

New Challenges for Documentary

ALAN ROSENTHAL and JOHN CORNER (eds)

Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005 (2nd edn)

xi + 507 pp., illus. and index, £15.99 paper

New Challenges for Documentary is a valuable book with a misleading title—it's an anthology of writing published over the past four decades, offering a look at

long-standing challenges, not new ones. Seventeen of the book's 35 chapters were originally published between 1968 and 1983, seven chapters are from the 1990s, and eight were first published between 2000 and 2004. Three new chapters were written for this edition, but two of them also focus on the 1990s. Given the age of these contributions, it is surprising that the original publication date is not provided at the head of each chapter (it can be found in the acknowledgments). It's also frustrating that, with a few welcome exceptions, contributors are identified by name only, with no details (unless offered within the chapter) about profession or affiliation. The editors are briefly introduced on the back cover: Alan Rosenthal, a documentary film-maker, is a professor of communications at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and John Corner is a professor in the School of Politics and Communication Studies at the University of Liverpool.

The fuller context—who wrote the articles, when, and for what purpose—would be useful because much of this book's value lies in the historical insight it offers to readers, immersing them in the past and allowing them to determine for themselves what's changed and what hasn't in the years since. Given that today's media landscape includes *Taxicab Confessions*, cell phone cinematography and the Web, it's thought-provoking to read Calvin Pryluck's chapter about the ethics of documentary, written in 1976, when *Candid Camera* was considered invasive and vérité film-makers were accused of exploiting the ordinary people who were their subjects.

New Challenges is comprehensive and well organized into six parts: Part I, *Theories and Forms: documentary as genre*, features chapters by Bill Nichols, Jay Ruby, John Corner, and Linda Williams. Together they explore what is meant by 'the voice' of a documentary, how interviews and archival materials succeed or fail at conveying the complexity of history, and how a film-maker's presence impacts the events being filmed. Williams's intriguing chapter compares Erroll Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*, Oliver Stone's dramatic feature *JFK*, and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*.

Part II, *The Inside View: producers and directors*, offers compelling interviews with film-makers Emile de Antonio (first published in 1982), Peter Watkins (1971), Marlon Riggs (1992), and Dennis O'Rourke (2004), in addition to a 1981 *Cineaste* compilation of survey responses from film-makers including Dave Davis, Jon Else, and members of the Kartemquin Collective. Part II begins with a 1981 report on the Canadian Film Board Unit B and concludes with a look at film financing, excerpted from Alan Rosenthal's excellent book, *Writing, Directing and Producing Documentary Films and Videos*.

Part III, *Issues of Ethics and Aesthetics* includes a strong array of essays by authors including Brian Winston, from his 2000 book, *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentaries*; Calvin Pryluck, mentioned earlier; Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, from their 2001 book, *Faking It*; and John Corner, with a compelling look at the use of music in documentary. Lee Atwell explores homosexuality on screen, focusing on *Word is Out* and *Gay U.S.A.*, and Jay Ruby discusses image making from an anthropologist's perspective. There is also a *Cineaste* review of Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*.

In Part IV, *Changing Contexts in Television*, the editors aim to 'look at how the institutional structures of TV, and its specific market character and relationship to the audiences, have shaped developments.' Their focus is on the past: a Fred Friendly report on the 1954 McCarthy *See It Now* broadcast; a 1981 article by Robert Drew about his role in the evolution of television journalism; Alan Rosenthal's 1981 article

about his work as an independent with Israel TV; and Craig Gilbert's 1981 article about making *An American Family*. In chapters written for this edition, Ben Levin writes about *American High*, which premiered on Fox in 2000, and John Ellis writes about 'the crisis of 1999,' when a British tabloid, referring to evidence of deception in reality programming (including talk shows and 'docusoaps') asked on its front page, 'Can We Believe Anything We See On TV?'

In Part V, *Versions of History*, historian Donald Watt and film-maker Jerry Kuehl, writing in 1976, launch a look at the sometimes contentious link between history as practiced by historians and as portrayed by film-makers. Jeffrey Youdelman focuses on narration, while John O'Connor explores 'content, production, and reception.' In a 1995 'apologia,' Dirk Eitzen (citing historian Michael Frisch) argues that popular historical films should be viewed as an opportunity for historians, because of their ability to engage viewers in connecting to the past. And Stella Bruzzi, in an interesting excerpt of her 2000 book, *New Documentary*, explores the evidential nature of film as 'record and as representation,' focusing on the Zapruder footage of the Kennedy assassination.

The five chapters that make up Part VI, *Docudrama: border disputes*, consider the legal, ethical, and creative challenges of the 'dramadoc' and 'docudrama,' with contributions from Derek Page, Steve Lipkin and others. Alan Rosenthal interviews film-maker Antony Thomas about *Death of a Princess*, a controversial 1980 film about a public execution in Saudi Arabia. Leslie Woodhead, in a 1981 address, defends his use of dramatization as a pragmatic response when no other coverage is available. Ian McBride, in a paper delivered in 1996 while he was head of factual drama at Granada Television, laments a shift from 'the power of the producer to the demand of the broadcaster' and considers the dangers when, for the sake of audience size and demographics, tabloid and checkbook journalism overwhelm public service. 'A cultural "market force," if you like, is capable of pushing a perceived appetite for human interest over the edge,' he warns, 'shoving dramadocumentary out of any golden age into a rapid dishonourable discharge.'

With all that is strong about this compendium, *New Challenges for Documentary* has a notable flaw: where are the women? In just under 500 pages, the book highlights the work of the men named above, in addition to Robert Flaherty, R.J. Cutler, Albert and David Maysles, Frederick Wiseman and others. Surely the authors, looking around the world and across decades, could have focused on a few of the many women who have played key roles in documentary? And the editors, revising the book in 2005, might have included more than five women among their roster of 33 contributors. Other than film-maker Connie Field (*The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*), included in the 1981 *Cineaste* survey, and Victoria Sterling, a former network executive quoted in chapter 32, women are rarely heard from in these pages. They are mentioned throughout—Christine Choy, Jill Godmilow, Esther Shub, Bridget Potter, Chris Hegedus, Joan Churchill, Shirley Clarke, Barbara Kopple—but the fact that they're *only* mentioned is a reminder that perhaps this, too, remains a challenge for documentary.

SHEILA CURRAN BERNARD

Independent Film-maker/Author

© 2007, Sheila Curran Bernard