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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction by Patricia Aufderheide;
The Politics of Documentary by Michael Chanan

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Source: *Cinéaste*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (WINTER 2008), pp. 79-81

Published by: Cineaste Publishers, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41690747>

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Finally, there are several errors of fact. It was the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, not Values; the Tenney-chaired un-American activities committee in California was a joint, not a senate, committee; the Conference of Studio Unions was formed in 1941, not 1937; the New Deal was not modeled on the economic theories of John Maynard Keynes; Jennifer Jones was the wife of David O. Selznick, not Darryl F. Zanuck; the Committee on Un-American Activities did not “single out” politically liberal filmmakers who had been making social-problem films in the realist tradition; *Crossfire*, (RKO, 1947), not *Gentleman’s Agreement* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1947), was the first Hollywood film to openly and extensively confront American anti-Semitism; the Writers Guild of America did not supersede the Screen Writers Guild until 1954.

In sum, this is an interesting book for those readers who are comfortable with postmodernist terminology and who also believe that five films can accurately reflect a decade’s worth of historical, political, economic, social, and industrial tensions.—

Larry Ceplair

Documentary Film:

A Very Short Introduction

by Patricia Aufderheide. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 158 pp. Paperback: \$9.95.

The Politics of Documentary

by Michael Chanan. London: British Film Institute (Distributed in the U.S. by Palgrave Macmillan), 2007. 280 pp. Hardcover: \$85.00 and Paperback: \$14.95.

Although documentaries have become increasingly profitable in the past decade, Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which won the Palme d’Or at Cannes in 2004 and went on to gross \$119 million at the domestic box office alone, surprised even the most optimistic critics. *March of the Penguins* (Luc Jacquet, 2005) and *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006) followed in its footsteps, turning nonfiction cinema into a hot property at the multiplex.

At the same time, with the availability of digital technologies, making and distributing documentaries have seemingly become accessible to everyone. The slapdash style and hand-held esthetics of Myrick and Sánchez’s 1999 *The Blair Witch Project*, coupled with the popularity of nonfiction film- and video-makers appearing as engaging and engaged characters nudging, judging, and joking in their own works, have trans-

formed many home movies into “documentaries.” Shot on affordable video cameras or on cell phones, edited on home computers, and distributed on DVDs or on social networking sites and video sharing web sites, documentaries seem cool to make and share.

The explosion of do-it-yourself as well as feature-length theatrically released documentaries has been paralleled by a relative increase of scholarly works on the subject. A quick search for “documentary film” on Scholar Google results in 4,000 hits just since 2005. Two of the most recent books are Patricia Aufderheide’s *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* and Michael Chanan’s *The Politics of Documentary*.

Aufderheide, who has worked as a cultural journalist and film critic for a number of publications, is a Professor in the School of Communication at American University, in Washington, D.C., and Chanan, Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of the West of England, is an independent documentary filmmaker. Both authors frequently draw on their experience in their analyses. Chanan, in particular, is a palpable presence in his book.

Aufderheide’s *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* is meant to be accessible to general readers, college students, and scholars in adjacent fields—the nonspecialist. One of nearly two hundred books in Oxford University Press’s Very Short Introductions, the length and form of the text is constrained by the elegantly slim format of the series.

The book is divided into two main sections. “Defining the Documentary” provides a discussion of the name, the form, and the defining moments of documentary’s development. “Subgenres” introduces different types of documentary. The chapter on each subgenre (public affairs, government propaganda, advocacy, historical, ethnographic, and nature) includes a historical survey and a description of the conventions, integrity, and legacy of each type of documentary. There is also a short conclusion that reviews the literature on the subject and points to future possibilities. To read this book is to encounter a comprehensive survey of some of the most important concepts relating to documentary films and videos internationally.

But does it work as an introductory text? Is it organized in a manner that provokes productive thought on the “lively, often fierce debates” that the cover copy claims are part of documentary filmmaking and scholarship? And does it give readers enough information to stimulate them to want more? This, of course, is not an easy task. The centrifugal force generated by the necessity to be comprehensive can level nuances and exceptions. Aufderheide, however, manages to bring together an expansive and exciting variety of works to illustrate the complex nature of documentary’s representation of reality. This book is not superficial.

Nevertheless, with so much ground to

cover, *A Very Short Introduction* sometimes tapers off into a catalog of historical highlights. Devoting nearly a quarter of the book to founding moments—Robert Flaherty, John Grierson, Dziga Vertov, and *cinéma vérité*—Aufderheide fulfills Oxford’s marketing promise to provide an evolution of the subject and its development. She uses Flaherty, Grierson, and Vertov to talk further about realism, romanticism, formalism and social purpose. She uses *cinéma vérité* as an umbrella term to discuss a variety of post-WWII filmmaking: direct cinema, *cinéma vérité*, and observational cinema, not only as a mode of filmmaking that uses lighter, 16mm, synch-sound equipment, but also as an attitude toward authority. But the section slowly approaches an inventory of “filmmakers worldwide [who] seized upon the fly-on-the-wall” approach.

Fortunately, just as things begin to sag, controversy comes to the rescue. As Aufderheide describes the disagreements over the ethics, effectiveness, and truthfulness of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema, the book again rises to embrace its potential. Filmmakers defend their films and their actions, and accuse each other of being journalistic, lacking creativity, and mystifying their roles and the filmmaking process. Once again Aufderheide brings to the fore the dynamic tension between representation and reality.

Because of the restrictions of such a short study, or, perhaps, because of Aufderheide’s background as a journalist, we sometimes get more description than detailed examination. Take, for example, *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis, 1974). She depicts it as “a pointed, heartbreaking document showing what Davis believed was the betrayal of fundamental U.S. beliefs and ideals in the Vietnam War... an expression of grief and rage.” If you want to learn something about the film, this is a first-rate account. But how *Hearts and Minds* tells its story and how Davis conveys his beliefs about the U.S.’s betrayal are not explained.

While it might be good to acknowledge the limitations of what it’s possible to learn about documentaries from this very short introduction, it would be unfair to dwell on these limitations when so much has been included. This is an introduction with immense breadth and scope. There is an extensive bibliography for further reading and a collection of 100 “great documentaries” for further viewing, most of which have been discussed in the book. The “great documentaries” are not only “classics.” They include many from around the world that experiment with form, some of which other scholars might not even view as documentaries.

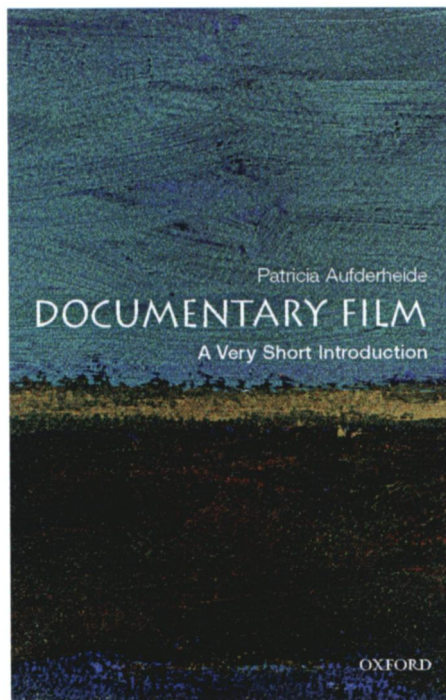
Patricia Aufderheide has written a provocative book. Her questions are honest and rigorous. The paths she clears for herself are amply justified. And it is a measure of her nonchalant erudition that *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* kindles so many diverse ideas.

Chanan's *The Politics of Documentary* does not claim to be an introduction. It's a work of even wider scope and ambition. His *modus operandi* is not simply to come up with a survey of political documentaries, but to demonstrate how and why documentaries are political. Vividly described, extensively and astutely analyzed, this is not a book for the casual viewer. It is, however, a book for the eager student who wants to explore non-fiction films, videos, and theory further.

Politics is Chanan's compass and lens. Politics—focused and supple—steers his inquiry and sensitizes his careful readings of a wide range of documentaries and debates in contemporary theory. Like Aufderheide, Chanan does not believe in an objective reality separate from consciousness. And because of this, documentaries are easily imprinted with ideologies and deployed to political ends. In two cover photos taken from frame enlargements, the subtitles pictured call our attention to the politics of documentary production itself. One has two young scavengers in a Brazilian garbage dump asking the camera, "What do you get outta this holding this thing in our faces?" The other is of Vladimir Nabokov asking Igor Stravinsky, "Don't they bother you with all this equipment?" Who benefits from a documentary? And, no, one cannot observe invisibly. Any production is necessarily an intrusion. These are issues investigated in more depth in the text.

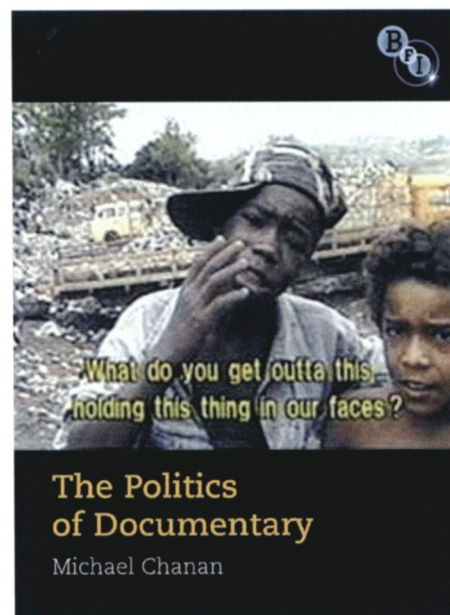
The book is organized in three parts. The first, "Mapping the Field," sets forth the current status of documentary filmmaking, and how it has been experiencing a revival in the last ten years. Unlike Aufderheide, Chanan calls into question the notion of documentary as a "genre." Drawing instead on Ludwig Wittgenstein's model of family resemblances, "how members of a family share their features in various ways, yet none of these features is the single defining characteristic of family resemblances.... [S]imilarities crop up and disappear," Chanan proposes that the documentary "always overflows any definition." This section concludes with a discussion of documentary semiotics, and how much semiotic film theory can be applied to nonfiction filmmaking.

The second part is fittingly titled "Historic Moments," and introduces a detailed history of documentaries, from the actualities of the earliest days to *cinéma-vérité* and direct-cinema productions of the late 1950s and early Sixties. Chapters within this section deal with specific eras, styles, and filmmakers, such as the city symphonies of the 1920s, Soviet montage, Flaherty, Grierson, early sound cinema, and British Free Cinema. These are not straightforward accounts of history, however, as they interweave considerations of ethics, ideology, and film language. The first chapter, "Documentary before Documentary," goes back far and deep enough to raise questions as to what it means to be a "film," and how the produc-



tion of meaning developed in the early years of cinema. The chapter on sound detours at the end for a valuable riff on authorship. Chanan's film history embraces not only artistic and social paradigms, but also technological developments and industrial and institutional factors. He also, helpfully, gives the historical origins of terms that have become so commonplace that we forget they were once invented.

The third section is an account of "Contemporary Themes." Here Chanan brings into the debate non-Western documentaries, specifically Japanese, Iranian, and mostly, Latin American. His previous publications include a book on Cuban cinema, hence it is not surprising that he uses many examples from that country here as well.



One chapter entitled "Living History" deals solely with Latin American documentary in the Seventies, a tumultuous era for the region. Two of the chapters in this section are concerned with "the subject": "The Space of the Subject," deals mainly with biographical and autobiographical documentaries, and "After Vérité," presents a wide-ranging discussion on the author in the text. The final chapter focuses on archives and the role of documentaries as collective memory. Much of the material in this section is recycled from conference papers or previously published articles, sometimes in earlier versions. But it is nice to have so much of Chanan's work collected for the first time.

His frequent reference to contemporary cultural theorists—Henri Lefebvre, Fredric Jameson, Mikhail Bakhtin, Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, Jürgen Habermas, Eric Hobsbawm, and others—may rankle some readers. Indeed, even though it cites them often, the book doesn't really bring anything fresh to this field. It does, however, make a significant intervention in debates on non-fiction film.

It is through his presentation of theoretical disputes and close analyses of documentary texts that Chanan accomplishes this, especially by applying the notion he gets from Jacques Derrida, actually from the film *Derrida* (Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, 2002): the demand "to not assume that what is conditioned by history, technology, institutions, or society is natural." This is one of Derrida's "gestures of deconstruction" and one of Chanan's operational assumptions. When applied to documentary texts and documentary history, it allows Chanan to investigate both the "archiving machines" (Derrida again) and the act of looking. His history, like documentaries themselves, is not so much a reflection of reality as a reflection upon reality, and its agenda is to unmask what might have seemed to be natural. His history, then, is not simply the founders. It is a world history and a broad one including camera operators, the industrialization of electricity in Rio de Janeiro, the hegemonic project of Soviet Communism, the in-house production unit of the Ford Motor Company, as well as documentary production in Mexico during the revolutionary years following the uprising of 1911. Chanan draws upon the research of many scholars in this imaginative recovery of early documentary history.

An examination of his analysis of Jean Vigo's *À propos de Nice* (1930) demonstrates the breadth that he also brings to documentaries themselves. He begins by discussing the film in the context of other city symphonies, and quotes Georges Sadoul's description of it as a "lyrical, violent, and subversive social polemic... full of black humor and biting sarcasm." To capture the contrast between the idlers sprawled on the Promenade des Anglais and the poor of the old town, Vigo pushed his cameraman,

Boris Kaufman, around the Promenade in a wheelchair with a camera concealed in a cardboard box. Chanan goes on to discuss other details of the shooting; the permissions needed and sometimes ignored; the editing; and the theoretical underpinnings of their "montage of associations." Drawing on the work of Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes, he proceeds to give almost a shot-by-shot analysis of the twenty-minute film, not just describing it, but questioning Vigo's sequencing of shots, explaining the transitions, etc. He quotes Vigo's own description of the film at a talk and screening at the "Groupement des Spectateurs d'Avant Garde" in Paris as putting "a way of life" on trial: "These pleasures are the last gasps of a society so lost in its escapism that it sickens you and makes you sympathetic to a revolutionary solution." According to Chanan, "[W]hat Vigo is trying to convey in his speech is something about the documentary that derives its demands for social reality but can only be realized through filmic interpretation."

In passages such as this, Chanan hits his stride with clear and insightful analyses. This is where the assumptions at the conceptual heart of his undertaking are thrown into sharpest focus: a documentary is a discourse that interprets lived reality according to the propensities and predilections of the filmmakers. It is then sent into the public sphere where viewers perceive it according to their social context, and according to their personal preconceptions and desires. Both ends of the process are political.

Or course, there are small faults in his work. But they should not detract from the sweeping power of the book. The persuasive analyses in *The Politics of Documentary* make clear that Michael Chanan is one critic who consistently asks probing questions about the turbulent intersections of nonfiction film, cultural theory, and global politics, and who knows that the answers to them can never lead to reassuring affirmations but rather to new disquieting questions.

If you want to know more about documentaries, these two books will answer many of your questions—and prompt a few more.—**Melis Behlil and Louise Spence**

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Fascinating Film

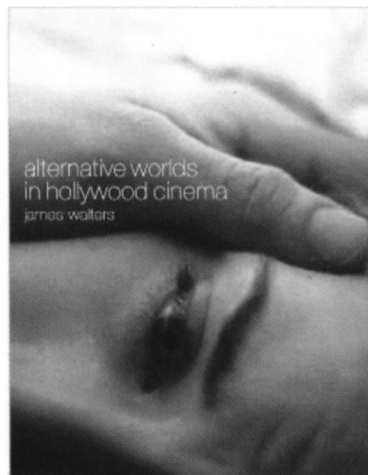
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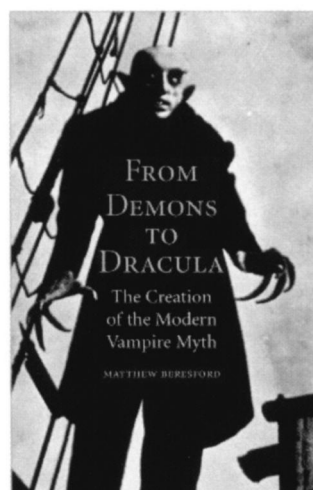


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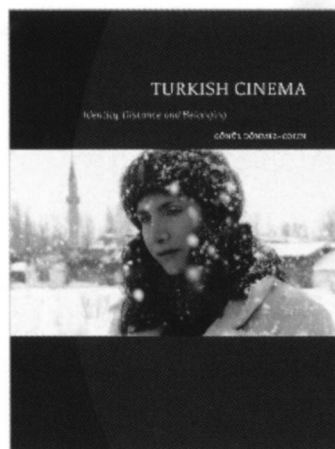


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