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THE NAME DOCUMENTARY:

A PREFACE TO GENRE STUDY

DENNIS GILES

My concern is how the name *documentary* is attached to the phenomenon, how the word becomes so thoroughly identified with the thing that it displaces it. The word and the phenomenon are not the same thing but through the work of the name they come to be known as identical. I intend to examine the process by which the name establishes its tyranny.

I must approach the problem of naming naively since this is written in an area of Mexico where I am without access to the apparatus of academic film criticism. But as one who possesses only a limited facility in the Spanish language my involvement in the process of naming is here more intimate than in the cultural site which is my home. (Which leads to the speculation that naming is motivated by a sense of homelessness (*Unheimlichkeit*)--by a sudden awareness that beings are alien from the self--inspiring the desire to domesticate them via the name.) The name does not yet "come" automatically but is reached only through my conscious struggle to establish the difference between one term and another. In this primary stage of speaking a language (in which I yearn in vain to be *spoken by it*) there seems no necessary relation between the name and the thing, no reason why *chinché* should mean 1) a bedbug, 2) a thumbtack, and 3) a boring person, or why *chicharro* refers to both a pea and a poor cigar. The contention that the name is an arbitrary signifier, that it is downright *unnatural*, is immediately apparent to any gringo lost in the maze of a foreign tongue. Since the things I encounter refuse to name themselves, I seize with delight upon any authority--a friend, a dictionary--an Adam who points at the animals saying, definitively, "this is *chinché*, this is *chicharro* and that is *documentary*." I search for one who can fill the empty word with the vision of the thing, ground the fiction in the truth of appearance.

As we pass through the avenues of the city, my *amiga* Lupita cries "¡Mira!" pointing a blood-red fingernail towards the thing--any thing. A name speeds from her lips to fasten upon it--at first like a thin coat of lacquer, but *manana* I can neither see nor think the thing in its nakedness, denuded of the name. The thing thus loses its "thingliness," as Heidegger puts it; it is no longer nature, but culture.

If there is no thing visible to which Lupita can point, *nada* to form the object of my look, each name she speaks remains in the air between us. Such names are immediately fugitive, never falling upon a visible being. We pursue them with synonyms which never quite stick, sliding off into still other names which are equally groundless.

But assuming there is some thing to point at, my gaze follows Lupita's to discover a banana. "¡Plátano!" I exclaim, only to be informed that *this* banana is to be called by another name: it is orange rather than yellow and is scarcely bigger than my thumb. The point of this travelog is not, however, to teach the reader how to distinguish bedbugs from thumbtacks and dwarf bananas but to explore what is said in the name *documentary*. I learn from Lupita that this banana is *dominico*

only by seeing that it is not yellow, not 12 centimeters long--not like the others. The name separates out "this" from what remains but does not cut the thing off from its context. On the contrary, the relation between "this" and "the others" is always understood, and this banana (or this genre of film) achieves its "sense" only in comparison/contrast to that which it is not, yet which lies within the same general category of being. The name asserts both difference and sameness; it sets the thing apart and binds it with its fellows. This is to say that if we use the name *documentary* it can be understood only as a double relationship: 1) to the ground (all cinema) in which it resides, from which it projects and 2) to the specific Other to which it is opposed--the fiction of Hollywood.

To name a thing is simultaneously to set it in its genre and to point it out of this context as an individual being. But this last statement is already an error. Each *dominico* banana shares properties with every other *dominico* and yet each, in some small way, is itself, distinct from the others of its class. To name each and every small, orange banana *dominico* is already a generalization which obscures the differences between individual beings. No matter how finely we sift beings with our nominations, no name is ever "adequate" to the particular thing or the vision of it. (This is true even of proper names like John, Mary or Elvis, although movie titles by and large still point to single films.) Every *single* name, we must conclude, is generic. From this point of view, each of the following grouping of properties within the realm of cinema can be called a genre: 1) films about eating, 2) films using natural light, 3) films where none of the people wear hats, 4) silent films, 5) short films, 6) films made by women, 7) films through a cracked lens, 8) sad films, 9) unscreened films, 10) King King films, 11) Non-golian cinema, 12) documentaries. And cinema itself could be considered a genre of: the audio-visual, entertainment, finance, fetishism, art, etc. In sum, there is no innate or "natural" reason why *documentary* should be named a genre while films about camels remain unclassified. No reason why the *documentary* should or should not be a genre other than the historical convention--the tradition--of naming it such.

At this point the reader may protest that it is only "common sense" that films which tell the truth are distinguished from fiction films, though it may be less apparent why the genre of truth is to be called *documentary*. To such an objection against the absurd genres listed above, I must answer that truth (thus "its" genre) is also a historical production, as is the notion of "common sense."

What appears to be only common sense, Heidegger argues, is really the product of a great historical tradition, the same tradition which has taught us to see objects in three-dimensional, rectilinear space, to regard ourselves as souls inhabiting bodies, to distinguish our inner, subjective experience from outer, objective events, and to conceive of our relations to the things of the world in the same way that we conceive of their relations among themselves. "What is natural," he says, "is not in the least natural in the sense of being self-evident to every man, no matter who he might be or when he might live. The natural is always historical."¹

To determine what is meant by the name *documentary* we must consider the tradition that gives sense to the name. But here another problem is encountered: there is evidence that the *documentary* tradition is in process of dissolution (or evolution), that the name is losing its meaning, that the group of films called *documentary* is beginning to overflow the limits set by the name. When the "real" men and women of an African village put on a show for Rouch--constructing stories and characters expressly for his camera--is this an ethnographic *documentary* of a people at play or a play inspired by the myth of Hollywood? To use the word *documentary* as a description of a cinema which records the act of *poiesis* seems to

conceal more than it reveals about the phenomenon in question; yet Rouch must be regarded as a major source of the contemporary "documentary" movement. To read Rouch out of the tradition would be perverse; to leave him in the tradition is to acknowledge its perversion. ("Perverse" is the usual translation of the Hebrew *tebel*, literally a *mixing* or *confusion*; to have sexual intercourse with an animal is perverse, says Leviticus, because it mixes genres which should not be mixed.)

The documentary tradition is further undermined (or deconstructed) through Godard's contention that his "fiction" film *TWO OR THREE THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER* is a documentary on housing developments, and that the "Her" of his title is not only Marina Vlady in the role of housewife/prostitute but the great whore Paris, as material city and economic system.

In many mythologies, the rise of cultural heroes and the knowledge they bring is intimately linked to the power of naming and the institution of genres. Nomination goes hand in hand with the domination of beings. Boundaries are drawn between physical and mental realms; the various monsters which transgress the incipient limits are slain or thrust back into their proper province. Pools, springs and caves are places of danger since they open upon regions which *should* be set apart. The populace is separated into various classes, ranks and professions; social institutions carve out their specific region of authority; property lines are drawn. Henceforward each man, god and thing is expected to conform to the name which establishes his function, his place and his limit. The world can be known and communicated (*via* the name) only when it has been thus arranged and defined. The definition given by the name is intended to be permanent; it is the law of a social and cultural order which hopes to perpetuate itself *ad infinitum*. Definition signals, above all, that the boundaries are clear, that *this* thing and that thing no longer promiscuously mingle their substance as they did in the primeval eras of Chaos and monstrous growths (the "Age of the Titans"). In the language of photography one can say that definition and the institution of genres are both problems of framing and focusing. To put something in focus (*i.e.*, to bring it to its clearest definition) we eliminate the blur by which the object of our desire is merged with the rest of the visible world. We devalue "the rest" to the status of background from which the thing now clearly stands out. Focusing establishes a hierarchy of beings and establishes their separation. And to it a privileged area of being *in frame* is simultaneously to frame out all that is insensitally to the project at hand. That which remains unfocused/unframed (beyond the limits of the project) is neither this nor that specific being but resides in that unwanted category we call *dirt*.

In her meditation of ritual pollution Purity and Danger Mary Douglas argues that "uncleaness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained."² Dirt is what is left over after the activity of classification. It is the residue "created by the differentiating activity of mind... a byproduct of the creation of order."³ Dirt is first what cannot be named, later that which blurs the name. It is usually ignored as unworthy of our attention, or it is almost absent-mindedly swept out of the realm of domesticated being. Dirt is often a nuisance but sometimes a *danger* (*tebbe!*) since it tends to contaminate categories which should remain clearly defined. The history of genres can be seen as the story of the accumulation of dirt--definitions begrimed and obscured by casual usage and the accretion of foreign properties. The documentary of Flaherty becomes enrusted with Griersonian and Rouchian problematics. Dust inexorably accumulates from neighboring but alien arts and disciplines until we can no longer distinguish "truth" from fiction. At this critical stage in the degeneration of the name theorists begin to "clean house." In this periodic ritual genres are purged, rediscovered, redefined or rejected. Only when things are once more set in their place can the apparatus of scholarship again teach the categories in their proper definition.

From its nuisance stage as mere extraneous matter, dirt easily becomes a moral category. According to William James, Evil can be considered as "a waste element, to be sloughed off and negated." There are "Elements of the universe which may make no rational whole in conjunction with the other elements, and which, from the point of view of any system which those elements make up, can only be considered as so much irrelevance and accident--so much 'dirt' as it were, and matter out of place."⁴

Film has always been something of an abomination to academia because of its impurity. "Those species are unclean which are imperfect members of their class, or whose class confounds the general scheme of the world."⁵ Cinema study falls both within and without a number of disciplines, and in the United States is claimed by a bewildering variety of departments--Communication, Speech, Journalism, Visual Arts, English, Comparative Literature, Theatre, Performing Arts, Broadcasting (!?) and that marvelous category of left-overs--"General Studies." And whenever a department of Semiology is founded, no doubt cinema (along with all other signs and meanings) will be considered its unique possession. Insofar as film takes the whole of the world (both "real" and imaginary) as its subject matter one must say it is impure--a *mezcla*, a confusion--*by nature* (*i.e.*, in the history of categories to date). In the past 5 to 10 years cinema study has become even more "contaminated" with the approaches of linguistics, structural anthropology, psychoanalysis, etc. (as the history of Film Reader bears witness). In fact, the proper introduction to the study of film may well be the section of Leviticus which deals with obscure and unclassifiable elements of the cosmos which are to be abhorred as abominations in the sight of God.

But within the unclean arena of film, one genre--documentary--has been considered relatively pure (in part, I suspect, because it is not apparently dirtied with commerce--is not peddled and hawked like the products of the Hollywood factory). But as I have argued above, documentary is on the threshold of losing its cleanliness, not only because it admits alien matter through increasingly porous borders, but because so much contemporary documentary displays a singular disregard for traditional aesthetic "form." The ideology of spontaneity, the will to catch life "as it happens" leads to a distrust of montage and constructed scenarios, to abrupt pans, and zooms, to shots that would once have been considered "misframed" or even "unfocused." The documentary is more and more an area of free-play between the camera and the world; in contrast to its messiness the Hollywood production--with the "classic" aesthetic of shot, countershot, the 180° rule, the Renaissance perspective, the attention to framing and focus, the clarity of its narrative, *ad infinitum*--is a spotless, faultlessly organized museum. Or so goes the myth--Hollywood as a house in which nobody "really" lives, a house that refuses to admit the dirt of life. Faced with this ideal image of the opposition many documentarians glory in the "mess" they conceive as reality, and, like the Maysles' in GREY GARDENS, film the anomalies and rejects of the civilized order.

The "dirtier" documentary grows, the more it loses its traditional status as a genre, the less it is worthy of its name. Nomination establishes *distinction* within a context but it also seeks to *immobilize* the phenomenon in question. The word is spoken as the immutable law which will henceforth rule the thing. Insofar as the thing exists in history, the name dictates a prohibition upon it. As Propp tells us in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, plot begins with an interdiction (e.g., "Don't pick the flowers") by which the subject is prohibited from developing his story; once the interdiction is violated, the hero (here named "Documentary") is thrown into history, enacts his (its) plot, and is "dirtied" in the process. The prohibition draws a limit beyond which the thing shall not pass if it is to continue to be called by its name. The law of the name "calls" the thing to be atemporal, requiring it to neither develop nor decay. A worm which sprouts six legs and begins to fly is no longer called a caterpillar (though it is still contained in the more "general" genre *insect*). The documentary which begins to "play

act" runs the risk of disnomination. Two significant exceptions to this rule occur in the related fields of politics and sports (the pure arenas of power and play, respectively) where ex-governors are still named "Governor" and Joe Louis is still called "The Champ." In each case, however, the name is only a courtesy. Once again, the function of the name is to stop the flow of time, to pretend that *the thing is still what it was*.

When Grierson the nominator (The Adam of the Genre) responded to Flaherty's cinema by abstracting his memory of the event into the word *documentary* he not only separated it out of the rest of film but established its function. The purpose and propriety of documentary was to show evidence of an action or a fact; that is, "to document"--from *docere*, to teach. The word is both indicative and imperative, saying both *what is* and *what should be*. By speaking "documentary" Grierson established an aim and a *limit* to the phenomenon. His founding call is a wish, a challenge and a command.

Yet the historical phenomenon necessarily violates the call that the thing shall not slide beyond its name. *Documentary* has begun to lose its mandate over the thing it speaks. We are nearing the point welcomed by Michel Foucault in his dense preface to *The Order of Things* in which a culture reclassifies its world of experience. The culture of which we speak is *only* the specific region of cinema, but insofar as film is omnivorous--attempting to "eat" the entire world--any crisis in the genre which claims to speak the truth of cinema is simultaneously a crisis in the conception of truth itself--the truth of the whole culture. This moment in which we can no longer ignore the erosion of the word *documentary* is Foucault's moment of *decalage* in which a culture deviates "from the empirical orders prescribed for it by its primary codes," discovers "that these codes are perhaps not the only possible ones or the best ones," and glimpses a new order in which all codes "of language, perception and practice are criticized and rendered partially invalid."⁶

As information yields to deformation, the "classic" is threatened by chaos. Once more, as in the Titanic Age, we enter a time of hybrid growths, monstrosities, strange minglings. As film theory begins to doubt that the camera can ever find an "objective" truth, let alone represent it without distortion, as the very opposition subjective/objective is put into question, as filmmakers continue to obscure the classic contradiction between documentary and fiction, as every generic distinction is systematically violated in the theory and praxis of cinema, the word *documentary* becomes nonsensical. And so, in this paper about the naming of genres, I am caught between times in the evaporation of names. What is yet documentary may soon be called by other names, but I cannot know them. In this site of rupture if I am asked "What is documentary?" I am forced to answer only that it was all that has been called documentary, but it is now called to be Other than itself. Documentary is, at this moment, 1) the documentary tradition and 2) the repudiation of this tradition. But insofar as I use the name, I must accept, provisionally, the presuppositions of previous discourse as to what region of cinema is delimited by the name. My purpose is not to complete the destruction of the word, even though the propositions on which it rests are ultimately groundless.

Notes

¹W. B. Macomber, *The Anatomy of Disillusion: Martin Heidegger's Notion of Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. 12.

²Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 53.

³Douglas, p. 190.

⁴William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London, 1901-1902), p. 129.

5Douglas, p. 70.

6Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), xx-xxi.

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