7. Documentarist as... Prosecutor

Definition(s):
Prosecuting (with film)—an active process of collecting and using film footage for the purpose of accusing and hopefully 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 (later DEFA, the East German state film entity).
As a couple, the Thorndikes created documentaries with a pro-communist perspective. They specialized in historic compilations that would expose former Nazis in West Germany (“in the manner of Esfir Shub, but with a difference”). 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.”
Their 1955 work, Du und Mancher Kamerad (You and Many a Comrade) is available online, but without English subtitles; still, you can get the sense of their use of existing/”found” footage, and the filmmakers’ prosecutorial role.

Alain Resnais (1922-2014)
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). Many of these documentaries focused on the art world, such as Van Gogh (1948; no English subtitles; Academy Award winning short).
[Resnais is one of the most interesting—and respected—filmmakers who worked substantially in both documentary and narrative forms (see class handout: Documentarists and Documentary/Narrative Filmmakers).]
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 combination of techniques was highly effective.

Further, we see even in Night and Fog evidence of Resnais’ later focus in his narrative works on the intersection of time, memory, and regret. In his narrative works, such as Hiroshima, Mon Amour (1959; article), Last Year at Marienbad (1961; trailer), and Je T’aime, Je T’aime (1968; trailer), he dealt with the manipulation of time, and even time travel. Like Bunuel, [Resnais insists (5:43) that each spectator is entitled to his/her own interpretation of his complex narratives.]

[And as pointed out in the Flitterman-Lewis book chapter in the Grant and Sloniowski book, in Night and Fog, Resnais plays with time and with tempo: “While the film’s structure can be described as an alternation of present and past, there is a specific direction to its flow of meaning . . . the accelerating tempo of both what is heard and seen is paralleled by another kind of movement from dispersed fragmentation to cohesion.” And, a sense of presence is reinforced by a shift in verb tense. . . archival footage is narrated in the historic present tense of documentary film (“The deportation extends throughout the whole of Europe”); by contrast, the present-day interludes are narrated in the past imperfect. . . (“They closed the doors. They watched. . . Even the concrete ceiling was shredded”).]