

Silence—the temporary absence of sound can create a powerful change of mood or cause us to look with a heightened awareness at the picture

All documentaries are permutations of these ingredients, and it is the associations and traditions they call on, their structure, and the point of view imposed on them that summon shape and purpose.

DOCUMENTARY MODALITIES

Michael Renov in *Theorizing Documentary* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993) divides the documentary into four fundamental modalities. They are to

1. Record, reveal, or preserve
2. Persuade or promote
3. Analyze or interrogate
4. Express

As he points out, these categories are not exclusive; any film sequence can use more than one. A film in its entirety can use the full range while favoring perhaps two such modalities. Let's try assigning the commonest to a list of nonfiction genres that is by no means exhaustive.

<i>Nonfiction film genres</i>	<i>Records, reveals, preserves</i>	<i>Persuades, promotes</i>	<i>Analyzes, interrogates</i>	<i>Expresses</i>
1 Analytical (essay)			•	•
2 Anthropological	•			
3 Art (films on)	•		•	•
4 Biographical	•		•	
5 Cinéma vérité (documentary catalyzed by makers)	•		•	
6 City symphony	•			•
7 Combat (war)	•			
8 Committed (political or social activist)		•	•	
9 Compilation (interprets archive material)		•	•	
10 Cross-section (sociological survey)	•		•	
11 Current affairs		•	•	
12 Diary	•			•
13 Direct cinema (observational, non-interventional documentary)	•			
14 Docudrama		•		•
15 Educational		•		
16 Ethnographic	•		•	

<i>Nonfiction film genres</i>	<i>Records, reveals, preserves</i>	<i>Persuades, promotes</i>	<i>Analyzes, interrogates</i>	<i>Expresses</i>
17 Experimental (avant garde)	•			•
18 Historical	•	•	•	
19 Incentive		•		
20 Minority voice (feminist, gay or lesbian documentary)		•	•	•
21 Mockumentary (fake documentary)		•		•
22 Nature	•	•		•
23 Persuasive (exposé or thesis)		•	•	
24 Political (agitprop)	•	•	•	
25 Process	•		•	
26 Propaganda		•		
27 Romantic tradition		•	•	
28 Science		•		
29 Sociological	•			
30 Training	•		•	
31 Travel and exploration	•			
32 War (effects of)	•	•	•	

Whether or not you are familiar with all these genres, it's plain that trying to typify and categorize them is highly arguable. You could, for instance, make a case for all films belonging in the second column because all nonfiction films seek to persuade. And merely by their selecting something for our attention, you could say that all films seek to express (fourth column). To further confuse matters, most genres make use of multiple modalities according to how they fulfill their self-imposed task. With such permeable boundaries the usefulness of any method of deconstruction is limited, but in production and before it, it helps to know what modality you are currently using so you can deploy it more consciously and successfully.

Bill Nichols in his valuable *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001) divides documentary into six categories. For each I have chosen just a single well-known example. His list evolves chronologically from (as he asserts) documentary's roots in Hollywood fiction, and for each category he lists a commonly perceived deficiency:

- *Poetic documentary* (1920s). Poetically assembles fragments of the world but lacks specificity and is too abstract. Example: Joris Ivens' *Rain* (Netherlands, 1926), which evokes all the aspects of a passing shower in Amsterdam (Figure 3-1).
- *Expository documentary* (1920s). Directly addresses issues in the historical world (that is, the world we all share and experience as "real"). Once sound became established, it adopted the classic "voice of God" commentary. Expository documentary suffers from being too didactic. Example: Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak's *Why We Fight* series made for the U.S. War Department (USA, 1942-1945).

DIRECT CINEMA AND *CINÉMA VÉRITÉ*

On either side of the Atlantic this mobility evoked opposite philosophies about the relationship between the camera and its subjects. In North America, the Maysles brothers, Fred Wiseman, Allan King, and others favored what they called *direct cinema*, an observational approach that kept their intrusion on participants down to a minimum. This, they felt, allowed them to capture the spontaneity and uninhibited flow of live events. They shot under available light and without evident preparations, like ethnographers waiting for significant events to take shape.

They claimed a certain purity for the method, but unless the camera is actually hidden—an ethically dubious practice—participants are usually aware of its presence and cannot help but modify their behavior. The integrity of observational cinema is thus more illusory than actual, because its onscreen appearance is sustained by eliminating any material where the illusion is broken, such as when participants glance at, or adapt to, the camera. Certainly it leaves the spectator feeling like a privileged observer, but seldom are we seeing life unmediated as such films lead us to suppose. The fact is that observational cinema (as *direct cinema* is now called) is at its most truthful when events claim most of the participants' attention. Authenticity declines as the camera becomes more prominent than those being filmed and they become conscious actors in their own story. Though this situation has a truth of its own, it is no longer life caught unaware.

The other approach, called *cinéma vérité*, takes account of the central problem by actively involving participants in the process. It originated in France with the ethnographer Jean Rouch. Documenting ways of life in Africa taught him that making any record always provokes an important relationship with participants. Like Flaherty with *Nanook*, Rouch thought that authorship could usefully and legitimately be something shared. Permitting and even encouraging interaction between the subject and director, his *cinéma vérité* ("cinema truth," a translation of Vertov's *kino-pravda*) legitimized the camera's presence and let the crew become catalysts for what took place on the screen. Most importantly, *cinéma vérité* authorized the director to initiate characteristic events and to probe for what Rouch called *privileged moments* rather than passively await them.

Eric Barnouw, in his excellent *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), sums up the differences as follows:

The direct cinema documentarist took his camera to a situation of tension and waited hopefully for a crisis; the Rouch version of *cinéma vérité* tried to precipitate one. The direct cinema artist aspired to invisibility; the Rouch *cinéma vérité* artist was often an avowed participant. The direct cinema artist played the role of uninvolved bystander; the *cinéma vérité* artist espoused that of provocateur.

Notice that Barnouw thinks documentarians are artists, not social scientists. This acknowledges that subjective judgments are involved whenever the screen reveals documentary truths. Direct cinema found its truth in events observable by the camera, while *cinéma vérité* (now more often called *participatory cinema*) was committed to a paradox: that it may take artifice to expose truth. Flaherty

acknowledged this when he said that "one often has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit."

Both approaches capitalized on the spontaneous, and their most striking moments were often completely unpredictable. Since neither could be scripted, documentary was freed from the tyranny of the script. Editors, faced with the prospect of reducing great masses of footage, set about inventing film language that, using freer and more intuitive forms, counterpointed voice and effects tracks, and flexuous, impressionistic cutting to abridge time and space. The fiction feature film was quick to adopt these poetic advances, as you can see in Nicholas Roeg's thriller *Don't Look Now* (1973).

Participatory cinema acts willingly on what is being filmed, and observational cinema does so unwillingly. Both have much in common. Their competing claims of fidelity to the actual are equally questionable because editing routinely abridges what was originally separated by time and space. Despite any appearance of objectivity and verisimilitude, the documentary, like the fiction film, is always being channeled through human points of view—of those in front of the camera as well as those behind it.

In the end, all documentaries must invoke, as best they can, the spirit rather than the letter of truth—and they are exciting because of this. A documentary's authenticity ultimately lies in its organizing vision rather than any mechanical fidelity to life.

When should one use participatory cinema, when observational? Most films allow each sequence's subject matter to determine the approach. Some kinds of actuality-related truth reveal themselves unaided, while others are best elicited by inquiry or reconstruction. This seems so natural on the screen because this is how we proceed through the world: sometimes we are an interested observer, and sometimes we actively probe for the truths we need to discover. To help you in your work, this book will propose that documentary is really a screen version of human consciousness doing its living work.

TRUTH CLAIMS

How can we assess a documentary's implicit claim to fairness and truth? Always supposing the film is authentic to fact, you can only determine the truth of a film's more esoteric claims by comparing them with your knowledge of life. You reach subjective decisions through your emotional and experiential judgment, and there is no other, independent arbiter.

Art exists to encourage us to do this work, to spur us into becoming mentally and emotionally active. Working at its highest levels, documentary art probes the roots of human life and human values, and treats its audience as equal partners in the quest.

IMPROVISATION IN DRAMA

In the United States of the late 1950s, the actor John Cassavetes used the new portable 16 mm equipment to shoot his first film, a fiction piece that capitalized on the power of Method dramatic improvisation. *Shadows* (1959) is grittily shot

they empathize, and whose version of events squares most with their own experience of life?

The summing up stage places all that has happened in relation to these questions in context for the jury to consider. Films differ from this last, adversarial stage of a trial because they are dramatic entities rather than decision-making ones. An edited film usually has the texture of many voices and multiple POVs, with the most embracing being that of the storytelling itself, which is the underlying "voice" of the director and crew.

Another good film where you can see this analogy at work, one also having a murder trial at its heart, is *Brother's Keeper* (1992) by Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky. In it, Delbert Ward, who is one of four aged and semi-literate farming brothers, is accused of murdering, or mercy killing, his sick brother William. But the town, alienated by big-city police tactics, rallies to the defense of the formerly outcast family. The Wards are shown in all their reclusive squalor, but gradually you realize that Berlinger and Sinofsky are on their side, but to get there the film takes us through multiple other viewpoints.

Shortly we shall look more in depth at the notion of POV in filmmaking, but first we must look at the options the filmmaker exercises when using the camera to collect evidence.

DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE

COLLECTING EVIDENCE: OBSERVATIONAL OR PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

Every camera setup involves collecting evidence, and how you do it will convey different kinds of meaning to your audience, or jury. You must first choose between two major approaches outlined in the last chapter. One we said is strictly observational; the other is participatory and allows the crew to intercede. To quietly observe the aggression between children playing in a school yard is more telling than interrupting their spontaneous activities to ask them to play a competitive game and hoping they do it aggressively.

Whether you shoot observationally or you catalyze the action onscreen is thus something you decide both philosophically and pragmatically. Fred Wiseman, a former lawyer, uses no lighting, no directing, and no questioning, and only ever uses the camera observationally. He shoots a massive amount of footage and makes his distinguished films from the results. If you have a similar conviction about the worth of observational documentary or you are an ethnographer, you will want to capture only events that are uncompromised by you and your camera. However, if you film an interview, it means that merely by asking questions and leading the conversation, you participate in making the record—even if all the questions are edited out.

Using the camera to elicit documentary truth arose, as we discussed earlier, in Russia with Dziga Vertov's *kino-pravda*, or "cinema truth." In France the revival of this approach by Jean Rouch in the 1960s was given the equivalent name in French, *cinéma vérité*. However, because English speakers corrupted the

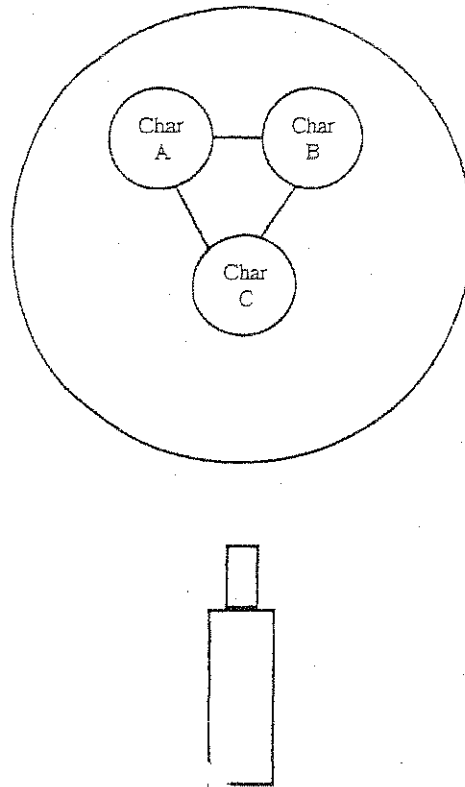


FIGURE 4-1

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

term to connote spontaneous shooting, we now say that a documentary using these intercessional methods is *participatory*.

Whether to use intercessional or non-intercessional shooting is often a commonsense decision dictated not by dogma but by the situation in hand. Where 15 fire engines are hard at work putting out a fire, you won't need to exert any pressures by interceding. But if a naked man has chained himself to the Ministry of Agriculture's railing, you may want to question him if the filming is to go beyond a single enigmatic image.

Figure 4-1 represents symbolically how in observational cinema the camera and crew do their utmost to remain outside onlookers, minimizing their own effect on the proceedings. Figure 4-2 represents participatory cinema, in which camera and crew are avowedly present and inquiring, ready to catalyze, if necessary, an interaction between participants or between participants and themselves.

POINT OF VIEW

Although a *POV shot* will be a literal, physical viewpoint, the phrase *point of view* on its own usually denotes *the impression one gets reading a story or watch-*

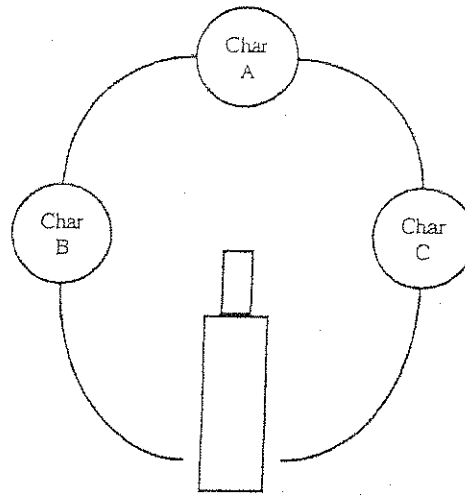


FIGURE 4-2

Diagram representing *cinéma vérité* or participatory cinema, in which the camera and crew may alternately be discreet onlookers or catalyze responses and situations.

ing a film, of the emotional and psychological point of view through which the story is being experienced. Sometimes, depending on context, it will refer to something like a Marxist or Freudian outlook being used as a tool of social or psychological analysis.

A documentary is a story whose “voice” and impact emerge, as in literature, from getting us to experience other people’s realities and other POVs. How this works almost defies explanation, and plenty of filmmakers, if they understand it at all, do so more viscerally than conceptually. What is inescapable is that you will need to convey POVs other than your own in your films. It is hard to ever feel you are controlling them while you shoot, and it is hard to locate them in a finished film except in an intuitive way. Luckily, POVs seem to emerge on their own whenever the maker

- Has a clear purpose for telling the tale
- Relates emotionally to the story and each of its characters, and knows why
- Knows at every point how he or she wants to move the audience

POVs, your own as well as those of your participants, evolve and clarify during the marvelous voyage of discovery called the *artistic process*. From ideation (generating and developing the central idea) to creation (researching, writing, shooting, and editing), the film’s POVs will develop and strengthen as your sense of the film’s identity and purpose develops. This is especially so during editing.

Let me repeat, the clearer your attitudes to your subject and to the reason for making the film, the better. This is why this book insists on self-exploration as the foundation of creative identity and creative identity as the springboard to effective filmmaking. Following are categories of POV with film examples.

I have provided an explanatory diagram for each type of POV, but you will quickly realize from viewing any of the film examples that such a diagram is a simplified view of a subtle and complex range of realities. In practice most POVs incorporate other minor POVs, and the uniqueness and force of the major view-point depend on the contrast with minor ones.

The camera outline in the diagrams symbolizes a recording eye and ear, but to this you must add the human hearts and intelligences guiding their attention. The lines connecting the camera, director, and participants represent their awareness of, and relationship to, each other.

Single Point of View (Character in the Film) As you can see from Figure 4-3, the film is being channeled through, or perhaps even narrated by, a main character. This person may be a bystander or major protagonist, and he or she may be observing, recounting, or enacting events. This kind of film may be a biography or, if talking in the first person, an autobiography.

The seminal work is Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), which takes as its central figure an Eskimo hunter struggling to survive in the ultimate of hostile environments. Though shot silent and usually seen only with a musical accompaniment, it nevertheless creates a strong sense of intimacy with the hunter-gatherer Eskimo and his family. Many scenes were re-enacted for the camera, so we might classify the film as re-enacted observational cinema, if that isn't too

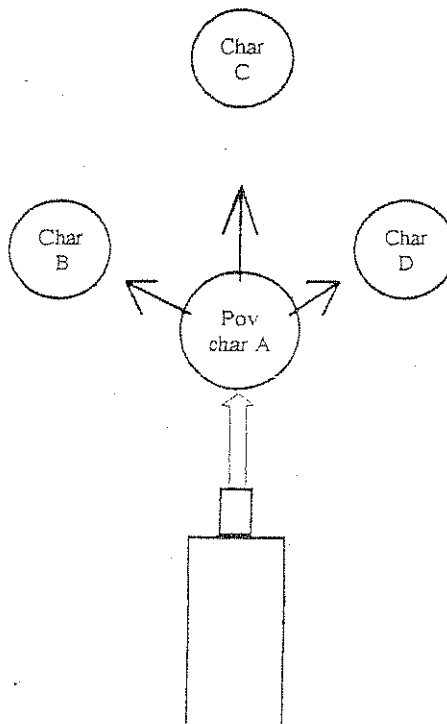


FIGURE 4-3

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

contradictory. Yet the movie seems so true to life and made in such good faith that complaining about artifice seems ungrateful. In his later work, particularly *Louisiana Story* (1948), the passion in Flaherty's storytelling has become sentimentality and his dramatizing manipulative.

Werner Herzog's *Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971) has such a strange and fascinating subject that it can use non-intercession most of the time. It follows Fini Straubinger, a deaf-blind woman who lay in an institution for 30 years until she was taught the deaf-blind tactile language. She is on a journey to locate others as isolated and despairing as she once was herself. As the film progresses, her eerie, prophetic simplicity stresses how elemental is the need for human contact and how devastating is its absence or loss. She emerges as a gauche angel who personifies the love and nobility latent in the human spirit (Figure 4-4). Because the film includes interviews, it also uses participatory elements.

Taking a single character's POV limits a film's scope to what that person can legitimately know, understand, and represent. By making one person stand for a nation, as Nanook does, you may place too much thematic freight on a single representative. Flaherty's Nanook is an Eskimo archetype, and by using him to show man against nature, Nanook carries the burden of portraying his race as an endangered species. Having a strong historical sense of his people, Nanook



FIGURE 4-4

Through its character-within-the-film point of view, Werner Herzog's *Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971) shows that for the deaf-blind, contact with the rest of the world is by touch alone. (New Yorker Films.)

surely collaborated in this. It was an equality of authorship that declined in Flaherty's later work.

The focus on a central character produces a hero, or sometimes an antihero. Too much emphasis on individualism can imply that destiny can be challenged and thwarted individually, and its corollary is that society victimizes the dissenting individual. Flaherty's romantic idealizations, uncomfortably visible in *Man of Aran* (1934), come under sympathetic examination in George Stoney and Jim Brown's *How the Myth Was Made* (1978). This documentary is included with a DVD version of *Man of Aran*.

A partisan viewpoint mainly routed through a central character does not have to lead to the distortions of idealizing. Just be careful to include broader insights. These will make for a stronger film.

Multiple Characters Within the Film. The viewpoint represented in Figure 4-5 is of multiple characters, in which none tends to predominate. The combination of camera and editing may look *at* the other characters or *through* one person after another's consciousness of the others. Through what the seer sees, we empathically construct what he or she is feeling.

When each character represents a different constituency within the social tapestry, you build a texture of different, often counterbalancing, viewpoints like a Buckminster Fuller dome. This approach to POV is excellent for demonstrating a social process, its actors, and its outcome. This POV can be observational

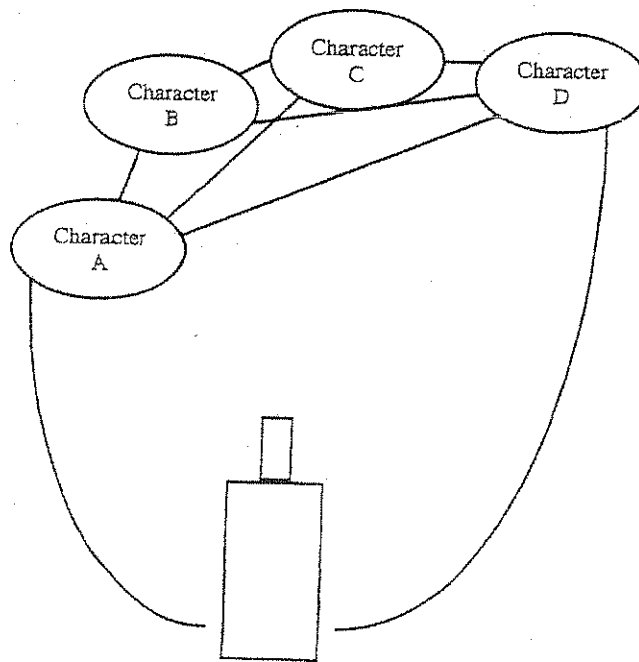


FIGURE 4-5

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

or participatory, and is well suited to a "cross-section" film revealing cause and effect within a collective such as a family, team, business, or class of society.

Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, USA* (1976) covers a strike by impoverished Kentucky coal miners (Figure 4-6). There are prominent characters but no ruling POV, because the central issue is exploitation and class conflict between workers and big business. Ironic protest songs carry some of the narrative forward, and these create such a powerful aura of folk tale and folk ballad that the film lives on afterward in one's memory. Shot mostly as observational cinema, there are moments—most memorably when the crew were shot at—when the filmmakers become participants in the events.

Michael Apted's *28 Up* (1986) introduces a sampling of British children across the class system and monitors how each person's view of him or herself develops over 21 years. Beginning with 7-year-olds, Apted returns thereafter every 7 years to press many of the same issues. The cool, empathic, incisive interviewing challenges even his wariest subjects to a touching scrutiny of their life's meanings. It is poignant indeed to see young people struggling with their beliefs and their demons, each wanting to believe they freely chose their destiny, yet many facing uncomfortable evidence of a path determined by their class origins. A *35 Up* and a *42 Up* followed, but in trying to cover ever more ground these films end up being less embracing. If you watch the later films and you *must* know what befalls the characters, it probably means you have come to love the characters like friends from your own youth. What more could you ask of a film?



FIGURE 4-6

Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, USA* (1976). Music as an expression of suffering and protest adds to the many facets of the multiple characters' point of view. (Krypton International Corporation)

Omniscient. The limitations of diagramming (Figure 4-7) suggest that omniscience is mostly free camera movement. Certainly the camera is no longer limited by what one character can see or know, and the eye of the omniscient story does indeed move freely in time and space. But omniscience carries with it an unfettered, all-knowing consciousness on the part of the storyteller, like the eye of God, who is said (reliably so far as I know) to see and know all. Here the all-knowing intelligence is that of the storyteller, who takes us to any place and time in pursuit of the story. This POV is by no means an impersonal mirror, for at its best it has an outlook and moral purpose for telling the tale.

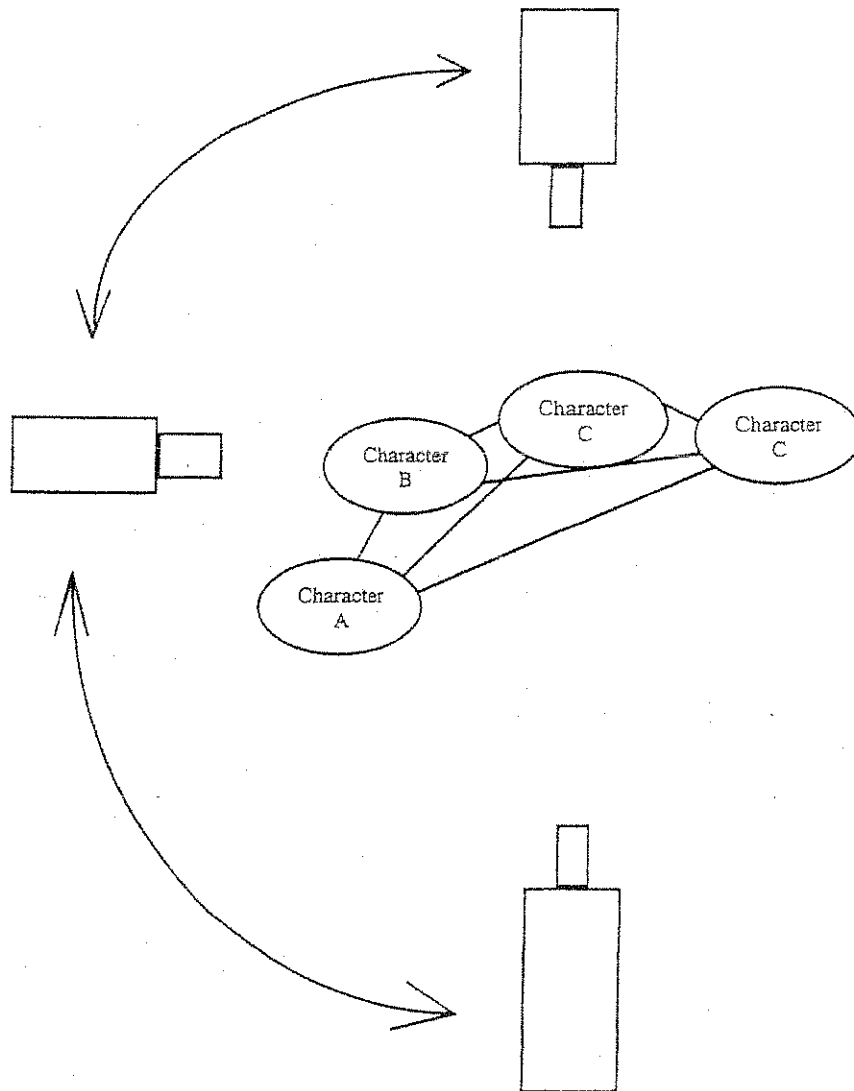


FIGURE 4-7

Diagram representing the omniscient point of view, in which the camera can move freely in time and space. The point of view isn't vested in any particular character and isn't fettered by any character's limitations or insight.

Typically narrated in the third person, the omniscient documentary will express a collective rather than a personal vision. The central organizing vision may be an institutional or corporate view or that of the filmmaker who as storyteller need make no apology or explanation onscreen.

My feeling is that documentary inherited the omniscient viewpoint from the first genre of nonfiction, the travelogue, which in turn came from the 19th-century gentleman's slide lecture. To be modest, he presented his material non-egotistically, either as science or as ethnography, and avoided all references to the first person. Most older films take this position, though not always with humility in mind. Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1937) and *Olympiad* (1938) use omniscience to camouflage an intensely partisan view of Hitler and his Germany. Riefenstahl's masterly use of narrationless documentary seems to ascribe power and inevitability to her subject, but this should be taken as a warning of what "art for art's sake" can mask. All film seeks to persuade, but films that suppress their subjectivity and gloss over the paradoxes and conflicts in the world they reflect intend to condition more than enlighten.

Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (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 atmospheres. Their powerfully aestheticized imagery (Figure 4-8) and ironic montage set up a

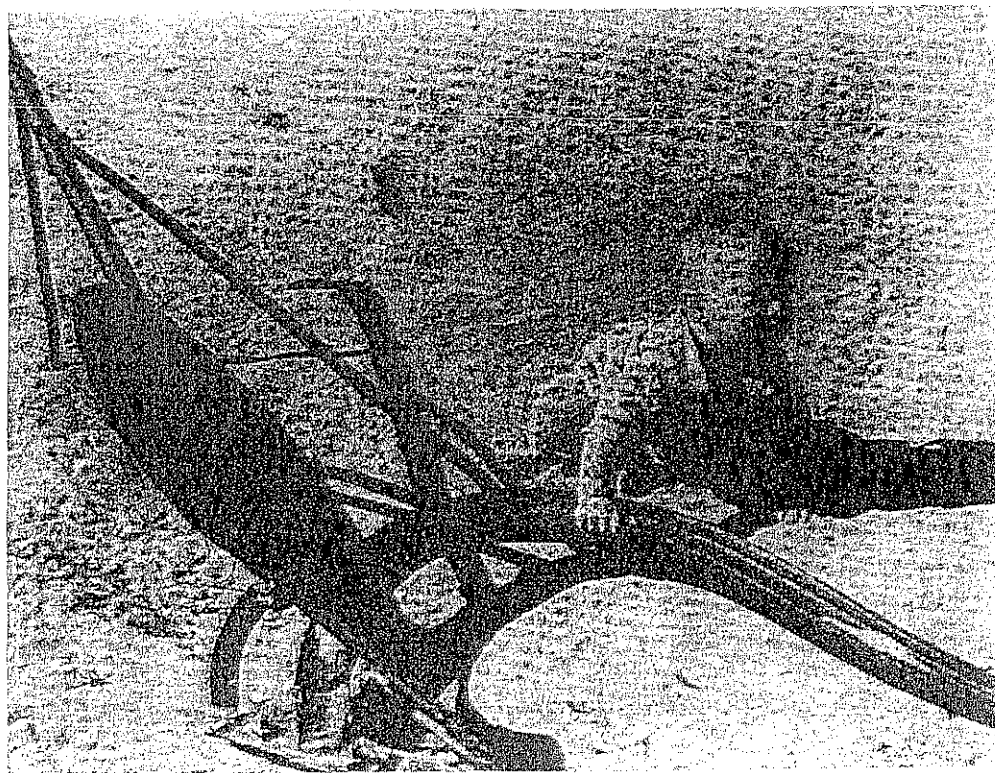


FIGURE 4-8

Pare Lorentz's *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936). Stark imagery and ironic montage are used to set up a haunting vision with an omniscient point of view. (Museum of Modern Art)

unforgettable 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* (Dayton, OH: Pflaum, 1974), would contend that all documentaries are propaganda because all seek to persuade. He liked to be provocative: all documentaries set forth an *argument*, but one that simplifies the evidence to make its conclusions unavoidable is seeking to persuade by conditioning, not argument. This is undoubtedly propaganda.

Few documentaries are set in the future, but Peter Watkins' *The War Game* (1966) appropriates a news program style to posit the nuclear bombing of London. The omniscient POV is sometimes used by an author who does not want to stand between the viewer and the film's subject. With grim impartiality, *The War Game* uses the facts of firebombing in World War II Germany to construct an infernal, incontestable vision of nuclear war and holds us mesmerized by its air of veracity. Passionately it seeks to persuade, but shunning heroics it avoids the personalizing found so often in screen treatments of disaster and forces us to include ourselves and our loved ones among the doomed. As a new parent when I first saw it, I found it nearly unbearable.

Omniscience can seem natural when a subject is complex and far reaching, such as war or race relations, where injecting an individualized storytelling POV would seem parochial or egocentric. Omniscient films put the viewer on guard whenever the film hides its credentials. This was not the case with *The War Game*, which cited all the sources for all its terrifying projections. The omniscient, all-knowing narrator who guides us through history is more worrisome, especially during those television history series that race over vast thematic and factual territory.

Powered from the resources of large corporations and using an army of production workers, the history series gravitates toward omniscience as naturally as royalty to saying "we." Thames Television's *The World at War* in the 1970s, WGBH's *Vietnam: A Television History* in the 1980s, and even Ken Burns' *The Civil War* (1990), which counterpoints contemporary accounts and photographs, all echo the textbook emphasis on facts rather than questions and issues. The ambitiousness, authorial impersonality, and apparent finality of such ventures make them suspect. Who is speaking to whom, for whom, and representing whom? Why do they suffocate historical curiosity when they should awaken it?

Not all ambitious screen history fails. *Eyes on the Prize* (1990), a PBS series from Blackside, Inc., chronicled the development of civil rights in America and managed to tread a fine line between omniscience and personal stories that spoke of passionate commitment. An openly critical film like Peter Davis' *Hearts and Minds* (1974) argues that the American obsession with sports lay behind the tragically mistaken U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. Here the viewer is on a clearer footing and can engage with the film's propositions rather than go numb under a deluge of suspiciously uninflected information.

Personal. Here the POV is unashamedly and subjectively that of the director, who may also narrate the film. A director's surrogate may still be in front of the camera as a "reporter" or catalyst, or the film may present its views in the form of a first-person or third-person essay. There are no limits to the personal POV beyond what the author/storyteller can demonstrably see and know. In

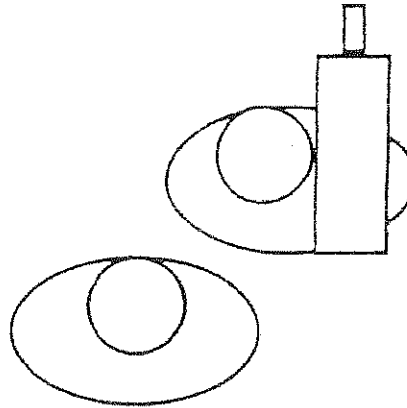


FIGURE 4-9

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

Figure 4-9 the director is behind the camera; but he or she can step forward into the visible world of the film.

Like his *Roger and Me* (1989), Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) is a personal essay in which he again plays the ruffled, naïve Everyman just *trying* to get a few answers. In *Columbine* he sets out to comprehend American gun culture. His questions take him to gun stores, a bank that offers a rifle as an incentive for starting an account, and Charlton Heston (the president of the National Rifle Association). Along the way he compares shooting deaths in the United States to the far lower number in Canada, which has the same ratio of guns per capita, and ponders what cultural differences could possibly explain why Americans kill each other more often. By asking deceptively simple, provocative questions, Moore sparks a series of surreal, often hilarious encounters that leave you thinking afterward about all the paradoxes.

Barbara Sonneborn's *Regret to Inform* (1998) is a personal journey to the place in Vietnam where her first husband was killed when they were young. Undertaken as an exorcism, the 10-year journey to make the film put her in touch with both American and Vietnamese war widows, and the result is a searing examination of what war does to those left behind.

Reflexive. Reflexive documentaries are those acknowledging and even investigating the effect of the documentary process on its product. The anthropologist Jay Ruby, who uses anthropological insights to assess photographs, film, and television, says that

To be reflexive is to 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 By sabotaging the traditional illusion

¹ Jay Ruby, "The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Alan Rosenthal, 65 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).

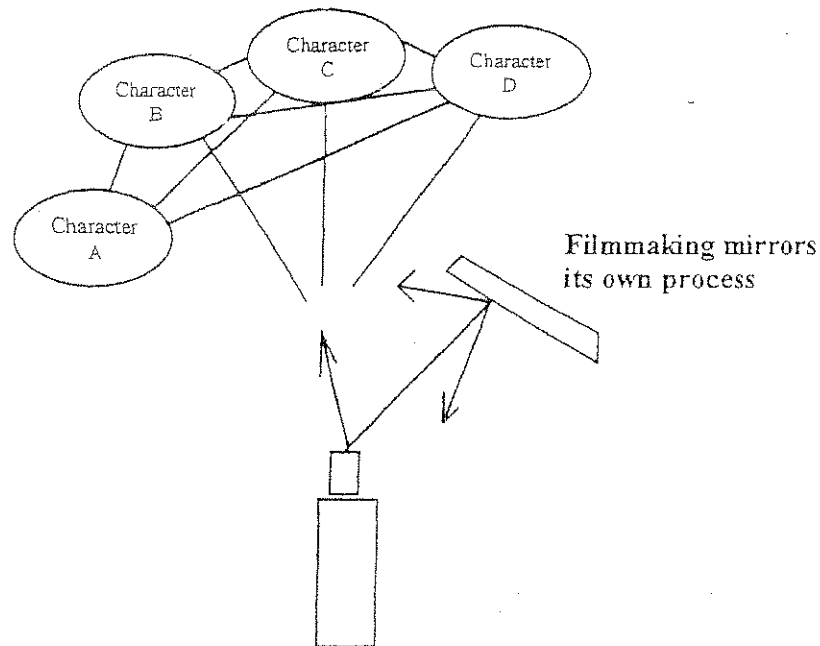


FIGURE 4-10

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

that we are watching unmediated life, reflexivity signals that films are “created, structured articulations of the filmmaker and not authentic, truthful, objective records.”²

The first radical investigation of documentary language is credited to Dziga Vertov, a poet and film editor in Russia of the 1920s. By seeking to show “life as it is” in *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), his Kino-Eye method laid the ground for *cinéma vérité* in France 40 years later. *The Man with the Movie Camera* portrays Moscow as a teeming spectacle of dialectical opposites. The exuberant camera, seemingly independent of human agency, alternately embraces the constants and contradictions of human life. Sometimes we see the camera and cameraman, sometimes we see them literally in a mirror, as in Figure 4-10. Vertov thought that the dynamics of camera and montage transcended human agency, and though we often see shots of the cameraman at work, he seems—like the dancer in *The Red Shoes*—more the camera’s puppet than its master. For ideological reasons, Vertov denied personal authorship by claiming that film truth was vested in the apparatus itself—an ebullient mystification that he doesn’t quite pull off. This is still a powerful belief in beginning film students, who assume that professional film equipment will make a professional-level film.

Figure 4-10 shows that the filming process includes the complex relationships between our friends, A, B, C, and D, and also lets directing, shooting, and editing acknowledge incidents in the filmmaking process itself. This I have symbolized, not too confusingly, I hope, by a mirror.

² Ibid., 74-75.

When a film exposes or analyzes the paradoxes of its own exploration, it draws the audience into the fact that major questions usually hang over every documentary. For instance, how often are we seeing not spontaneous life captured by the camera but something instigated by or for filmmaking itself?

The ethnographer Jean Rouch in his seminal *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), made with Edgar Morin, first looked into this aspect of filmmaking when he posed the people of Paris with a fundamental question, "Are you happy?" By showing participants their own footage, he initiated a moving self-examination in his participants and a desire to go deeper. The results show Rouch's radical curiosity, his sympathy with the ordinary person's need to find meaning in life, and his willingness not only to question the medium but his own authority to use it.

Reflexivity allows the filmmaker to open doors and windows on filmmaking and to share thoughts about whatever ethical or other ambiguities have entered the process. Ethnographic filmmaking, in which the culture under study is supposed to be uncontaminated by the filmmaker's own cultural assumptions, is a prime candidate for such scrutiny. Explaining one culture for the benefit of another is inherently hazardous (if not ultimately impossible) and is fraught with lessons for all documentary makers about one person's right to represent another.

Aside from distortions, subjectivity, or misinformation there are other fascinating issues concerning the medium's boundaries. How, when, and why do we as an audience suspend disbelief? What deceptions does the medium practice on its makers? What may or may not be ethical? And so on. Plainly documentary is more of an emerging and imperfectly understood medium rather than a finished vehicle of information or advocacy for a "subject."

Self-Reflexive. The ultimate in reflexivity is self-reflexivity, in which a film can become a snake eating its own tail. Self-reflexive films reflect not only on their own process but incorporate their authors' thoughts, perceptions, and self-examination as well (Figure 4-11). For the filmmaker seeking self-administered therapy, this form can do what the pool did for Narcissus. It is a treacherous and difficult genre to pull off, but wonderfully rich when successful.

Michael Rubbo's *Sad Song of Yellow Skin* (1970) is an Australian/Canadian filmmaker's search to define Vietnam amid the flux of that country's paradoxes. By confining his attention mostly to city street kids and the young American dissidents working with them, Rubbo exposes us to the seamy side of a peasant civilization torn apart by a wealthy and technocratic occupying savior. Rubbo's ironic view of himself and the world saves his films from sentimentality.

Alan Berliner in *Nobody's Business* (1996) uses documentary to explore family history and dynamics (Figure 4-12). Approaching his crabby father to get a better understanding of his life, he is roundly repulsed—hence the film's title. Berliner senior insists adamantly that he is an ordinary man with nothing to say. Such visceral resistance drives his son to examine family film, photographs, and letters in search of the father he hardly knows. The film elaborates the strategies he uses to unravel his father's story as the son of an immigrant Jew. Along the way, the topics broaden out to include ethnicity, ethnic identity, and America as

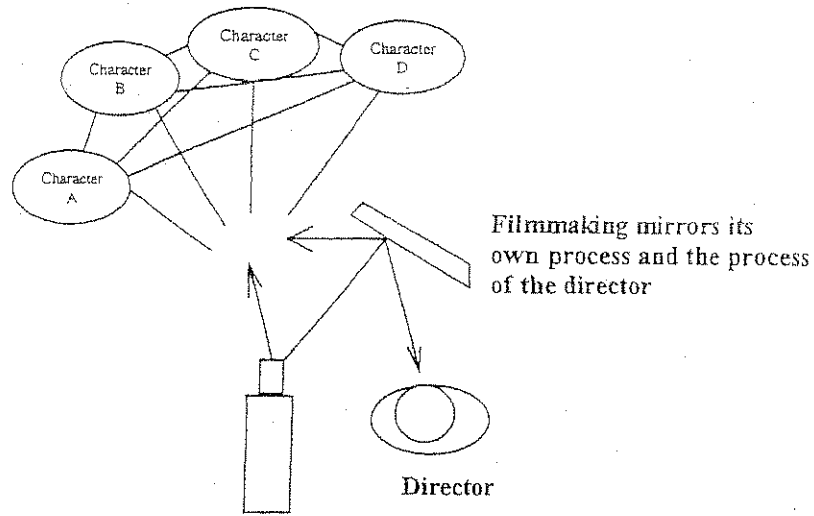


FIGURE 4-11

Diagram representing the self-reflexive point of view. This allows examination of both the film's process and that of its maker(s). However, treat this one carefully, for little separates self-reflexivity from self-indulgence.

the melting pot that failed to alloy its citizens into one culture. It is a larger view that more than justifies the means to get there.

IN SUMMARY

Each of these POVs represents a particular way of looking at people and their world. POVs are part of a storytelling strategy to be sure, but they are also a way to create the characters who see and feel the predicaments in which we find them. Though we see through other eyes, we retain our own values, and the double experience helps us define both the other and ourselves.

When we watch the materials of a film, we know each shot in each sequence is a step attempting to convince us of something: the beauty of a landscape in winter, the mendacity of a salesman, the alienation of children who live in the streets and sniff glue, the professional confidence of a tank commander as the convoy moves into Baghdad, the fake humility of a preacher asking the television audience to support God's work by contributing money, the willing intoxication of a young man in love. What makes us believe or disbelieve what we are being shown? Why should we believe this person rather than that? Why should we trust this expert rather than that one? Why should we care about this person and his or her issues? Why should I believe this film's assertions about tribalism and democracy among Papua and New Guinea tribesmen, when the film was made by non-natives? Why should I believe that this audience reaction shot is not a facile editing creation and really belongs with what the mayor just said at the City Hall microphone?

These are the skeptical thoughts of an audience member. Your job is to make it difficult for that audience member to doubt and yet expose him or her as fully as possible to the depth and complexity of the actual. You will have to edit your

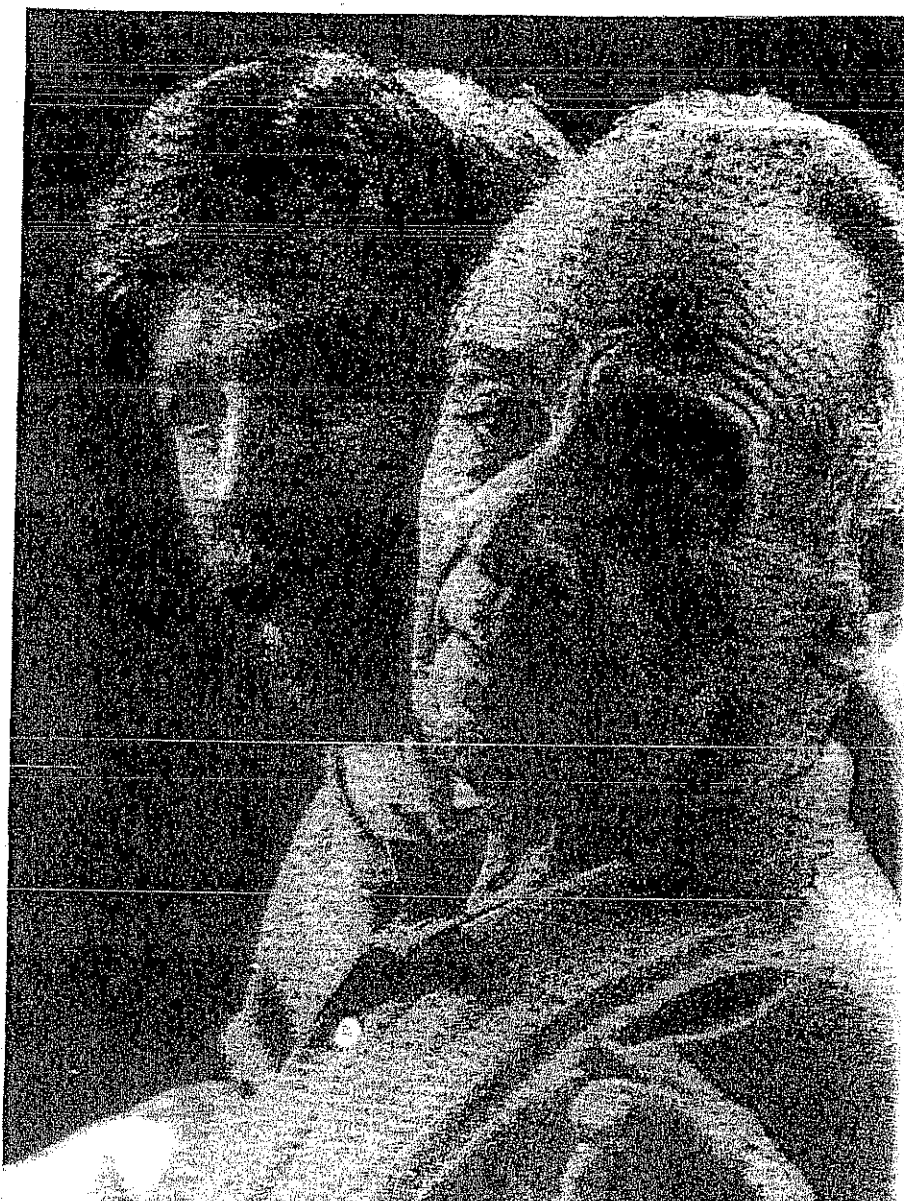


FIGURE 4-12

Koblov's Business (1996) by Alan Berliner. A son challenges his rascally father to reveal himself. (D. W. Leitner)

footage and its POVs carefully and consciously, and you will need to guess where the audience's mind goes at any given moment in your edited film so that you can answer the audience's inner questions with further challenging and thought-provoking information. If that seems very difficult (and it is), then for now simply concentrate on examining what you shoot, how you shoot, whom you shoot, and how you authenticate them. For any particular project, try dividing up the evidence you have gathered and giving each piece a credibility rating. See if you can work in the upper third of that hierarchy where the need is more complex.

ing. What do you have to arrange, say, or do to put a participant under test so that the next levels of truth are revealed? How can you raise the pressure so that there is more at stake?

Doing any of this will drive you to be more challenging and demanding of yourself and of your participants. This is what makes good documentary.