for its participants?
- Do the participants realize how we may judge them?

By dispensing with the figment that we are watching unmediated life, reflexive films can acknowledge how screen works are "created, structured articulations of the filmmaker and not authentic, truthful, objective records."[2] Ruby points out that the investigation of documentary language began with Vertov in the 1920s, particularly his *Man with the Movie Camera* (Russia, 1929). Vertov aspired to show "life as it is," but was fascinated by the mysterious processes of cinema. He believed that the dynamics of camera and montage transcended human agency, and though we often see shots of the cameraman, he is portrayed more as the camera's servant than its master. Downplaying personal authorship, Vertov invested the apparatus with the power of finding truth—an ebullient mystification that he didn't quite pull off. Though Vertov's life-embracing Kino Eye manifesto met with incomprehension and disapproval by the Russian authorities at the time, it prepared the ground for *cinéma vérité* in France 40 years later. Today, reflexivity allows the filmmaker to focus on any of the art's ambiguities. Ethnographic filmmaking, supposed to be uncontaminated by the filmmaker's own cultural assumptions, is a prime candidate.

Aside from investigating film's boundaries, distortions, or subjectivity, there are further issues to concern us:

- Under what circumstances do we as an audience suspend, or resist suspending, disbelief?
- When does the medium deceive its makers?
- What are the ethical ramifications to reflexive filmmaking—and when are we exploiting people?

SELF-REFLEXIVITY

The ultimate in reflexivity is the self-reflexive form, which reflects its authors' thoughts, doubts, and self-examination while filming (Figure 17-20). This threatens to become the snake eating its own tail, or the pool in which a certain young man drowned. Though treacherously difficult to pull off, it can prove wonderfully rich in the right hands. Alan Berliner in *Nobody's*

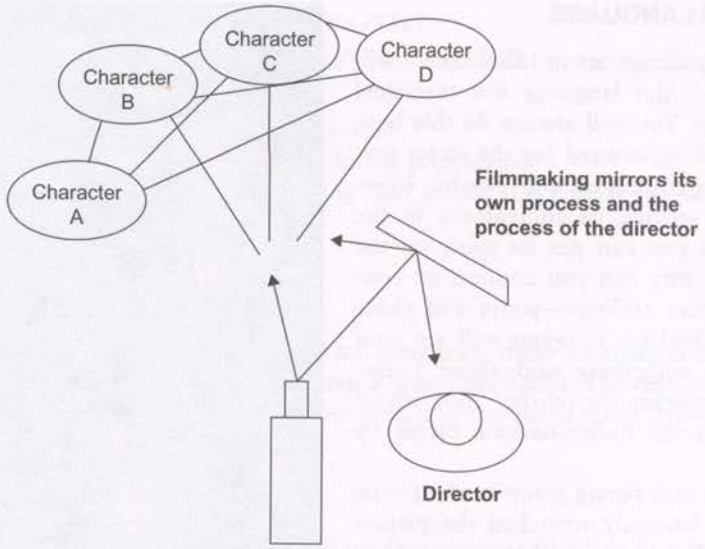

FIGURE 17-20

Diagram representing the self-reflexive point of view. A film can now reflect not only its own process but those of its maker(s) too. Handle with caution since little separates self-reflexivity from self-indulgence.

Business (USA, 1996, Figure 17-21) uses the documentary process as a means of approaching his crabby father. He hopes to achieve a better understanding, but is roundly repulsed—hence the film's title. The older man is adamant that he is an ordinary man with nothing to say. This, a challenge to any documentarian, sends the son to home movies, photographs, and letters in search of the father he hardly knows. Since his dad is the son of an immigrant Jew, the quest broadens by association to include ethnicity, ethnic identity, and even America as the melting pot that failed (thank goodness) to dissolve its citizens into a common culture. What emerges more than justifies the intrusion it takes to get there. Like all films that really illuminate family life, this one shows how the important doors never open until the director pushes and pushes. Power (that is, vital information that tells you who you are) is never given. You take it when you decide to grow up.

FILM LANGUAGE AND THE AUTHORIAL VOICE

The range of more confident, authorial voices now available confirms that documentarians no longer have to pretend they are making objective social science or have to suppress the ambiguities and contradictions they encounter in real life. Subjectivity is not just allowable, it is positively welcome, and today's technology allows you to subtitle, freeze, or interject in ways that all help disrupt the illusion of objective realism. You can slow the image, play it fast or backwards, filter it, superimpose or interweave texts at will, and thus invite us to question, doubt, and reflect on the fugitive nature of that waking dream we call actuality.

FINDING FRESH LANGUAGE

Your greatest challenge as a filmmaker will always be to find film language not tarnished by over-familiarity. You will always do this best, I contend, by looking inward for the exact texture of your own emotional and psychic experience, and then seeking its equivalency in the cinema palette so you can put its spirit on the screen. Only this way can you connect us convincingly with other realities—yours and those of your subjects. Perhaps someone will see your work and repeat something said about Louis-Ferdinand Céline—that he wrote "not about reality, but about the hallucinations raised by reality."[3]

Documentary is a young genre in the young art of cinema; it has only scratched the surface of its potential. You come on the scene when documentaries have an expanding canvas and their only restraints remain productive ones—that anything is documentary if it (a) presents aspects of actuality (past, present, or future) and (b) implies a critical relationship to the fabric of social life.

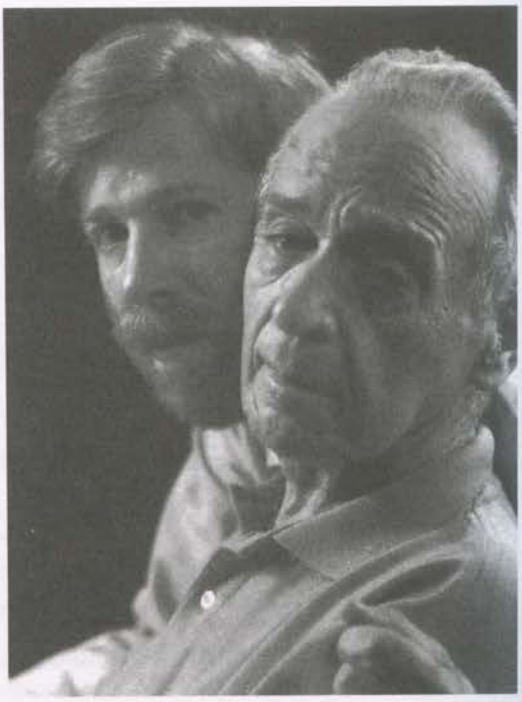

FIGURE 17-21

Nobody's Business by Alan Berliner—a son challenges his irascible father to reveal himself. *(Photo by D.W. Leitner.)*

STORYTELLER AND POV QUESTION CHECKLIST

Each possible POV offers a different way of entering the people and their world. Switching POV creates a vital contrast between what each character sees and feels while navigating human predicaments. Seeing through other eyes, we retain our values and have a double experience, one that *helps us realize both ourselves and others*. Of your film, ask:

- How many POVs are possible in my film?
- Which POV should predominate
  - Throughout?
  - Through different parts of the documentary?
  - Through one or two parts?
- What is my brief description of each POV in relation to the
  - Character's agenda?
  - Character's limitations and blind spots?
  - Overall development of the story?
- What must I shoot to serve each necessary POV?
- How should I shoot each so I complement the character's nature and biases?
- How do I, as the Storyteller, want to color the story?
- What role does my Storyteller play in order to further the nature of the story?

- What should I shoot to show the Storyteller's POV?
- How should I shoot to imply the Storyteller's POV, so I build the storytelling atmosphere and emphases?
- Should my audience be able to take into account
  - Aspects of the filmmaking that surfaced during production?
  - My/our experience during the filmmaking that might affect what the audience will think and feel?

HANDS-ON LEARNING

For analyzing the means that filmmakers use to tell their tales, make an analysis of a representative few minutes of a favorite work with **AP-1 Making a Split-Page Script.** The reason for imagery used against language, of language overlapping picture cuts, and the use of voice-overs emerges in all its subtlety when you log it out on paper.

NOTES

1. Jay Ruby, "The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film," in Alan Rosenthal, ed., *New Challenges for Documentary* (University of California Press, 1988), p. 65.
2. Ibid., pp. 717–75. See Ruby's long essay "Exposing Yourself: Reflexivity, Anthropology, and Film" at http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/ruby/exposing.html.
3. André Malraux's comment on *Journey to the End of the Night* by the visionary novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894–1961). Quoted from memory—I have been unable to trace the origin.