14. Documentarist as . . part of a Movement??

Definition(s):

A “Movement”: This final chapter of the Barnouw book begins by noting the growth in documentary work, and how documentarists “were turning into a movement,” that is, filmmakers “met each other at international film festivals, joined in coproductions, and exchanged ideas through film seminars, journals, and a burgeoning film literature. Satellite, computer, and video speeded the cross-fertilization” (p. 297). However, the rest of the chapter is devoted to re-visiting most of the 13 earlier categories of documentarists, and to denoting five “subgenres” (I hate that term!) of historical documentaries.

Key Concepts & Issues:

“Global Symphony” documentaries (Not in Barnouw)—an apparent combination of Explorer, Painter, and Chronicler functions, these films were popular in the 1980s and 1990s; they have had a strong impact on IMAX and OMNIMAX films

“Point of View” Documentaries—presenting a very personal vision, e.g., *Ethnic Notions* (1986) and *Tongues Untied* (1989) by Marlon Riggs

The “Historic Chronicle Documentary”—a growing derivation of the Chronicler documentary—see Type #9 below

The “Documentary Blockbuster”—beginning with Michael Moore’s *Roger and Me* (1989), documentaries might now play at multiplexes

The role of Film Festivals in promoting documentaries, and making them international “Objectivity”?—Barnouw ultimately concludes that there’s really no such thing in filmmaking; “documentarists make endless choices”; “one can hardly imagine a documentary, or a film, or any kind of communication, that is not propaganda—in the sense of trying to present evidence that may enlarge understanding and change ideas”; “a more potent and persuasive form of propaganda is popular fiction”; and finally, “unlike the fiction artist, they [documentarists] are dedicated to not inventing”.

Key Documentarists/Documentary Types—Barnouw revisits most of the documentary types explored in previous handouts:

**Type 2. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-explorer (#2)**

More work in outer space, undersea, photomicrography, within the human body

- e.g., BBC-TV’s *Everyday Miracle: Birth* (1981)
- e.g., BBC/Discovery Channel’s *Planet Earth* (2007)
- e.g., “Global Symphony” films (Not in Barnouw)—Godfrey Reggio’s *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance* (1982); *Powaqqatsi: Life in Transformation* (1988); Ron Fricke’s *Baraka* (1992); These films clearly also have strong elements of Painter (like the City Symphonies) and Chronicler

**Type 3. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-reporter (#3)**

Barnouw chooses to focus on documentary examinations of Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, with a “cold war” interpretation of how
information was restricted; Barnouw chooses not to provide a focus on the growing presence and audience dependence on cable networks such as CNN, C-SPAN, the History Channel, etc.

Type 4. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-painter
e.g., Hilary Harris’ *Organism* (1975)
e.g., Nam June Paik’s *Kennedy/Olympic* (1981)

Type 5. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-advocate
Here, Barnouw focuses on films about atomic power and atomic weaponry, and the early relationship between the two applications
 e.g., the Atomic Energy Commission’s *Go Fission* (1969)
e.g., Columbia University’s *Hiroshima-Nagasaki, August 1945* (1970)
e.g., John Else of KTEH-TV, San Jose’s *The Day After Trinity: Robert J. Oppenheimer and the Atomic Bomb* (1980)

Type 7. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-prosecutor
e.g., Robert Stone’s *Radio Bikini* (1988)
Barnouw adds Satire to the mix—e.g., the Archives Project’s *The Atomic Cafe* (1982), which like Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series, uses existing footage in which the sources’ own words backfire

Type 9. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-chronicler
Barnouw identifies an expansion into the:

*“Historic Chronicle Documentary,”* with five “subgenres”:
1. The omnipresent exposition, characterized by instant mobility of a host
   e.g., BBC’s series *Civilization* (1970), featuring art historian Kenneth Clark
   e.g., U.S.-British co-production of the series *Cosmos* (1980), featuring Carl Sagan
2. The archival compilation film or series
   With the failure of theatrical newsreel companies, footage collections came up for sale, lease, and free use; unlike earlier compilation films, the new wave tended to combine historic footage with testimony by surviving participants (multiple witnesses)
   e.g., American TV series *Eyes on the Prize* (1980)
   e.g., U.S./British/French collaboration *Vietnam: A Television History* (1983)
3. The biography
   This had been a popular genre in literature for centuries, yet didn’t become common in documentaries until quite late (c. 1960s)
   e.g., Kevin Brownlow’s many long-form productions, mainly for Thames Television in Britain—Abel Gance: *The Charm of Dynamite* (1968); *Hollywood: A Celebration of the American Silent Film* (1980); The Unknown Chaplin (1982); Buster Keaton: *A Hard Act to Follow* (1987); *D. W. Griffith: Father of Film* (1993)
4. The really long compilation of witness narrations (The “Shoah” documentary)
Barnouw doesn’t give this type a real name, so we might call it after its principal exemplar--
e.g., *Shoah* (1986) by Israeli filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, is an oral history collection

5. The Ken Burns documentary
This actually seems to be what Barnouw is calling it!
e.g., *The Civil War* (9 episodes, 1990); *Baseball* (9 episodes, 1994); *Jazz* (10 episodes, 2001); *The War* (7 episodes, 2007); *The National Parks* (6 episodes, 2009)
The Ken Burns documentary is characterized by:
a. Photo animation—still photos are panned and zoomed into, etc., to give a sense of motion (note that even “static” shots of these photos have a little “handheld” type motion!)
b. Authentic testimony is acted by professional voices, often celebrities (e.g., Morgan Freeman, John Lithgow, Tom Hanks)
c. Contemporary footage of historic locations (e.g., battlefields) is shot in color, and in the proper time of year
d. Linkage is provided by a quiet, sparse voiceover (e.g., David McCullough for *The Civil War*; Peter Coyote for *The National Parks*)
e. Linkage is also provided by authentic music and a “mosaic” of appropriate sounds

Type 10. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-promoter
Now Barnouw seems to categorize commercials as documentaries!

Type 11. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-observer (Direct Cinema)
e.g., The films of Les Blank, e.g., *Garlic is as Good as Ten Mothers* (1980); *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe* (1980); *In Heaven There is No Beer* (1984); *Gap-Toothed Women* (1987)
e.g., Combining Direct Cinema style with Advocate sensibilities—Barbara Kopple’s *Harlan County USA* (1976) and *American Dream* (1990)
e.g., Combining Direct Cinema sequences with first person narrative—Ross McElwee’s *Sherman’s March* (1986)

Type 13. Revisiting the Documentarist-as-guerrilla
Barnouw notes the importance of home video as a method of bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (Barnouw writes in a pre-Internet, pre-Vlog world!)
e.g., Combining Guerrilla intent with Cinema Verite (type 12) techniques—Michael Moore’s *Roger and Me* (1989)