7. Documentarist as . . . Prosecutor

Definition(s):
Prosecuting (with film)—an active process of collecting and using film footage for the purpose of convicting someone of a crime

Key Concepts & Issues:
Documentary footage as evidence, including at war-crimes trials! Filmmakers from Yugoslavia, Poland, etc., as they closed in on Germany near the end of WWII, concentrated on documenting war crimes. Others used archival and captured footage.

Key Documentarists:
Andrew and Annelie Thorndike
Epitomized the documentarist-as-prosecutor. Andrew, of German-American descent, was born in Berlin, and worked for UFA; sent to the front during WWII, he was a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union; returning in 1948, he resumed documentary work at UFA (now DEFA, the East German state film entity).
As a couple, the Thorndikes specialized in historic compilations that would expose former Nazis in West Germany. Early, they used reconstructed events, but later swore not to use it—archival material was their passion. Their intent was to “document—not illustrate—their accusations.”

Alain Resnais (1922- )
A “Left Bank” French New Wave filmmaker whose later narrative work would include themes of time, memory, and regret. (He directed documentaries for ten years—1948 through 1958—before his break-through narrative film, Hiroshima, Mon Amour (1959).)
His Night and Fog (1955) was groundbreaking—ostensibly a film examining the Nazi concentration camps, it used a quietly reflective, powerful commentary by poet Jean Cayrol and a unique alternation between B&W archival images (almost entirely stills) and new color footage (always tracking) of the now-peaceful camps. This unusual set of techniques was highly effective.