Whatever you think of Michael Moore’s immensely satisfying movie about the awful Bush Administration and its destructive policies—and reasonable people can disagree, of course—one thing that cannot be said about “Fahrenheit 9/11” is that it is an outlaw from the documentary tradition. “The documentary tradition” sounds like a grand phrase for a genre that includes everything from “Nanook of the North” to “Girls Gone Wild.” There’s no doubt that it’s an eclectic form. The “Documentary” section shelves Michael Moore next to National Geographic, movies about bad Presidents next to movies about butterflies, bodybuilders, and Eskimos. These movies do have one thing in common, though: they show you what was not intended for you to see. The essential documentary impulse is the impulse to catch life off camera, to film what was not planned to happen, or what would have happened whether someone was there to film it or not. That’s why people make documentaries, and why people go to see them. It’s a genre founded on a paradox.

The term is as old as the cinema. Documentaire was one of the names that early filmmakers, back when many of the prominent ones were French, gave to movies of ordinary life, exotic places, and current events. The word suggests observational neutrality, a documentation, an unretouched record of what’s real; and if that was the promise it was betrayed almost from the start. The film and television historian Erik Barnouw, in his excellent survey of the documentary, lists a dozen cases from the early years where material was simply faked. Finding that on film Teddy Roosevelt’s charge up San Juan Hill looked more like a hike on a hot day, producers at Vitagraph reënacted the battle of Santiago Bay in miniature on a tabletop and added it to what they had shot in Cuba. The British producer James Williamson filmed the Boer War on a golf course. Thomas Edison made a documentary of the Russo-Japanese War on Long Island. Biograph exhibited a movie called “The Eruption of Mount Vesuvius” made nowhere near Mt. Vesuvius. The Danish mogul Ole Olsen produced a safari documentary by buying a couple of aging lions
from the Copenhagen zoo, moving them to an island, and, inter-cutting stock jungle footage, filming them being killed by hired “hunters.” Audiences didn’t seem to mind.

Those early documentarians were not journalists. They were, by cinematic standards, scarcely even filmmakers. They were businessmen. The first man to charge admission to a movie, the French industrialist Louis Lumière, thought that the cinema was a novelty without a future. He got out of the production business, at which he had been fantastically successful, after two years. That was in 1897. Early documentaries therefore had politics the way that tabloids have politics: they flattered prejudice. They were indistinguishable from propaganda. They were also, like the dramatic films of the time, short. It was after the feature-length film became standard that the documentary acquired its distinctive political cast and became a medium of progressivism.

It’s not surprising that documentary-makers have usually worked in a spirit of advocacy. They are people sufficiently committed to a point of view to go to the trouble of obtaining expensive equipment, carting it into the field, shooting miles of film under often unpleasant or dangerous conditions, and spending months or years splicing the results into a coherent movie. It’s easier to write an editorial. It’s easier, even, to write a book. People who make documentaries don’t make them because they believe that “reasonable people can disagree,” or that there are two sides to every question. They believe that there are, at most, one and a half sides—a right side and a side that, despite possibly having some redeeming aspects, is, on balance, wrong. They make movies because they are passionate about their subjects and they want to arouse passion in others, many others.

These passions may tend to be progressive rather than conservative because progressives are more likely to be the sort of people who feel good about expressing their activism in an artistic medium that requires hardship and teamwork, and that results in a product that has little chance of making anyone rich. It may also have something to do with the nature of documentary itself. A preference for the off-camera is a preference for ordinary life—“the drama of the doorstep,” the legendary Scottish producer John Grierson called it. Ordinary people don’t lose their dignity when they’re caught off camera, because they’re always off camera. It’s on camera, in fact, where most people appear awkward and undignified. But people who are normally seen only on a stage—the powerful and the celebrated—lose a little dignity and authority when they’re shown barking at their secretaries or putting saliva on their combs. The documentary has a built-in bias against officialdom.

The man who made the documentary into an art form was an American, Robert Flaherty. He began shooting film of the Inuit in northern Canada in 1914, but his famous first movie, “Nanook of the North,” did not come out until 1922. It was financed by one French company, Revillon Frères (a fur business), and distributed by another, Pathé, after Paramount and four other studios had turned it down. It was a worldwide hit; in Germany, an ice-cream sandwich was named after the protagonist—a Nanuk. Paramount called back. It ended up producing Flaherty’s next movie, “Moana,” which he made in Samoa and which came out in 1926.

In vérité terms, “Nanook” is largely a fake. “What I want to show is the former majesty and character of these people, while it is still possible—before the white man has destroyed not only their character, but the people as well,” Flaherty wrote in an unpublished memoir. “Former” is the key word. Flaherty arranged, for example, to film a walrus hunt in order to show how indigenous people once gathered food. The Inuit had long since stopped walrus-hunting, and they ended up struggling to drag a harpooned walrus out of the Arctic surf and begging Flaherty to shoot it with his rifle. Flaherty pretended not to hear them and kept filming. Later on, Nanook and his family are shown building an igloo out in the wilderness. It was too dark inside the igloo to film, so a special igloo—in other words, a set—was constructed with one wall removed, and the family was filmed, in daylight, pretending to go to bed. When a shot didn’t work, Flaherty asked his subjects to repeat what they were doing until he was satisfied.

“Nanook” owed its popularity to Flaherty’s decision to tell the story of a family rather than try to document a whole community. The opening scene, in which Nanook’s large family adorably crawls, one by one, out of an impossibly tiny kayak, is the perfect audience hook. Flaherty used the same strategy in later films, but he often cast the members of his screen “family” himself. And, as he had with the walrus hunt, he persuaded his subjects to reënact abandoned traditions. In Samoa, it was the practice of tattooing; in “Man of Aran,” made in the Aran Islands, off Ireland, in 1934, it was a shark hunt. He had to bring in an expert to teach the locals how to do it. Flaherty staged the unstaged.

Flaherty inspired many filmmakers. Some made movies in the anthropological spirit of “Nanook” and “Moana,” and some, like Grierson, turned to modern life, but with similar ennobling intentions. Grierson’s only directorial
effort, made in 1929, is a piece of industrial poetry called “Drifters,” about North Sea herring fishermen. “Fishermen still have their homes in the old-time villages—but they go down, for each season, to the labour of a modern industry,” reads a typical intertitle, and this strikes the exact progressive note: traditional folkways encountering the global economy in the figure of the heroic worker. This is the spirit of a lot of the movies that Grierson went on to produce as the head of the Empire Marketing Film Unit, in Britain, and, later, of the National Film Board of Canada. Those movies don’t represent the purest progressivism in the documentary tradition, though. That distinction belongs to the brilliant Soviet documentaries of Dziga Vertov—movies with titles like “Stride, Soviet!,” “One Sixth of the World,” and “Three Songs of Lenin.”

The toxic antibody in the tradition, of course, is Leni Riefenstahl, who died last year, at the age of a hundred and one. “Triumph of the Will,” filmed at the 1934 Nazi Party rally, was released in 1935. In most respects, it represents a complete inversion of what the documentary since Flaherty had been all about. It doesn’t try to speak truth to power; it tries to speak the truth of power. Riefenstahl’s camera is in love with the stage. There is no sense of a reality beyond the frame. There isn’t even any sense of a frame, outside which something else might exist. Still, for everyone who watches it today, “Triumph of the Will” has the essential documentary fascination: you feel that you are seeing things you were not intended to see. It is a weird case of propaganda, over time, turning into something like an exposé.

The notion of the documentary as a plotless, commentary-less, vérité-style record of life as it is—the notion of the documentarian as a fly on the wall—was born in the nineteen-fifties. Lighter and more mobile cameras were less obtrusive, more suited to capturing subjects “off camera.” High-speed film opened up interior spaces. But the fresh variable was sound. In the late nineteen-fifties, the American filmmaker Robert Drew helped to perfect synchronized sound shooting. He also understood the key to creating the kind of documentary that the new equipment made possible: access. You get in the door, and then you just hang around until people forget you’re there.

In Britain, this method was associated with a movement known as Free Cinema; in the United States, it was called “direct cinema.” Drew went on to make a series of remarkable inside-look documentaries, including “Primary,” about the 1960 Wisconsin primary, and “Crisis,” about the forced integration of the University of Alabama, in 1963—two of the best records of the Kennedys on the job. His group, Drew Associates, gave a start to filmmakers like D. A. Pennebaker and Albert and David Maysles.

The Mozart of the form is Frederick Wiseman. His first documentary, “Titicut Follies,” of 1967, an exposé about the Bridgewater State Hospital, in Massachusetts, shows scenes that do not require comment—and, of course, there is no comment in a Wiseman film. Wiseman must have felt that even the title was an editorial intrusion (it refers to a song-and-dance revue performed by some of the inmates), for his subsequent titles are neutral to the point of petulance: “High School,” “Hospital,” “Juvenile Court,” and so on. Wiseman does not operate the camera when he films; he operates the sound system, and the sound is the bravura element. The movies do not just show what was not intended for you to see; they let you listen to what was not intended for you to hear. Wiseman is a voyeur of the ear.

Not surprisingly in the case of a filmmaker who goes to such lengths to suppress editorializing, editorializing is the central issue in Wiseman’s work. His own position is subtle. He refers to his movies as “reality fictions,” and although he edits in extremely long takes, which give an impression of inclusiveness, he insists that the results correspond to nothing in real life. “All the material is manipulated so that the final film is totally fictional in form although it is based on real events,” he has said. There is (as many people have guessed, anyway) a theme in Wiseman’s work: it is about dehumanization, about what happens to individuals when they get caught in a system. But is Wiseman showing you this, or is he telling you this? Part of the experience of watching his movies—not just “Titicut Follies,” where the point is blunt enough, but, for example, “The Store,” about the Neiman-Marcus department store in Dallas, which demands a lot of viewer input—is asking yourself: Why these scenes, where nothing much seems to be happening, and not other scenes, where something might actually be happening? And then: What about those other scenes? Could they open onto a different side of the story? Wiseman’s point, in talking about his movies as fictions, seems to be that these are questions that people always should be asking. There may be a neutral style, but there is no neutrality.
The catch in Wiseman’s approach, as in almost every documentary, is that there is one exception to the implicit claim that the camera is showing you everything, and that is the camera. As night begins to fall, Nanook and his family are caught in a blizzard, far from their igloo. We are watching all this, so obviously there is at least one other person present, Flaherty. In fact, Flaherty often shot alone, and he was willing to suffer the privations of his subjects. But, as in the adventure with the walrus, there is something fundamentally bogus about what we are seeing. If the Inuit (as the intertitles explain) are driven to hunting walrus from sheer hunger, can’t the man with the movie camera (and the rifle) help them out? It is the paradox of “off camera.”

One way to handle this is to put the filmmaker inside the frame, as Marcel Ophuls did in “The Sorrow and the Pity,” on the Occupation in France, and Claude Lanzmann did, to a much greater extent, in “Shoah.” The filmmaker is seen; his voice is heard. “Getting the story” is part of the story. In those films, though, what is “off camera” is not the interview subjects, who are presented in relatively formal settings, but the facts of collaboration and extermination—things that the collaborators and the exterminators had hoped no one would ever see again.

A more radical solution is not to enter the frame but to break it. Errol Morris opens “The Fog of War,” his recent documentary on Robert McNamara, with a scene in which McNamara is explaining, “off camera,” what he intends to say once the interview starts. This is more than an “it’s only a movie” disclaimer—as though anyone might doubt that it is. It’s a reminder of who is controlling the narrative. It’s consistent with Morris’s tendency to photograph McNamara in a way that makes him look off balance and dishevelled, a little too hot for the camera.

Mainstream journalists generally admired “The Fog of War”; they generally despise “Fahrenheit 9/11.” What they complain about (politics aside) is manipulation, that the logic of the movie is, if it looks bad, it probably is bad. Members of the Bush family palling around with wealthy Saudis looks bad; deputy defense secretarieslicking their combs looks bad; politicians in “live-feed” shots before they go on the air look bad. So do children who have been wounded (we are not told how), names blacked out on official documents (we don’t know by whom), John Ashcroft singing his own composition “Let the Eagle Soar” (well, that is pretty bad). The criticism is completely correct: this is the logic of the movie, by and large. It’s the logic of the visual. “We don’t know the source for what we’re seeing,” people have complained. They’re right. Movies do not have footnotes.

Some of the tricks Moore has been attacked for using—the slow-motion replay of live feed of President Bush before delivering a televised address, for example—are used by Morris, too. Morris runs slow-motion footage of Curtis LeMay and Lyndon Johnson that makes them look just as rabbity and unstable as Moore makes Bush look. Moore introduces Bush Administration characters with shots of them being made up for television—they fake the way they look, so we can’t believe what they say. Morris shows McNamara checking sound levels before he starts speaking on camera. It is all standard documentary demystifying, the backstage glimpse of people getting dressed to impress. In McNamara’s case, the treatment actually makes him more credible, because we feel we are seeing him in the raw. And where’s the shock value, anyway? Television watchers have become so accustomed to the comedy of the outtake that it’s amazing the technique has any bite left at all.

Moore’s own presence in “Fahrenheit 9/11”—he does the voice-over, he gives himself a lot of screen time, he does his political performance-art bits, like buttonholing congressmen and encouraging them to have their kids enlist—has annoyed even viewers disposed to appreciate his bias. He’s an obnoxious embarrassment, they feel, and his case would be stronger if he stayed offscreen. But if Moore stayed offscreen his movie’s tendentiousness would be a lot more sinister. It’s hard to evaluate something when you can’t discount for perspective. Moore does not exactly conceal his. He’s a populist ideologue who boils everything down to a single article of belief: the rich screw the poor. Most people who see “Fahrenheit 9/11” already know the degree to which they accept this as an explanation for everything, and they adjust their reception of the movie accordingly.

Why do people who do not credit Michael Moore with much political sophistication like his movie anyway? One common reaction to “Fahrenheit 9/11” is that it shows you things that have never been seen before—the “Pet Goat” and “Now watch this drive” clips, scenes of carnage and brutality in Iraq, Saudi-schmoozing, Ashcroft singing, Al Gore being forced to reject repeated petitions by black representatives to contest the official counting of the electoral -college votes in the 2000 election. It may be that most of these things were shown somewhere, but the movie is designed to make audiences feel that they have never been seen, or that, having been seen, they have been deliberately suppressed. Someone doesn’t want us to see this: it’s the pure documentary impulse, and it works.
Liberals have been relatively forgiving of the movie in part out of sheer exhaustion from the cravenness of the mainstream media, which investigated Whitewater with far greater zeal than it did the claim that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and the shameless cheerleading of the right-wing media. Robert Greenwald’s “Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism,” a movie that has yet to tempt a distributor but has been exhibited in special screenings, and that circulates, samizdat style, on videotape and DVD, is a forceful reminder of how vicious the cheerleading is. “Outfoxed” ought to be a redundant exercise. The right-wing bias of Fox News, whose laughable motto is “Fair and Balanced,” is not something that ought to require a documentary to uncover. But where is the mainstream media? The answer is that the mainstream media is a place where Tucker Carlson is identified as a “political analyst.” Reporting on television is now accompanied by so much partisan yapping disguised as analysis, and there is such a panic to get anything on the air that comes over the transom regardless of the source (like pictures of John Kerry in a silly hat), that the other networks have to feel uncomfortable about accusing anyone else of confusing news with opinion. “Outfoxed” suggests, in fact, that competing news organizations, like CNN, having seen that flag-waving attracts viewers, are starting to imitate Fox.

Cinematically, “Outfoxed” is a straightforward film, consisting mostly of clips and talking heads. Greenwald is reported to have assembled an enormous archive of Fox News videotapes, and the movie reveals, by montage, telling patterns of bias and innuendo. He also managed to score some damning memos, sent to the Fox News organization by a senior vice-president for news named John Moody, which explain what the story of the day will be and how reporters and announcers are expected to spin it. There may be a few viewers out there who continue to confuse Bill O’Reilly with Eric Sevareid. “Outfoxed” will disabuse them.

Greenwald has also produced two documentaries on the Bush Administration, “Unprecedented,” about the 2000 election, and “Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War”—films that went straight to DVD. According to an article in the Times Magazine by Robert Boynton, “Outfoxed” was partly funded by MoveOn and the Center for American Progress, liberal groups, and the movie ends, weakly, with a call for the people to rise up and protest (shots of tiny groups of picketers with hand-lettered signs) and with similar exhortations from the usual exhorters. There are no interviews with current Fox employees, or with anyone else who might offer a defense of the network or challenge some of the movie’s assertions. “Outfoxed” is not a work of reporting; it is a brief for the prosecution, most of it supported by the juxtaposition of very short clips from Fox News broadcasts. It’s totally manipulative. Mainstream journalists will love it anyway.

What’s wrong with “Fahrenheit 9/11” isn’t the method. It’s the thesis. Moore’s big idea is that the war in Iraq wasn’t about running the world; it was about money. This seems exactly backward. It’s possible that if going to war in Iraq were bad for Halliburton the Bush Administration would have hesitated, but it did not go to war in Iraq because the war would be good for Halliburton. It went to war because of an idea about America’s world-historical mission. It was an idea that a lot of people who were not conservative Republicans signed on to with enthusiasm and with reasons more articulate than any Bush himself is capable of uttering. The war and the occupation have gone sour, but although you don’t hear much about the idea anymore, it’s not at all obvious that it has been abandoned. The intellectual investment in the Iraq war is much scarier than the financial involvement. Moore’s movie never treats it.

One of the first movies shown to a public was called “The Arrival of a Train.” A movie camera had been placed at the edge of the platform, and the train was filmed pulling into the station. It was one of Lumière’s most popular shorts. The story grew up that audiences screamed and tried to get out of the way when they saw the image of the approaching train, and this anecdote became a kind of touchstone in meditations on the power of the cinematic. But recent scholarship suggests that the story is baseless. Audiences did not think that the train on the screen was going to run them over. They knew what was happening: they were watching a movie. Movies are a powerful means of expression, but watching one is not the equivalent of being hit over the head with a brick. You can still think. If you don’t, it’s not the filmmaker’s fault. You can withhold your assent to a lot of what Michael Moore implies about George Bush and his brutish, arrogant, reactionary Administration, and still take pleasure in the way he makes them look bad. You can even think that the reason they look bad is that they are bad. It’s only a movie.

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