

Review Essay

Documentary America: Exploring Popular Culture

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DOCUMENTING OURSELVES: Film, Video, and Culture. By Sharon R. Sherman. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. 1998.

HOLLYWOOD'S INDIAN: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film. Edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. 1998.

DISASTER AND MEMORY: Celebrity Culture and the Crisis of Hollywood Cinema. By Wheeler Winston Dixon. New York: Columbia University Press. 1999.

Documentary today influences and structures the way we think about and envision current events and history. The proliferation of documentary, of course, stems in part from its importance to television as specials, docudramas, and public broadcasting endeavors such as Ken Burns' *The Civil War* (1989). Also, documentary films such as Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989) achieve critical and commercial success. Yet, while documentary for information and entertainment grows in popularity and authority, its relation to film as an art and to culture studies remains generally misunderstood and neglected. Thus, documentary requires further study to explain its place in our culture.

Besides the cost efficiency of documentary as compared to commercial films, the power and popularity of documentary also derive from the conventional belief in its special relationship to reality. In her important new book, *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video, and Culture*, Sharon R. Sherman uses a familiar but descriptive label to identify this idea of documentary realism as a ““slice of life”” (10). For many, documentary provides a visual and aural piece of actual experience, rendering that experience with an immediacy to reality that obviates the mediation of written texts and artistic forms. In its comprehensive thoroughness, analytical depth, and strong interdisciplinary breadth, Sherman’s work participates in an emerging scholarly and critical reconsideration of this definition and understanding of documentary as well as the reexamination of documentary’s influence upon culture studies. Although the book reflects Sherman’s focus on folklore throughout her distinguished career as a scholar and filmmaker, folklore here becomes the vehicle for the articulate exploration of a broad range of questions and issues about documentary as both an instrument for empirical research and as a critical subject. In this case, folklore provides texture and character to a book that will be useful to those working in any field or discipline involved in associating documentary and culture studies.

As sometimes happens with hybrid forms, the actual origins, conditions of conception, and even the parentage of documentary remain somewhat ambiguous. Generations of film scholars and critics have deemed documentary a special film form to be considered quite distinct from films of fiction or the imagination. According to this position, documentary emerged as a distinctive form in the early 1920s, at least two decades after the beginning of film, even though the Lumiere brothers’ 1894 film of workers leaving a Paris factory arguably contains elements of filmed documentary. The conventional view places the origins in the seminal films of Robert Flaherty, especially his film of Eskimo life, *Nanook of the North* (1922), to be followed by his work on Polynesians, *Moana* (1926). *Moana* prompted the coinage of the word “documentary” in a review by John Grierson, who soon matured into the great innovator of British social documentary in the 1930s. Sherman writes, “From that time on, *documentary* has been a firmly established term” (5). In addition to Grierson’s British School of documentary realism as a founding influence, the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov contrived a “cameraeye” theory of documentary that sought a reality beyond the possibilities of the human eye in his *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1928). Vertov’s active, participatory camera of “kino-eye” became the Russian school of *kino-pravda*, which in turn led to the *cinema verite* of Jean Rouch.

Sherman synthesizes the history and evolution of documentary with critical film theory and the practice of filmmakers and folklorists. Her intimate working knowledge of ethnographic film and the ethnodocumentary provides a solid factual basis for *Documenting Ourselves* that at times makes the book into a directory and guide to the field. This bridge connecting individual practice and production with theory and history helps structure one of the book’s most

interesting discoveries of the merger of the inner recesses of personal identity and selfhood with the search for the objective documentation of reality. Documenting the other, the alien, the unknown culture foreign to one's own milieu turns out to be an internal documentary of the self and of the individuals' culture and experience. This dual movement described in the book of inner and outer searches suggests the deepening complexity of critical views of documentary that go beyond earlier assumptions of documentary's putative historical roots in immediate reportage. She writes:

Film is always a construction. Film "truth," whether it be cinema verite, *kino-pravda*, or observational cinema, is a misnomer because film is never objective. Even the placing of the camera for a film consisting of a single "take" (uninterrupted shot) is a manipulation. The camera reflects the filmmaker's view. Most filmmakers believe, however, that their manipulation creates a "greater truth," what Flaherty's wife, Frances, called "that high moment of seeing, that flash of penetration into the heart of the matter." (207)

Sherman's own quite original contribution to understanding the documentary form gains much from Bill Nichols' delineation of five modes, updated from a previous four, for structuring the representation of reality in documentary film. For sure, Nichols' systematic study helps define the whole contemporary discussion about the nature of documentary as a film form and as a force in contemporary culture.¹ Any one wishing to better understand the complexity and potential of documentary also should consider the argument that Gilberto Perez makes in *The Material Ghost* about the inherent connection between documentary and fictional film. Perez says, "Every film has an aspect of documentary and an aspect of film. How, then, can we talk about documentary as a kind of film distinct from fiction?" The inextricable relationship for Perez between fiction and documentary complicates and problematizes the attempt to neatly define and categorize documentary as a pure, factual recording of experience. Fiction film and documentary in Perez' argument exist interdependently. Perez writes:

All films may be documentary and all films may be fictional, but some are more documentary, and some are more fictional, than others. The term *nonfiction film*, though often used, is not to be preferred. Documentary film doesn't mean avoiding fiction, for no film can avoid fiction: it means establishing a certain relationship, a certain interplay, between the documentary and the fictional aspects of film so that the documentary aspect may come forward in some significant way.²

Perez partly explains this mixture of documentary and fictional forms by expanding upon Jean-Luc Godard's early crucial insights into the documentary nature of actors' representations of characters in film. Perez quotes Godard, "Every film is a documentary of its actors."³ Thus, Perez explains that in a fiction film, the camera hesitates to distinguish "between the actors and the characters they play" by concentrating on the "human reality on the screen." He says, "A fiction movie constructs the fiction of characters from the documentary of actors."⁴ In contrast to theater and stage performance, in acting for film all performance becomes a documentary about the performer. He says, "The movie actor of course acts, gives a performance of a character; but the performance shades into a documentary of the actor's own characteristics that also, and often more expressively, portrays the part he or she plays." While theatrical performance becomes "a signifier of drama," in a fiction film, documentary signifies fiction. Perez turns the documentary nature of film performance into a theory of the documentary aspects of film in general. "Documentary in a fiction film, documentary whether of place or of persons, serves as a means for the representation of fiction."⁵ Following Godard's lead, Perez' engagement with the structural, aesthetic, and epistemological paradoxes of film contributes to our understanding of film as both a fictional and documentary art form. In effect, Perez builds upon Sherman's case for all film, including documentary, as a "construction" that never achieves absolute objectivity and always requires human and artistic intervention.

It would seem necessary then to reconsider the origins of documentary as a form if not a term. Perez' argument would indicate that just as they cannot be separated in practice and life, film and documentary should not be separated at birth. To argue that documentary emerged years after the appearance of history's first films, perpetuates a confusion about the inherently documentary nature of film, a confusion that vitiates the diversity and heterogeneity of film as an art and cultural form. Definitions and studies of documentary should incorporate the awareness of its inevitable involvement with fiction. Clarity and coherence about the intrinsic intertwining of documentary and fictional film should enrich film studies as both a subject and method of analysis.

A comment by the distinguished historian and ethnographic scholar Wilcomb E. Washburn dramatizes in very specific terms the cultural and methodological necessity for understanding documentary's complexity as an aesthetic form and as a tool for cultural studies. Washburn's appreciation for the paradoxes involved in the relationship of documentary to fiction comes in the forward to an important new collection about Hollywood's treatment of Native Americans. Writing in *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, Washburn says,

The viewer of imaginative re-creations of the Indian-white past may be better off than the viewer of documentary films, or

“docudramas,” that have assumed a growing importance. . . . Viewers of films claiming the authority of a documentary or docudrama, such as *Annie Mae—Brave Hearted Woman* (about an activist killed during the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee) . . . too often assume the historical reality of the representation no matter how ideologically distorted or historically unsupported it may be. Better than the many contemporary, politically tinged documentaries is a clearly imaginative film such as *Powwow Highway*. (x)

More important here than any potential disagreement with Washburn’s opinion or judgement is his somewhat intuitive bridging of aesthetic, historical, and ideological categories in perceiving the multiple complexities of documentary’s relationship to fiction, history, and culture. The frustration and alarm in Washburn’s tone convey the internalization within this eminent scholar of the issues we have been discussing. For him, documentary and fiction have changed their customary places, so that truth and reality can be found more readily in so-called imaginative works. This view confirms Perez’ theory of the interconnection of fiction and documentary by testing it on an important subject and body of work, popular culture representations on film of Native Americans. For Washburn the discussion about documentary and Native Americans goes beyond a discourse on aesthetics and the nature of truth. His deeply-held and considered opinions suggest the high stakes for all involved in documentary productions of Native American history and culture—historians, producers and filmmakers, and especially Native American communities themselves. Documentary, as Washburn suggests, influences and reflects historical judgement with potentially important political, economic, and social consequences to the lives of real people, in this case, Native Americans. Questions for Native Americans of personal and collective identity, economic opportunity, civil rights, and education relate in part to their treatment in the media. Thus, Native Americans as individuals and distinct peoples continue to have much at stake in how film treats their past history and present lives.

Edited by two accomplished scholars of film and culture studies, Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor, *Hollywood’s Indian* initiates a much-needed program for updating critical and historical views of decades of Hollywood’s general misrepresentation of Native Americans through stereotypical images, symbols, and characterizations. Building on earlier studies, *Hollywood’s Indian* provides perspectives from current scholars over a broad range of films and subjects. Fortunately, Washburn’s admonition about the complex interaction between film and documentary sets the tone for the book. Again the lesson recurs of establishing a coherent organization of interrelationships between documentary and fiction in film, an argument somewhat redolent of Henry Nash Smith’s efforts in the early days of modern American Studies to balance opportunistically

art and social science. For Smith, literary works could be considered “nondocumentary guides” to a culture and historical period, meaning, I think, imaginative explorations of real society and life situations, implying thereby a literary application of Perez’ on-going dialogue and exchange between fiction and documentary.⁶

To great success, the dozen essays in this collection, following an excellent critical and historical overview by the editors, adopt variations of this methodology of balancing documentary and fiction to study and analyze the meanings of Hollywood’s representations of Native Americans. By and large, the essays exemplify how intense empirical research and rigorous critical standards of analysis fulfill the potential of popular culture studies to help, in Sherman’s phrase, “document ourselves.” In the opening essay of the collection, Ted Jojola of New Mexico offers his own survey of the history of Native Americans on film and maintains the creation of an “absurd reality” in the projection in these films of images of Native Americans that reflect white values and attitudes. John E. O’Connor in “The White Man’s Indian” analyzes how the three production factors of drama, commerce, and politics play into the development of Indians on the screen as extensions of white concerns. Hannu Salmi in “The Indian of the North” compares Western traditions to the situation and representation of Finnish Indians. Pauline Turner Strong argues that Hollywood continues “Playing Indian in the Nineties” by shaping popular notions about Native Americans in 1995 in *Pocahontas* and *The Indian in the Cupboard*. Examining an earlier period of film, Ken Nolley’s “The Representation of Conquest” concentrates on John Ford’s work to chastise Hollywood in general for failing to appreciate the diversity of Native American cultures. Further work by Nolley on this subject should consider a recent essay by Arthur M. Eckstein on Ford’s conscience-ridden efforts in *The Searchers* (1956) to compensate for decades of his own denigration of Indians.⁷

A major contribution of *Hollywood’s Indian* to Native American and popular culture studies concerns the renewed attention throughout the collection to forgotten or neglected films that convey invaluable insight into attitudes about Native Americans as well as other minorities. For example, *Broken Arrow* (1950) gains recognition in several essays for its importance as an index to ambiguities and contradictions in American culture about race. Thus, Frank Manchel in “Cultural Confusion” concentrates his critical and historical attention on this particular film, *Broken Arrow*, as the epitome of “cultural confusion” about Native Americans in Hollywood film. Studying other films, James A. Sandos and Larry E. Burgess carefully discuss “The Hollywood Indian versus Native Americans” as seen in *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (1969), while Margo Kasdan and Susan Tavernetti interpret *Little Big Man* (1970) in “Native Americans in a Revisionist Western.” Eric Gary Anderson’s “Driving the Red Road” gives serious critical attention to *Powwow Highway* (1989) as an important portrayal of contemporary Native American life that contrasts with usual Hollywood patterns. Looking back to the era of silent film, Michael J. Riley in “Trapped in

the History of Film,” studies racial conflict in the neglected classic, *The Vanishing American* (1925). He concludes:

Thus Native America is an ongoing reinvention, perhaps one of mass media’s most enduring and fanciful creations. In the end, the many faces of Native America, as mediated identities, must be understood in terms of the times and circumstances, as well as the motivations, of those who are representing the past.
(70)

Seeing another significant departure from Hollywood’s usual portrayal of Native Americans, Robert Baird in “Going Indian,” gives a close reading of *Dances With Wolves* (1990) that emphasizes changes in various edited versions of the film. Baird believes the Kevin Costner film could be a more “radical inversion of the Western” (166) if he had retained “one moment of unbridgeable cultural difference” (165) when the white hero recognizes the joy of the Sioux over their destruction of white buffalo hunters.

Jeffrey Walker writes one of the collection’s most provocative essays in his conceptually-consistent castigation of Michael Mann’s 1992 film version of James Fenimore Cooper’s classic novel *The Last of the Mohicans*. In “deconstructing an American Myth,” Walker works out of an interdisciplinary methodology that synthesizes history, literature, and cultural studies. This intellectually-rich blend becomes even more interesting with Walker’s incorporation of solid film history and theory as well as an appreciation for the difficulties involved in translating a novel into film. These resources form Walker’s arsenal for an assault against Mann’s film. He takes strong exception to Mann’s profound violations of the Cooper novel, while also noting differences with earlier film versions. Many will recall Mann’s most egregious changes of switching the roles of the Munro sisters, Cora (Madeleine Stowe) and Alice (Jodhi May); transforming Hawkeye (Daniel Day-Lewis) into a romantic hero; inventing a romance between Cora and Hawkeye. Arguing as a literary purist and Cooper apologist, Walker nevertheless might lighten up a bit and take both Mark Twain’s famous humorous attack on Cooper as well as Cooper himself less seriously. To those of us who find Mann’s film to be a powerful achievement of modern filmmaking in which all the elements of film cohere, Walker fails to see the cinematic forest for the specificity of the literary trees. In other words, Mann made a film as its own work of art not a filming of a book. Working assiduously to achieve historical accuracy and cultural dynamism, Mann, to some viewers at least, evokes the most profound and lasting elements of Cooper’s tale, especially as interpreted over history by such people as D. H. Lawrence, Henry Nash Smith, and Richard Slotkin—violence, the transformative powers of the landscape, cultural exchange between whites and Native Americans, the Puritan mission in the wilderness, the shaping of a unique colonial and national character and culture

through the interaction of ideology, experience, and environment.⁸ Rather than berating Mann for straying from the Cooper text, Walker should work from his area of genuine brilliance of relating historical and cultural contexts to the aesthetic and cultural meanings of film production, as when he describes Cooper's real interest in Native Americans, including their plight during the dreadful Federal Indian Removal Policy (178). Even when representing Cooper, fiction film should not be compelled to become a form of documentary that must adhere rigidly to primary literary sources.

Walker's grievances over Mann's promiscuous liberties with Cooper's text to make a popular film are subdued when compared to Wheeler Winston Dixon's rage in *Disaster and Memory: Celebrity Culture and the Crisis of Hollywood Cinema* against popular American culture in all its manifestations. With rhetorical flourishes that are reminiscent of the blanket vituperation of the old New Left, Dixon unleashes a jeremiad of condemnation against what he terms "Dominant cinema." Dixon's "Dominant cinema" serves as a metaphor comparable to Herbert Marcuse's "one-dimensional society" to describe what he perceives as an all-inclusive cultural and ideological "consensus" of racism, sexism, and economic exploitation.⁹ He writes, "The world of the Dominant cinema has become our new sacred domain" (33). He argues that Hollywood inevitably marginalizes any variations from a singular pattern for all films designed for mass consumption.

Simply put, much of the attention in film studies, and thus in exhibition/production/distribution, centers around traditional Hollywood filmmaking, which encodes in its imagistic and narrative structures rigid concepts of class, race, gender, and iconic standardization that narrate one potential story (that of the usually white, male, middleclass protagonists) over the stories of any other characters (men and women of color, in particular). (100)

To help explain this phenomenon of a universal and omniscient cultural force, Dixon refers to Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's *Seeing Films Politically*.¹⁰ In contrast to Dixon, however, Zavarzadeh, who shares Dixon's critical view of mainstream American culture, articulates a complex and coherent conceptualization of the dialogue and conflict in the culture between hegemonic and alternative forces and voices. The absence of such a fully-conceptualized theory diminishes some of the important work in this book, such as Dixon's revelatory discussions of neglected Hollywood figures Ida Lupino and Richard Carlson who managed to break the Hollywood mold as directors. Maintaining a strident proclamation of Hollywood as the epitomization of the mental and emotional strait jacket of American life and thought, Dixon should provide greater insight into the varieties of repression and coercion by the dominant culture that occur even within his own argument.

Without such analysis, voices and figures of difference such as Lupino seem like mere aberrations who somehow managed to escape the totalistic determinism of Hollywood rather than being complex representations of the structure and nature of the system as a whole.

Perhaps with some naivete, it seems possible to be sympathetic to Dixon's concerns about the conformity and corruption of much of media culture, while also acknowledging and nurturing potential sources of redemption. Even Dixon's own brilliantly original and cogent discussion of the horrific death of Princess Diana suggests one such source. Dixon's analysis of this episode represents the commitment of much recent work in film and media culture studies to resist the proclivity toward mindless sterility and conformity in mass media. Similarly, the revivification of documentary as an art form for critical analysis, a force for cultural investigation, and a means for intensifying cultural consciousness at least opens an avenue from which to advocate, initiate, and move toward reform and renewal.

Notes

1. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington, 1991) proposes the following four modes of documentary: expository makes an argument or case, observational emphasizes individual immediacy, interactive involves the filmmaker and camera in the action, the reflexive includes self-consciousness about the process. In *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), Nichols adds a fifth mode, the performative that emphasizes expression and the personal.

2. Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium* (Baltimore and London, 1998), p. 43.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 343.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, p. 345.

6. See Henry Nash Smith, "The American Scholar Today" in "*The American Scholar*" Today: *Emerson's Essay and Some Critical Views*, ed. C. David Mead (New York, 1970), p. 74.

7. See Arthur M. Eckstein, "Darkening Ethan: John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) from Novel to Screenplay to Screen," *Cinema Journal* 38:1 (Fall 1998): 3-24.

8. See Joel Engel, "A Fort, a War and the Last Thousand or So Mohicans," *The Sunday New York Times*, Arts & Leisure, 20 September 1992, pp. 9, 12; Janet Maslin, "Cooper's Hawkeye as Swashbuckler," *The New York Times*, 25 September 1992, B2. See also D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; rpt. Garden City, 1951); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950; rpt. Cambridge, 1973); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, 1973).

9. See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, 1964).

10. See Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, *Seeing Films Politically* (Albany, 1991).