



Significação: revista de cultura
audiovisual

E-ISSN: 2316-7114

significacao@usp.br

Universidade de São Paulo
Brasil

Renov, Michael

Teaching documentary: toward a goal-centered pedagogy of the documentary film

Significação: revista de cultura audiovisual, vol. 38, núm. 35, enero-junio, 2011, pp. 9-30

Universidade de São Paulo

São Paulo, Brasil

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=609766003002>


- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative



Teaching documentary: *toward a goal-centered pedagogy of the documentary film¹*

Michael Renov²

University of Southern California

1. Aula inaugural do Programa de Pós Graduação em Meios e Processos Audiovisuais da ECA-USP (primeiro semestre de 2011).

2. Professor na School of Cinematic Arts – University of Southern California (USA).

Resumo

Há algo sobre o ensino do filme de não-ficção que o distingue de outras formas de pedagogia da mídia. Este artigo recolhe esforços de pedagogos na área do documentário (em aprendizagem e em análise), na crença de que uma proposta de metas para o ensino pode ajudar a promover um diálogo contínuo em torno de melhores práticas.

Palavras-chave

documentário, ensino, pedagogia

Abstract

There is something about the teaching of non-fiction film in particular that sets it apart from other forms of media pedagogy. This article collects efforts of documentary pedagogues in apprenticeship and on trial in the belief that a proposal of goals for our teaching can help promote a continuing dialogue around best practices.

Key-words

documentary, teaching, pedagogy

It is tempting to say it is the best of times for those who, like me and many of us here, teach documentary. I will return in a moment to this upbeat pronouncement, but first I want to raise a central question right at the outset of this presentation, the “so what?” question: why bother focusing on teaching? Isn’t that something we’re paid to do, an institutional demand, that which competes for our time and attention as we struggle to write our books and articles, make our films and pursue our passions? If you’re like me, you may protest and say that teaching *is* one of your chief passions and in fact you attend Visible Evidence³ precisely to *renew* that passion and restock the shelf for teaching your classes. But there can be little doubt that, in the political economy of higher education, rewards accrue far more from scholarly or creative productivity rather than from dedicated pedagogy. When American researchers land big grants or fellowships, the first thing they do is buy out their teaching obligations — so that, often, the most celebrated scholars or artists are likely to be teaching the least. I think a similar dynamic exists everywhere. When it’s time for tenure and promotion at American research universities, great teaching provides necessary but far from sufficient grounds for success. The same cannot be said of other educational settings — for example, the small liberal arts college whose devoted teachers and small classes are major selling points to prospective students and their parents.

I know that the tension I’m describing between teaching and scholarship plays out differently in diverse national contexts. The

3. Nota do editor: conferência internacional sobre documentário em filmes, vídeos e em outras mídias.

Para outras referências, ver: www.visibleevidence.org.

academic film culture of the United Kingdom, for example, has tended to give more prominence to pedagogy than has its North American counterpart, and here I'm thinking of the emergence in the 1970s of *Screen education*. In the United States, *Screen education* was received as a largely parochial distraction from the main event, which was the production of hard-core film theory. At the moment, however, the citation-counting that currently dominates the British system of academic rankings and state funding allocations has tended to diminish the incentives for good teaching as an end in itself and fueled the trend toward writing about teaching in such admittedly first-rate publications as *The Journal of Media Practice*. I'm far from immune from this charge myself. This paper is a response to a request to contribute to an edited collection on film pedagogy. Would I have taken time to reflect on the teaching of documentary without such incentive?

Yet I want to argue that there is intrinsic value in our efforts toward conceptualizing documentary pedagogy. Moreover, there is something about the teaching of non-fiction film in particular that sets it apart from other forms of media pedagogy, recommending it all the more to our collective attention. What I hope to do is provide some context for thinking about the teaching of documentary before sketching out the general contours of what I'm calling a goal-oriented pedagogy of the documentary film.

Now I said at the beginning that this was perhaps the best of times for teaching documentary. That statement turns far less on the teaching part of the statement and in the past decade or two, documentary culture has massively expanded: there are more books on more documentary topics being published than ever before; access to the tools of the trade (digital cameras for production, the internet for distribution) has increased dramatically; the international film festival circuit is thriving; documentary modes — from the mock doc to auto-ethnography, the animated documentary, and the docu-musical — continue to emerge and intrigue; reality TV has begun to take over the airwaves of several continents; and more colleges and universities are offering more documentary courses to eager students. It's a bull market for the documentary, and the 14th edition of *Visible Evidence* (Bochum, Germany, 2007) bears witness to these achievements.

But despite this progress, there has been relatively little consideration given the how and the why of what we do as

documentary pedagogues. This is particularly notable in a cultural field that was, from the outset, understood to bear a powerful relationship to the educative function. In the words of our totemic ancestor John Grierson, the film was “an instrument much more suited to the specific purposes of education than any other of the arts”; and the British documentary film movement was developed with specifically pedagogical goals in mind (Grierson, 1966, p. 194). Grierson, it should be noted, was prone to favorable references to Lenin who had dictated, in the wake of the October Revolution, that all film activities be gathered under the aegis of the Commissariat of Education. of Lenin’s view of the efficacy of media pedagogy, Jay Leyda tells us:

*In all discussions of the direction films should take in the new society (barely six months old), the word “education” was heard more often than the word “art”. It may have been thought that the quality of **art** had had its opportunity in Russian films, while the function of **education** not only in Russian but in all films had been neglected* (Leyda, 1960, p. 125).

The international language of film was understood to be the principal vehicle for educating a predominantly illiterate populace in the early years of nation-building. To that end, the so-called Leninist Proportion mandated that 75% of cinema resources would be earmarked for the production of informational films, a proviso that helped launch the career of Dziga Vertov (Feldman, 1984, p. 5).

Two decades later, Grierson wrote favorably of propaganda as “a positive and necessary force” that could provide “the patterns of thought and feeling which make for an active and imaginative citizenship.” The documentary film was a visceral mode of persuasion that could enhance what he called “total effort”, and he was proud of its achievements: “We beat out a rhythm for our time: a hard, tough and exacting rhythm which takes the head higher and the shoulders a little further back” (Grierson, 1996, p. 282).

Grierson’s tutelage with Walter Lippmann had led him to believe that the cinema, hand in glove with an enlightened and authorizing state, could offer “young people and adults alike (...) a broad and lively picture of their society to stir their imaginations and instill the loyalties necessary if they are to face up to its problems.” (Grierson,

1996, p. 289) This specific formulation was offered to a gathering of Canadians in the fall of 1943 at the height of the war, a time when Grierson, long dedicated to the “mobilization of men’s minds to right ends,” argued that film had achieved “unique importance in the new world of education.”⁴ Idealizing the communicative act as a powerful if ameliorative tool in the struggle against the forces of chaos and oppression, Grierson looked to the documentary film in particular which, “working as it does from the living fact (...) can, if it is mastered and organized, provide (...) [the] necessary umbilical to the community outside” (Grierson, 1996, p. 194).

While Grierson’s project was attuned to community-building (a contemporary-sounding ethos) and to the formation of citizenship with film functioning as an activist tool for persuasion, these goals have always to be understood in relation to his statist tendencies and the limits of his idealism. In his “First Principles,” written between 1932 and 1934, Grierson had inveighed against the dangers of the “romantic documentary,¹ the city symphonies and all those films and movements beloved by the “highbrows” on quite specific grounds: “Dadaism, expressionism, symphonics are all in the same category. They present new beauties and new shapes; they fail to present new persuasions” (Grierson, 1996, p. 151-152). In my own writing, I’ve described four modalities of desire, impulsions which fuel documentary discourse: the preservational, the persuasive, the analytical and the expressive (Renov, 1993, p. 22). Of these, the rhetorical or persuasive was the function that mattered most to Grierson, for whom the screen was a pulpit, and the film, a hammer to shape public opinion. For him, son of a Calvinist school master, the more expressive variants of documentary filmmaking failed to exploit the medium’s potential to communicate ideas and compel audiences to action.

Time and again in Grierson’s writings, the educational potential of the documentary is highlighted. The man never shied away from the etymological implications of education, as a “leading out” with all the connotations of hierarchy, authority and the imperial mode such a reading implies. Indeed, Grierson embraced the propagandist’s role. As we look back from our current perch, neither Lenin’s nor Grierson’s zealotry for the harness of the documentary film toward educative ends is likely to strike us as a genealogical strand worthy of rehabilitation. Yet we can’t deny the strength of the Griersonian legacy. When Bill Nichols

4. This reference to film’s role in “the new world of education” first appears in a pamphlet, “Education and the New Order,” published in 1941. See Grierson, 1996, p. 268.

writes, in his *Representing reality*, “[a]t the heart of documentary is less a *story* and its imaginary world than an *argument* about the historical world” (Nichols, 1991, p. 111) he stresses the propositional and even hortatory character of documentary, its drive to harness its depictions to a particular end. This formulation remains mired in a hypodermic model of communication, one that understands the educative act as a one-way transmission of fact or knowledge. But, happily, the critical study of education and the production of pedagogical theory have, in recent decades, offered a far brighter picture of what teaching can mean.

Jerome Bruner, a renowned educational psychologist, writes of the virtues of a culturally oriented cognitive psychology that moves away from the view of the learner (or audience) as an empty vessel to be filled and, instead, underscores the potential for establishing a mutuality of knowledge communities.

Such a pedagogy of mutuality presumes that all human minds are capable of holding beliefs and ideas which, through discussion and interaction, can be moved toward some shared frame of reference. Both child and adult have points of view, and each is encouraged to recognize the other's, though they may not agree. They must come to recognize that differing views may be based on recognizable reasons and that these reasons provide the basis for adjudicating rival beliefs (...). The child [in our context, the student], in a word, is seen as an epistemologist as well as a learner (Bruner, 1996, p. 56-57).

This approach, according to Bruner, takes advantage of what he deems humankind's “pedagogic disposition,” our innate curiosity and sensitivity to the habits of those around us, what he calls our imitative and demonstrational dispositions (Bruner, 1996, p. 47). The mutualist pedagogue strives to become attuned to learners' unique cultural orientations, to develop a healthy respect for the learners' own constructs of mind:

Truths are the product of evidence, argument, and construction rather than of authority, textual or pedagogic. This model of education is mutualist and dialectical, more concerned with interpretation and understanding than with the achievement of factual knowledge or skilled performance (Bruner, 1996, p. 57).

Bruner's pedagogical model strikes me as particularly well-suited to the documentary classroom and to the epistemological mood of contemporary documentary studies. Following Bruner's lead, the screening of even the most single-minded of visions — those of Vertov, Riefenstahl or Grierson — or the viewing of a classic ethnographic film such as Robert Gardner's *Dead birds* (1963), replete with its smothering voice-over, becomes the occasion for identifying and unpicking competing frames of reference — the filmmaker's, the film's subjects', the instructor's and the student's own. The crux of the educational challenge ensues when one faces up to these competing referential frames, particularly one's own and those of the students.

Bruner's approach resists the "sage on the stage" approach and its presumption of the value of a straight-forward dispensation of knowledge. Admittedly, the instructor typically has the advantage of a far richer reservoir of experience or context for understanding the subject at hand, in this case the documentary text. But Bruner's stress on mutuality helps to remind us that neither filmmaker nor professor holds a monopoly on truth-telling even for a work that mobilizes great rhetorical force. The experience of the film, as Stuart Hall reminded us many decades ago, entails a reading that is "negotiated." It is on this ground of *mutuality, respect and dialogue* that documentary pedagogy best operates. According to this view, a documentary effort at truth-telling becomes a construction to be challenged and interrogated rather than a series of facts to be consumed or an article of faith to be accepted or rejected. The documentary text becomes a fruitful site of potentially competing frameworks and competencies. My own teacherly presentation of a concept or filmic text becomes another framework to be considered and interrogated.

I know something about the Postal Special, the pre-war British context and the institutional history of the Empire Marketing Board and his GPO Film Unit when I teach *Night mail*, but none of this "knowledge" avails in the face of the students' reception of the Auden verse in voice-over, a sing-song recitation that strikes some young audiences as risible (perhaps due to the unexpected family resemblance to rap rhythms). One of the reasons I love showing students a decidedly non-canonical work such as a Brian Hill docu-musical is because there are so few pre-existing frameworks for

making sense of the work. We're more or less on our own in our reception (with help, perhaps, from Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight's on-line *Jumpcut* article on Hill) so that post-screening discussions tend to take place on common ground. I've shown the film in Amman, Jordan, to a public audience as well as in Los Angeles classrooms, and the discussions have always been lively and a little unpredictable. Another film that explodes expectation and provides some pedagogical opportunities is Bunuel's *Las hurdes*, which baffles, attracts and repels all at once. No single reading or reader of the text can claim full competency. It's a film that generates questions of a very fundamental sort: how does one come to "know" in a documentary film, what are or ought to be the ethical obligations of the filmmaker, how does a text rooted in the real "game" or (?) manipulate its audience? These are questions whose answers are not subject to easy tabulation. If a mutualist pedagogy can be said to enhance the free flow of ideas and heighten the understanding in the classroom, it seems to me that certain texts — expansive, surprising, confrontational — can play a special role in setting the stage for such a learning environment.

In Bruner's view, educational research has focused far too single-mindedly on preparing the young for an ever more competitive global economy. Pragmatism has displaced founding principles. What of maintaining a sense of participation in the democratic process, he argues,

or, indeed, of cultivating a proper skepticism about the exclusive place of economic and corporate ends in designing educational policies? Is not the dignity and worth of the common man proclaimed in our democratic Constitution also a crucial end to be sought? After all, was not John Locke's radical doctrine of empiricism, emphasizing each man and woman's ability and right to decide things on their own, as much an educational as a political doctrine? (Bruner, 2006, p. 212).

He concludes that "the master question from which the mission of education research is derived is: *What should be taught to whom, and with what pedagogical object in mind?* That master question is threefold: what, to whom, and how?" (Bruner, 2006, p. 212). I would want to add a fourth dimension to the threefold query: "why". Why do we wish to teach the things we do in the ways that

we do? And in that spirit, the remainder of my presentation will focus on developing a series of documentary-specific pedagogical aims responsive to the now fourfold question: what, to whom, how and why. In so doing I hope to echo at least some of what I gathered from an informal round of fact-finding via the Visible Evidence listserv. My questions regarding documentary teaching practices and perspectives were broadly framed and practical, having to do with perceptions of how the developing field of documentary studies plays out in the classroom: what films are most useful, what impediments exist with regard to distribution, how important is a global purview for teaching the documentary?

But the truth is that what I have to say here is primarily based on my own experience and here I feel obliged to offer a brief autobiographical aside. I've been teaching documentary for 29 years. When I was first hired at the University of California, Santa Barbara, I was asked to teach a class on post-World War II documentary film, the follow up to a course taught by Chuck Wolfe on the classic documentary works of the 20s, 30s, and 40s. Despite the fact that Steve Mamber, author of *Cinéma vérité in America* (1976), had been my dissertation advisor, I had never taken a class on documentary at San Francisco State University during my MA⁵ years or at UCLA (University of California). That's because there weren't any being offered. The English-language books on documentary available at the time were those of Barnouw, Barsam, Jacobs and a very few others. I doubt that I'm the only documentary scholar of my generation who got his training on the job — by screening and reading and teaching and discussing.

The classroom was the principal laboratory, in which ideas about documentary arose and got tested. There were few papers and fewer panels on documentary topics at SCS (precursor to SCMS)⁶ and those there were tended toward hagiography or the explication of classic texts. The phrase documentary theory was an oxymoron. When I applied for what was described as an explicitly documentary job at USC (University of Southern California) in 1985, I did so not on the basis of publications (I'd written a dissertation on female representation in Hollywood films of the 1940s and had published on related topics), but because of my teaching experience. I'd come to love my documentary class with its focus on contemporary works and topics such as the ongoing struggles in Central America (showing films such as *When*

5. Master of Arts, ou mestrado em artes.

6. Nota do editor: Society for Cinema Studies, precursora da Society for Cinema and Media Studies.

the mountains tremble (1983) and *El Salvador: another Vietnam* (1981). I regarded the prospect of a tenure-track job teaching what I liked best as too good to be true. My job talk became the essay, “Re-thinking documentary: toward a taxonomy of mediation”, published in 1986 in *Wide angle*, and my career as a documentary scholar had begun. But it was the teaching that led the way.⁷

7. Like most teachers, I’ve learned a lot from those I’ve taught. I’ve learned about Japanese documentary from Markus Nornes; about the performative from Su Scheibler; about home video from Jim Moran; about the televisual real from Mark Williams; about African documentary from Aboubakar Sanogo; about autobiographical inscription from Brody Fox; about documentary trace structures from Malin Wahlberg; about the compilation film from Patrick Sjöberg; about Indian documentary from Veena Hariharan; about the animated documentary from Bella Honess-Roe; and about documentary as evidence from Kristen Fuhs.

As for the documentary-centered pedagogical aims that I promised at the outset, I offer the following list of goals to which the documentary pedagogue may profitably aspire. These goals articulate with the discrete elements of the fourfold query (the who, what, why, and how of pedagogy) in varying ways. Most of us tend to foreground certain of these goals in our teaching of documentary; it’s neither possible nor desirable to hold them in equipoise. The aims are presented in the active voice appropriate to the teaching enterprise. Of necessity, my account of each of them here will be telegraphic rather than comprehensive: 1. To provide “local knowledge”; 2. To facilitate a grasp of the film-historical context; 3. To promote historical understanding; 4. To model political activism; 5. To engage with the semiotics and aesthetics of cinema; 6. To showcase documentary’s global reach; 7. To offer lessons in truth-telling and epistemology; 8. To effect practice; 9. To provide an ethical showcase.

To provide “local knowledge”

By “local knowledge” I mean something like information, the delivery of fact, inflected or lower case knowledge, which satisfies the underlying epistephilic urge. Local knowledge is a phrase derived from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose examination of the relations between fact and law across diverse cultures traced out a web of interconnection between the general and the particular, the construction of legal norms on the one hand and the happenings or “fact-configurations” of everyday life on the other. Law, he concluded, is local knowledge, “local not just as to place, time, class, and variety of issue, but as to accent — vernacular characterizations of what happens connected to vernacular imaginings of what can” (Geertz, 1983, p. 215). The documentary film is typically a storehouse of nuanced and localized knowledge,

fact-configurations packaged into meaningful structures calculated more to stimulate than satisfy the innate curiosity of audiences.

One motivation for teaching documentary is to offer experiences that satisfy that human appetite for local knowledge. I see this as a fundamental pedagogical aim yet one that rarely stands alone. I watch *Planet Earth* to be amazed and to sample the natural wonders of the world, but I don't often choose to teach such work without other supporting motives. This most elementary pedagogical goal reminds me of an apocryphal tale, namely that one of the most successful documentaries of all time, based on sales, was an educational film for fire fighters on how to coil a fire hose. We teach the documentary film to supply local knowledge.

To facilitate a grasp of the film-historical context

No one who teaches documentary film, even those who eschew the historical survey, can afford to remain blind to the film-historical dimension. I'm a firm believer that you don't have to show a *Lumière actualité* or *Nanook of the North* the first week of class, but you'd best attend to history in some measure. Otherwise students are apt to conclude that Jean Vigo's *A propos de Nice* is a brilliant example of *cinéma vérité*, a term that doesn't become meaningful for three more decades.

Regarding this pedagogical goal, the "to whom" question raised previously is deeply relevant. I'm far less likely to foreground the film-historical for a class of non-majors. But I think everyone should know that the documentary impulse is as old as cinema even if the documentary as a filmic type doesn't get established until much later. I don't feel obliged to follow a simple chronology or stick to canonical texts. But I am grateful for the recently available collection, *Unseen cinema: the American avant-garde film, 1894-1941*, as it allows me to show the very brief *24 dollar island* (1926), by Robert Flaherty, in lieu of *Nanook*. I can offer a more concise introduction to Flaherty's epic romanticism while leaving room for a more varied introductory week.

Encouraging students to grapple with historical questions in the emergence and development of the documentary film is not the same as teaching films in chronological order. Historical understanding

can be approached through a thematic or special topics orientation just as it can be via the survey. I feel obliged to remind the class that documentary has always developed in relation to the formats, technologies and apparatuses of particular moments so that Rouch's or Leacock's tinkering with the 16mm camera in the early 1960s shaped specific films while facilitating the evolution of documentary film style on two continents. American guerrilla television of the 1970s is important in part for its forceful introduction of a cheap and portable format, video, which changed documentary history yet again, and in so doing presaged the arrival of YouTube several decades on. The pedagogical challenge is not to force-feed names and dates but to usher students into thinking historically about a complex cultural formation, the documentary film.

To promote historical understanding

I'm often critical of historians or other non-specialists who use documentary films in a purely illustrative fashion, inattentive to the specificities of cinematic language. But it's undeniable that the documentary form furnishes ample opportunity for enlivening history for contemporary students. It's tempting to teach the Civil Rights era through the *Eyes on the Prize* series or, more recently, World War II by way of Ken Burns' and Lynn Novick's *The War*. Documentary films function particularly well as occasions for discussing matters of historiography, the methods deployed for the writing or production of historical narratives. Accounts of the past are always authored and from specific perspectives, but the neutrality of prose can obscure that fact. Music, voice-over narration, reenactment, interviews — these are some of the tools that documentary filmmakers use to represent historical events and they can all be shown to bear with them ideological effects. Teaching documentary can be the occasion for asking how history gets written, what process of selection is entailed in order to carve out a particular view of the past. This topic may end up overshadowing the content of any given historical documentary.

In recent documentary practice, the home movie has functioned as a dramatic portal to past experience, source of a "private history" that can be made to narrate the broader social field. Peter Forgacs'

The *maelstrom* is composed primarily of home movie footage shot by a young Dutch Jew over more than a perilous decade. The Peereboom family becomes the locus of our understanding; their private chronicle narrating a tragic spiral toward destruction at the hands of National Socialism that mirrors the plight of millions. Home movies can be treasure troves of memory, indices of an irretrievable past that can be nimbly repurposed and overlain with reflective text or narration in the hands of a Jonas Mekas, Michelle Citron, Rea Tajiri, Richard Fung, Alan Berliner, Jay Rosenblatt or Jonathan Caouette. World historical events get scaled down and turned inside out to reveal the private suffering that lies within. These works offer opportunities for engaging students in an open-ended dialogue about history as lived experience rather than as public event.

To model political activism

Many of us came to the teaching of documentary through our interest in social change and our recognition that the committed documentary wields a power of engagement for young audiences. It would be difficult for any pedagogue to avoid documentary's historical convergence with political activism from the first decades until today. Take your pick of noteworthy moments and makers — Vertov with his Kinoki in the teens and 20s; Joris Ivens, Ralph Bond, the Workers Film and Photo League in the 30s; Santiago Alvarez, Solanas, Getino and the Newsreel collectives in the 60s; the guerrilla television collectives of the 70s; feminist and queer activists in the 70s, 80s and ongoing; Eastern European, Korean and Chinese makers documenting popular movements of resistance in the 80s and 90s; the viral media activists of the current moment. Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* shattered box office records during the summer of an American presidential campaign when, for a moment, it seemed a movie might alter the fortunes of a nation. Some of my current students think *An inconvenient truth* might mark a sea change in American public opinion toward climate change. Without doubt, documentary's political engagements exert a powerful attraction for audiences and help to explain why many of us teach this work.

I have found Jane Gaines' essay on political *mimesis* (first presented at the 1994 Visible Evidence conference) to be a valuable classroom

tool for its attention to the visceral dimension of documentary film reception: the ways that the textures of images, the rhythms of sound and editing can induce us to “body back” what we’re shown and in so doing perhaps induce agency. I love the conversations this essay inspires whenever I teach it. It offers a great opportunity for a mutualist, experientially-driven rather than top-down approach to pedagogy. If I show Alvarez’s short film *Now* (1965), a music video precursor that matches Lena Horne’s inspired vocals to briskly edited, high energy archival footage of Civil Rights protestors, and ask students if the message “gets under their skin,” everyone is likely to have an opinion. I might then choose to complement that discussion with an exposition of Aristotle’s forms of rhetorical proof to suggest some concrete tactics for persuasion that have functioned effectively for *millennia*. For the teacher of documentary film, nothing quite equals the thrill of observing how the documentary film can reach the hearts and minds of students in every era.

To engage with the semiotics and aesthetics of cinema

All of us who teach the documentary are obliged to ask our students not just “what does this mean” but “how does this mean.” Although I don’t always utter the words “semiotics” or “aesthetics,” many important works of the 1920s, what Bill Nichols has called the films of “poetic exposition,” as well as more contemporary experimental documentaries are textbooks for teaching the fundamentals of cinematic language. I can’t show *A propos de Nice* without talking about Soviet-style intellectual montage, which is the only way to explain why images of the leisured classes sunning themselves in the south of France happen to be intercut with brief shots of ostriches or crocodiles.

The cine-poem and the city symphony help to ground the documentary enterprise in the modernist moment. The career of Joris Ivens, bookended by *Rain* (1929) and *A tale of the wind* (1989), is an exemplary one, reminding us that political advocacy (here I reference the scores of films made by Ivens who documented struggles around the world for six decades) derives its power from the maker’s control of his medium. As I argue in *Toward a poetics of documentary*, persuasion, far from being opposed to aesthetics,

depends on expressivity for its instantiation. I may choose to show the work of a Brakhage or a James Benning in a documentary context, in part because they push at non-fiction's discursive boundaries, but far more canonical texts such as *Tongues untied* or *79 springtimes of Ho Chi Minh* will also suffice to demonstrate that documentary is, after all, the *creative* treatment of actuality, and that aesthetic innovation can induce heightened audience response.

To showcase documentary's global reach

Nowadays I'm not happy if I'm not introducing students to documentary films and filmmakers from six or eight countries. I'm deeply grateful to Jane Balfour for introducing me to Sergei Dvortsevov, a Kazakhstani filmmaker whose *Bread day* (1998) has reinvigorated my teaching of the observational mode. After decades of teaching *Primary* and *Titicut follies*, it's a relief to be able to illustrate the tenets of direct cinema while also introducing the class to the realm of post-Soviet Russian cinema. More than ever, documentary is a global phenomenon with remarkable work being produced in Brazil, Finland, China, Australia and throughout Africa as well as countless other locations not previously featured in standard documentary histories. The recently released *Encyclopedia of documentary*, edited by Ian Aitken, has helped to redress the dearth of resources for studying global documentary culture.

Visible Evidence is an international event that will only achieve its full potential when it has been staged on every continent where documentary filmmaking thrives and that's everywhere, but Antarctica. The annual Flaherty Seminar, once held exclusively in upstate New York, has begun to organize occasional gatherings in international locations and always reaches out to makers from around the world.

My preliminary efforts to poll others via the Visible Evidence listserv tells me that most who teach documentary are ever in search of the means to broaden their geo-political horizons. Access is always a stumbling block. Now, at least for Latin American documentary, which has experienced a dramatic resurgence in recent decades, there is a resource that will make possible the screening of many hundreds of films, old and new. Docfera (www.docfera.com), for example, is an organization that aims to become "the first

web platform and the largest digital archive for Latin American documentaries in the world.” The plan is to attract institutional subscribers who will be given on-line access to a huge, highly searchable cache of Latin American documentary films.

One final observation on the importance of teaching documentary in a global frame: one can never fully anticipate the cross-cultural resonances of documentary spectatorship. I recently had the experience of showing *London can take it* (1940) to a group of Jordanian, Palestinian and Lebanese students in Amman. I was amazed by the immediacy of that film for these young people who have lived with bombs and bloodshed all their lives. The post-screening conversation focused on the film’s construction of national character, the assertion of British resolve, toughness and resiliency. The students, it seemed, had no comparable national stereotypes to draw on for their own survival narratives. That experience has forever changed my own reception of that film.

To offer lessons in truth-telling and epistemology

Jerome Bruner has written of the necessity of an enlightened educational policy that will, in addition to encouraging young people “to honor the culture’s traditions of sensibility or cultivatedness — its past —, (...) [will] also seek to equip them with ‘flexibility’ and ‘resilience’” (Bruner, 2006, p. 208). These are moral and intellectual attributes that are less learned than practiced or modeled, developed over time to the point of competence and even self-sufficiency. Students may have the technical facility to navigate and even intervene in the contemporary mediasphere, but, in the face of myriad truth claims attached to political campaigns, advertising and news coverage, they have far less competency for calibrating their responses more finely than indifference, acceptance or undifferentiated skepticism.

If knowledge is a justified belief, our job is to help students analyze the ways that claims for truth get justified in the works we screen. I begin my course by positing the truth claim as the defining condition of the documentary; the job then becomes, at least in part, ferreting out those claims and deciphering the rhetorical ploys and aesthetic practices that render them convincing for audiences.

Despite the disparagement from philosophers who see film scholars ill-suited to the task, such as Noel Carroll, I think all educators must be in the business of training our pupils as epistemologists as well as learners. We ought not to shy away from “going meta” in our teaching, offering models for political and intellectual critique that can help them construe their experience well beyond the classroom.

I even think some filmic texts can make vital contributions to spawning clarity of mind and judgment. Although one must be prepared to complement the screening with lots of historical context, the inclusion of an Emile de Antonio’s film, such as *In the year of the pig* (1969) or *Millhouse: a white comedy* (1971), on the syllabus can have tonic effects. As described by critics such as Tom Waugh, Doug Kellner and Dan Streible, de Antonio’s collagist approach requires the audiences’ active engagement and powers of judgment. Frequently archival footage is pitted against an interview so that the latter testimony calls into question or undercuts the historical record seemingly established by the archival material. As with the work of Errol Morris, viewers are forced to remain vigilant — to sift evidence, evaluate credibility and extract authorial point-of-view — throughout the experience. What I’m describing is tutelage in both visual and epistemological literacy. It is among our most vital task as educators.

To effect practice

This pedagogical goal may not apply to all teachers of documentary in all settings. I have a strong commitment to working at the intersection of theory and practice. I love having production students in my classes and observing them glean ideas and inspiration from the films and books they encounter. Makers bring a kind of pragmatism to their study of documentary that is useful for the scholar. They want to know how things are made, what works and why. Nothing makes me happier than seeing production students begin to re-evaluate their preconceptions and re-think their projects based on what they encounter in the classroom. I take special pleasure in assigning the writings of practitioners from Vertov to Rouch or David MacDougall as they tend to recover the moment when idea becomes action.

Over the years, I've had the special satisfaction of having some students tell me their filmmaking paths were deflected from fiction to non-fiction on the strength of my class. I guess that makes me a proselytizer. As referenced above, the USC School of Cinematic Arts is consulting on the creation of a new film school to serve the Middle East to be based in Aqaba, Jordan. I've already had the opportunity to teach a documentary workshop to students learning the production ropes and it's tremendously gratifying. I observe their responses to Rouch and Morin's *Chronicle of a summer*, Humphrey Jennings' *Listen to Britain*, Jon Alpert's *Hard metals disease* or Brian Hill's *Songbirds*. New horizons open up for them as they think through their own stories, relationships, and agendas for change. When theory and practice meet in this way, the results are enormously rewarding for all.

To provide an ethical showcase

I conclude with ethics. I was very pleased to discover that Bill Nichols' recent *Introduction to documentary* begins with an account of the ethical issues encountered in the study or production of the documentary film. I share Nichols' view that this is the place to begin — and end — the study of the documentary.

For the last two years, I've included a screening of Werner Herzog's *Grizzly man* on the first day of my documentary class. It's a remarkable film in many respects — gripping, repugnant, ecstatic — and it raises many questions that resonate throughout the term. Whose film is it, one may ask: Herzog's or his subject, Timothy Treadwell, whose own footage commands a sizable proportion of screen time? That question of authorship plays out across future screenings of TVTV's *Four more years*, Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman's *Silverlake life: the view from here*, Peter Forgacs' *The maelstrom* and Alain Resnais' *Night and fog*. In at least some of these cases, the thorniest problems arising from shared authorship turn out to be the ethical ones. Can one ever fully decide the "rightness" of Herzog's construction of Timothy Treadwell, *Grizzly man*'s filmmaker savant, or reconcile the gap between Treadwell's efforts toward self-construction and the version of the man offered us by the film? Don't we feel a

little queasy when Forgacs takes over for Max Peereboom, *The maelstrom*'s doomed amateur filmmaker? Would Tom Joslin have approved of his protégée Peter Friedman's choices in depicting both Joslin's and (his partner) Mark Massi's deaths?

Likewise, what are we to make of the Maysles' rendition of Big and Little Edie Beale in *Grey gardens* (1975)? My students never tire of arguing about who is exploiting whom in that film, of trying to untangle voyeurism from exhibitionism or find a comfortable angle of reception for themselves. Student responses have been amped up recently by the success of the Broadway version of the film, its presence on the web via countless fan sites and the promise of an upcoming feature version. What does one say when Angelo gets fired from his factory job in *Chronicle of a summer* or Jon Alpert's aggressive tracking of corporate crimes in *Hard metals disease* leaves his worker-informants jobless. Should the public's right to know or the filmmaker's will to point a finger at social injustice trump privacy or a steady paycheck for his subjects? When Fred Wiseman filmed at the Massachusetts Institution for the Criminally Insane at Bridgewater in *Titicut follies*, did those inmates ridiculed and demeaned on camera for all eternity really exercise informed consent? Is informed consent even possible in such circumstances and how much does that matter?

What all of these films and our responses to them have in common is a tendency to jam the moral compass, to jostle us out of our comfort zone as we strive to decide the "rightness" of the representation. Just as I've argued that the documentary teacher must train epistemologists, we are duty bound to make moral philosophers of our students as well. Emanuel Levinas and others have written weighty tomes that help us comprehend and come to grips with the obligations self owes other. These books are demanding reads and require a background in the history of ideas. The documentary films we show our students do not demand this knowledge, yet they are invaluable training grounds for the exercise of moral judgment. The ethical stakes are high for non-fiction, far beyond those of fiction, according to the argument, because these documentary representations entail human subjects and, potentially, life-changing consequences. As we struggle to decide where we stand and test our responses to these films, we ready ourselves for making the difficult choices life demands.

The goal of our teaching in matters of ethical judgment should not be to offer definitive answers so much as to offer occasions for testing our moral reflexes. If we share Bruner's sense that flexibility and resilience are the best aids to survival and full citizenship for our students, we would do well to accord the ethical domain a privileged place in our teaching.

Conclusions

I have, in these few pages, attempted to put our collective efforts as documentary pedagogues in apprenticeship and on trial in the belief that a proposal of goals for our teaching can help promote a continuing dialogue around best practices. If you share my sense of the importance that the teaching of documentary can have for students and for the broader public, I hope you will join me in what I take to be a vital and continuing conversation.

Bibliografia

- BRUNER, J. S. *Search of pedagogy II: the selected works of Jerome S. Bruner*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- _____. *The culture of education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- FELDMAN, S. “‘Cinema Weekly’ and ‘Cinema Truth’: Dziga Vertov and the Leninist Proportion”. In: WAUGH, T (Ed.). *Show us life: toward a history and aesthetics of the committed documentary*. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1984.
- GEERTZ, C. *Local knowledge: further essays in interpretive anthropology*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- GRIERSON, J. “Films and the community”. In: HARDY, F. (Ed.). *Grierson on documentary*. Berkeley: University of California, 1966.
- _____. “First principles of documentary”. In: HARDY, F. (Ed.). *Grierson on documentary*. Berkeley: University of California, 1966.
- _____. “Propaganda and education”. In: HARDY, F. (Ed.). *Grierson on documentary*. Berkeley: University of California, 1966.
- LEYDA, J. *Kino: a history of the russian and soviet film*. New York: Collier Books, 1960.
- NICHOLS, B. *Representing reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- RENOV, M. “Toward a poetics of documentary”. In: RENOV, M. (Ed.). *Theorizing documentary*. New York: Routledge, 1993.