Between Fiction and Documentary: Dangerous Liaisons and the Self-Reflexive Film

Jennifer J. Bottinelli
BETWEEN FICTION AND DOCUMENTARY: DANGEROUS LIAISONS AND
THE SELF-REFLEXIVE FILM

by

Jennifer J. Bottinelli
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This dissertation, submitted by Jennifer J. Bottinelli in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

Michael Anderson  
(Chairperson)

Stefan Beaudell

Michael Beaudell

This dissertation meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

Joseph D. Benoit  
(Dean of the Graduate School)

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(Date)
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ABSTRACT

As the two primary modes of filmic representation, fiction and
documentary have long been separated by their distinct associations with
subjectivity and objectivity respectively. Documentary film, with its ties to lived
reality, has been especially hampered by a too direct connection with objectivity.
Regarding the documentary film's representation of actuality, there is a tendency
for the authority behind the construction of the documentary image to go
unexplored and unquestioned when the documentary subject is thought to be
objectively represented. Neither fiction nor documentary image are likely to be
destabilized when each mode neglects to recognize its connection to an
alternative manner of representation—non-fiction for fiction film and vice versa.
While the acknowledgment of the intimate relationship between fiction and non-
fiction has received much attention over the past fifteen years (particularly in the
growing area of documentary film studies), further critical analysis is still needed.

In order to more fully understand the relationship between fiction and non-
fiction modes of representation in film, this study is divided into a creative project
(in the form of a documentary film made by the author) and a written scholarly
project which analyzes a range of fiction and documentary films. Included in the
dissertation is a chapter on 25 Fictions, the author's forty-minute video that
depicts some of the fictions which make up historic 25th Street in Ogden, Utah.
Those portions of Chapter V that deal with 25 Fictions are in italics. The other
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films discussed include, for instance, Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*, Nicholas Barker's *Unmade Beds*, and Stephen Eamhart's *Mule Skinner Blues*. Each film's analysis traces the presence and function of that mode which runs counter to the film's dominant mode of representation (i.e. the home-movie style of *Breaking the Waves*). What fiction and documentary films that foreground, in a self-reflexive way, the process of their construction illustrate is the fact that all filmic representations are a negotiation between fiction and non-fiction. And it is in that space between fiction and documentary that alternative representations to mainstream, commercial cinema are created.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Jean-Luc Godard: Beauty—the splendor of truth—has two poles. There are directors who seek the truth, which, if they find it, will necessarily be beautiful; others seek beauty, which, if they find it, will also be true. One finds these two poles in documentary and fiction. Some directors start from documentary and create fiction . . . . Others start from fiction and create documentary . . .

Cahiers: From which pole do you start?
Jean-Luc Godard: From documentary, I think, in order to give it the truth of fiction.1

In order to understand the world around them better, photographers like Eadweard Muybridge and inventors like Louis Lumière created some of the first films, documentaries. Muybridge was interested in documenting and studying animal and eventually human motion using a series of cameras placed next to each other on a track: "From these cameras, parallel threads ran across the track. A horse [for example] galloping through them clicked the cameras in swift succession. The photos gave information on each stage of the gallop."2 The Lumière brothers, on the other hand, with the handcranked film camera created by Louis, made minute long films (the length of the reel) of various everyday events, such as Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory (1895) and Arrival of a


Train (1895). In fact, the very first projected film showing to a paying audience was of a Lumière film on December 28, 1895 at the cost of one franc per ticket. While, according to Erik Barnouw, “it was Louis Lumière who made the documentary film a reality—on a worldwide basis, and with sensational success,” every one of these early films “had foreshadowed a crucial aspect of the documentary film: its ability to open our eyes to worlds available to us but, for one reason or another, not perceived” (5, 3). Since its beginnings, film, whether documentary or fiction, has not lost its ties to these first documents of “actuality.” Documentaries still strive to make visible that which exists outside the limits of both the viewer’s vision and the taken-for-granted everyday.

When displayed through the artifice of film or video, fiction and non-fiction take on qualities which transport the subject beyond the ordinary. It is important to preface a discussion of the perceived relationship between film and the subject it depicts by pointing out the limitations of the fiction/non-fiction binary. Such categories are problematic in the sense that, as a construction, they impose an order on what it is they are conceptualizing. And the fiction/non-fiction framework can be seen as particularly simplistic. It seems reductive to describe filmic representations as either fabricated or having their foundations in the world outside of the movie set. Furthermore, the term “non-fiction” is itself questionable since even documentaries present a mediated version of “reality.” Fiction films, too, are not purely fabrications, but are also documents of an actor’s performance, for example, or the wardrobe and setting of a particular time period, place, or culture. However, for the purposes of this study which, as I explain
below, explores the kinds of filmic representations that emanate out of the space between fiction and documentary, fiction and non-fiction seem the most appropriate terms available to describe a film's subject matter. The category of fiction/non-fiction is useful for providing a site from which to begin an analysis of films, both fiction and documentary, that foreground the degree to which fiction and non-fiction are a part of any filmic representation. And certainly some of the elements that are associated with non-fiction's film mode, the documentary, such as the jittery, hand-held camera of Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*—described in Chapter II—are artificial conveyors of the real. Von Trier's film is an excellent example of how filming with a hand-held camera does not necessarily mean the representation is more real, only that its meanings and associations change from the world of fantasy, perhaps, to the everyday.

A debate central to film studies since the medium's inception concerns how direct the connection is between film and reality. For celebrated film theorists Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin, film is a vehicle best suited for capturing the reality that exists before the camera. Resting "upon the assumption that film is essentially an extension of photography and therefore shares with this medium a marked affinity for the visible world around us," Kracauer argues that if "film is art, it is art with a difference. Along with photography, film is the only art which leaves its raw material more or less intact." In favoring realism over formalism, "everything depends on the 'right'

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3 *Theory of Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) ix, x.
balance between the realistic tendency and the formative tendency; and the two tendencies are well balanced if the latter does not try to overwhelm the former but eventually follows its lead" (39).

André Bazin's "myth of total cinema" follows a similar logic—although Kracauer's interest in the science of filmmaking is replaced by its mythic dimensions. With a "trust in the representation of uninterrupted reality," Bazin admired the Italian Neo-Realist filmmakers, like Vittorio De Sica, who eschewed studio filmmaking and special effects for outside settings, nonprofessional actors, and, for the most part, real time rather than elliptical editing. For Bazin, the "guiding myth, then, inspiring the invention of cinema, is...namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time." Kracauer and Bazin, therefore, acknowledge the primary significance of the world before the camera rather than film as an expression of the artist's intent.

The anti-realist stance towards the study of film is taken up by Rudolph Arnheim, who, in *Film as Art*, insists that "people who contemptuously refer to the camera as an automatic recording machine must be made to realize that even in the simplest photographic reproduction of a perfectly simple object, a feeling for its nature is required which is quite beyond any mechanical operation." In

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foregrounding the filmmaker's influence, Arnheim takes notice of a relationship that may exist between fiction and non-fiction in both fiction and documentary film modes. Instead of the filmic frame as either an unfiltered representation which "leaves its raw material more or less intact," or a window to the world that exists before the camera and is at times, perhaps, more real than reality itself, the film as art argument makes implicit the "question of my (the filmmaker's) position relative to the object" (Arnheim 10).

Under Arnheim's logic, then, even documentaries like those of Muybridge and the Lumières are capable of refuting "the assertion that film is nothing but the feeble mechanical reproduction of real life" (Arnheim 34). While Arnheim believes that such documents of reality as the footage of a horse galloping or "a military march, a true confessions story, or a strip tease" are "not art and are not intended to be art," his awareness of the subjectivity behind the camera supports, I would argue, the point that the Lumières, for example, in favoring a particular angle from which to film Arrival of a Train, imposed a certain artistic vision onto their subject (8). Just as fiction is comprised of such non-fiction elements as actors, sets, and, for Jean-Luc Godard, performances so well acted that the distinction between artifice and reality diminishes, documentary includes the fictive or subjective elements associated with an imposed narrative, particular camera angles, and the many other artistic choices a filmmaker must make.

It is important not to take too extreme a view of film as either all fiction or all non-fiction. This is especially the case for documentary film, a mode which, throughout film history, has come to be associated with a number of different
kinds of relationships to the "reality" which it has captured. Perhaps the most contested is the American strain of cinéma vérité, direct cinema. This observational, fly-on-the-wall approach, exemplified by such films as Robert Drew and Richard Leacock's *Primary* (1960), will be discussed in more detail in Chapter II. Suffice it to say that the direct cinema tradition, described by documentarian Errol Morris as setting "back documentary filmmaking twenty or thirty years," held that documentaries had the ability to record objectively the truth of reality.\(^7\) This realist tendency denies, in some part, any consideration of those formal elements that reflect a certain subjectivity behind the construction. At the most basic level, any camera angle or cut in a film represents a subjective decision made on the part of the filmmaker. Conversely, neither is documentary all fiction. Its foundation in actuality should not be overlooked. Stella Bruzzi warns that because "the ideal of the pure documentary uncontaminated by the subjective vagaries of representation is forever upheld, all non-fiction film is thus deemed to be unable to live up to its intention, so documentary becomes what you do when you fail" (4). What I suggest instead is a view of fiction and documentary film as representations constructed out of the negotiation between fiction and non-fiction elements. It is in that area between fiction and non-fiction that alternative representations—ones that contest those of the commercial mainstream—are constructed.

Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, in *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, comment on the ideological power of a dominant film industry in drawing from and, in turn, influencing the mass audience to which it is aimed:

Films transcode the discourses (the forms, figures, and the representations) of social life into cinematic narratives. Rather than reflect a reality external to the film medium, films execute a transfer from one discursive field to another. As a result, films themselves become part of that broader cultural system of representations that construct social reality. That construction occurs in part through the internalization of representations.8

To agree with Ryan and Kellner means that Hollywood films, with their "narrative closure, image continuity, nonreflexive camera, [and] character identification," perpetuate certain images of what it means to be, for example, a white man or a black woman. In addition, the industry's mainstream representations put forth a simplistic view of the world founded on and favoring, for instance, capitalistic maxims like survival of the fittest and the pursuit of the American Dream. It seems logical then to assume that such representations, targeted to appeal to as large an audience as possible, are themselves uncomplicated or at least made to seem uncomplicated. But what of the films presumably made outside of Hollywood control?

Regarding some of those films independent to the Hollywood mainstream, Robert W. McChesney notes that by “1998 almost all of the Hollywood ‘indies’ were either owned outright by a major studio or effectively affiliated with one

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otherwise. Independents have become a source of low-risk profit-making for the media giants, giving the latter near control over the industry." Ryan and Kellner's suggestions concerning the power of filmic representations along with McChesney's evidence regarding the lack of public space for alternative representations anathema to dominant Hollywood points to the importance of recognizing—as well as, for a filmmaker, creating—those moments when fiction and documentary films complicate, in terms of form and content, what is conventional to each cinematic mode. And, as my project will make clear, the space between fiction and documentary, where what is foregrounded is the fact that the image is comprised of both modes, is one place from which to create representations that contest both the purity of each mode and their mainstream roles, characters, genres, and depictions.

That space of negotiation between both fictional and documentary elements is one marked by what Bill Nichols describes as "excess." While, for fiction films, excess is "the random and inexplicable, that which remains ungovernable within a textual regime presided over by narrative," documentary excess is "that which stands beyond the reach of both narrative and exposition." More specifically, it brings us closer to, as "the referent of documentary," history (Nichols 142). One possible consequence of representations that reflexively make clear their ties to both fiction and documentary is that they draw attention to

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what it is that mainstream representations are not. "Without a dominant system," in other words, "excess would not exist" (Nichols 142). It is at the level of form that the negotiation between fiction and documentary is most clearly apparent.

What the films in this study have in common is their tendency to resist and re-imagine mainstream representations—like the role of the melodramatic woman or the non-Western subject, and even conventional expectations of the documentary mode as one steeped in objectivity. This space between fiction and documentary as a site for creating alternative filmic representations draws significant attention to at the same time that it contrasts mainstream cinema's fixed characters and closed narratives. One aspect of the excess I explore is the reflexive foregrounding of film as a construction, a mediation between filmmaker and subject. Reflexivity can take the form of a stylistic approach that gives the visual illusion of realism as in the case of Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, with its appearance of documentary footage, and von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*, with its home-movie look. In documentary, on the other hand, fictional film techniques like composed shots and fantasy sequences may serve to reflexively point out fiction film's relationship to non-fiction. In a move that plays with directorial control in the construction of the documentary representation, Nicholas Barker, in *Unmade Beds*, scripts and directs his documentary as if it were a fiction film. The filmmaker's presence, one example of an excess that does not, in mainstream, commercial film, make itself readily apparent on screen, tends to expose the rules of continuity which govern the creation of a seamless image (a feature of mainstream, commercial cinema).
My project is divided into two parts. Chapters II and III analyze Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* and Lars von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves.* Both are fiction films that incorporate documentary film conventions with respect to the style or manner in which they were filmed. Chapter IV addresses such documentary films as Nicolas Barker’s *Unmade Beds* and Stephen Earnhart’s *Mule Skinner Blues* with regard to their inclusion of fiction film techniques. In both cases, what is of particular interest is the manner in which each film reflexively foregrounds the filmmaker’s presence, thereby drawing attention to the role of fiction in documentary film and vice versa. And in Chapter V, I take a look at my own film, *25 Fictions,* which is a documentary about both a place, historic 25th Street in Ogden, Utah, and some of the various fictions which make up that place. My intention was, as with the documentary films in Chapter IV, to disrupt the assumption that documentary means objectivity. Again, what all of these films suggest is that, since neither mode is solely objective or subjective, a filmic representation is comprised of a negotiation between the two. Furthermore, as one component of that space between fiction and documentary, reflexivity, in drawing attention to the filmmaker’s construction, alludes to the fact that other perspectives exist outside of the narrative, exposition, and even film frame.

My interest in fiction films that incorporate documentary film techniques, such as *The Battle of Algiers* and *Breaking the Waves,* is rooted in an understanding that these films, and, by extension, the characters in them, are not of one entity, but are composed of various, and in some cases competing,
voices. Such a complexity results from each film’s negotiation of fiction and non-fiction. As for form, the films are the product of at least two types of filmmaking, and, with regard to content, they represent two conflicting identities. For Pontecorvo, the identities represented by the social groups of the French and the Algerian/Muslim concern race, and for von Trier the identities of the patriarchal religious community and Bess, the film’s rebellious female lead character, are gender-related. While *Battle* is the bringing together of a fictionalized historical reenactment and the representation of such subject matter in the manner of documentary footage, *Breaking the Waves* is a combination of “woman’s film” melodrama and the home movie form. Regardless of the vast differences at the level of narrative, both Pontecorvo and von Trier rely on the implied “reality” and “authenticity” of the documentary look. Again, these two films make visible the tensions existing both socially, with regard to race and gender, as well as formally, with respect to what occurs when non-fiction and fiction film conventions are mixed. And while one would be hard pressed to find such dissimilar films, they are similar in their treatment of the struggle of the individual, either black or female, as she or he navigates the terrain of an exceedingly oppressive—colonial in one case, patriarchal in the other—environment.

In other words, as Chapter II and III will make clear, the blurring of filmic modes offers a space for previously marginalized or counter-hegemonic representations to exist. Politically, these representations of “excess” are significant for complicating those of mainstream, commercial Hollywood narratives. If, as Ryan and Kellner argue, film “is the site of a contest of
representations over what social reality will be perceived as being and what will indeed be," then it is of utmost importance to draw critical attention to and even create representations that run counter to those socio-politically innocuous stories and characters that make up so much of the commercially dominant world of Hollywood film (13).

With a focus on documentary films, Chapter IV and V take the opposite approach and consider the role of fictional techniques in the "non-fiction" film. Originally, I was interested in looking at a range of films for Chapter IV and constructing a continuum with objective documentaries at one end and more subjective, and perhaps, reflexive documentaries at the other end. With a focus on contemporary documentary films, however, it became exceedingly difficult to find a film which still offered itself as an objective and "true" account of the reality it represented. It seems that the direct cinema tradition is giving way to the understanding that no representation is objective, and that to define any documentary construction by that standard is false. Rather than perpetuate the subjective/objective dichotomy, I chose to look at some of the ways in which documentary filmmakers have broken down the wall between themselves, their subjects, and the viewer.

Some very interesting work is being done in the area of the reflexive documentary and because the category itself is quite broad in its inclusion of any documentary that concerns itself with "the question of how we talk about the historical world," it seemed important to look at a couple of the ways filmmakers
have utilized the reflexive mode. The result is a comparative analysis of Barker's *Unmade Beds* and Earnhart's *Mule Skinner Blues*, two films that in very different ways complicate the category of documentary film by foregrounding the negotiation between fiction and non-fiction. Thus, while Barker's film, in bringing to the fore the performativity of everyday life, questions the very possibility of catching "life on the run," Earnhart illustrates the collaborative nature of the filmmaking process, one where filmmaker and participant "perform" for each other's camera. In both instances, documentary's traditionally observational stance is exposed and challenged by the ways in which the filmmaker/subject relationship is depicted as one of reciprocity. Out of the collaboration between the documentarian and his or her subject, what results is the excess that is expressed through the negotiation between fiction and non-fiction elements. In the case of *Unmade Beds*, documentary excess takes the form of Barker's subtle, yet composed shots, which are more reminiscent of a fiction film than of its more informal counterpart the documentary. And Earnhart, in *Mule Skinner Blues*, uses special effects to dramatize or exaggerate the "performances" of his participants. Each director, therefore, recognizes the degree to which his presence is one of manipulation.

Part of my decision for choosing documentaries which are obvious both in their recognition that representation is subjective and in their use of fiction film devices was based on my own plan for making a film. I was inspired by

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Earnhart's declaration that "all documentary filmmakers must influence their subjects to some degree in order to create a palatable product." With that in mind, then, I elected to make a film born out of the editing room. Godard notes that "We'll save it in the cutting-room" has applied to James Cruze, [Erich von] Stroheim, and [D. W.] Griffith, so I imagined I was at least in good company regardless of the outcome (39). With no concrete sense of how the narrative of 25 Fictions would play out, I set about shooting footage and collecting interviews. Under the loose theme of the many fictions that make up a place, I asked questions about some of the more well known folk stories and legends, like 25th Street's underground tunnels, that have come to define the historic street. And in the process the documentary's participants began to share their own personal stories.

It became clear that a representation of place necessitated also representing some of the people that inhabit, frequent, and work in that place. The result is a film that juxtaposes public place with personal meaning—each of the participants has their own stories about and attachments to certain parts of 25th St. Consequently, the documentary excess 25 Fictions explores is the unofficial history of 25th St. Unlike the analyses of The Battle of Algiers, Breaking the Waves, Unmade Beds, and Mule Skinner Blues, the structure of Chapter V is a bit less formal. As a way of following the form of 25 Fictions, I decided to cut together several different film analyses with observations on my film. In addition

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to continuing the practice of understanding the relationship between shots, or, in
the case of Chapter V, between various surveys of fiction and documentary films,
the structure of the chapter follows along with its title—just as 25 Fictions visually
documents some of the fictions of 25th St., the analyses represent a textual
documentation of some of the fictions which run through Douglas Sirk’s Written
on the Wind, for example, or Agnes Varda’s The Gleaners and I.

Together, my dual consideration of the different ways fiction and
documentary films represent their subject through a negotiation of fiction and
non-fiction techniques hopefully signals a move away from the rigid, unproductive
division of subjectivity/objectivity. One result it seems of engaging with both
fiction and documentary is a complexity in how it is that the subject and the
participant are represented. Moreover, the authority behind the construction
becomes apparent with the intermingling of filmic modes. Granted, many mock-
documentaries, such as The Blair Witch Project and Waiting for Guffman, also
reflect a negotiation between a fictional narrative, for example, represented
through a documentary lens. But such films do little to move beyond the fact that
they are mock-documentaries. It seems, therefore, that a resistance to and an
exposing of the rules behind mainstream, commercial representations are not
guaranteed by a blending of the two modes. Films like The Battle of Algiers and
Unmade Beds, however, function beyond the level of entertainment and political
commentary. They question the nature of what is fiction and non-fiction and, in
doing so, they offer representations not found in mainstream, commercial
cinema.
The theoretical debate in film studies, led by Siegfried Kracauer, André Bazin, and Rudolph Arnheim, over film and its ability to capture reality is not over. Such a dialogue is meaningful for continuing to draw attention to the political nature of the filmic representation. Film’s relationship to the material it represents is often judged by the degree of realism it conveys. And whether one takes a realist or formalist stance towards the filmic image, each position is still grounded in the idea of film as a re-presentation of actuality. The question then becomes how much does the filmmaker want to make his or her presence as mediator between material and representation apparent? Whereas Kracauer and Bazin are significant for highlighting the power the filmic image has in its ties to and direct representation of the real, Arnheim comes closer, I think, to delineating the ontology of the film image. Perhaps, as he argues, some film is not art. But even though a “film art developed only gradually when the movie makers began consciously or unconsciously to cultivate the peculiar possibilities of cinematographic technique and to apply them toward the creation of artistic productions,” art has its beginnings in the very act of representing—where the real is selected, composed, and filmed (35).

In that area between fiction and documentary, where representations admit to being composed of both fictional and non-fictional elements, there is the possibility for unmasking the rules that make up the dominant, commercial (Hollywood) system of representation. Reflexive films offer space for such excess to reside at least momentarily. Excess, according to Nichols, “becomes less a countervailing system of organization, less a challenge to the dominance
of the law that asserts its pride of place, than testimony to the centrality of that law" (142). Regarding the theoretical discussion of the relationship between film and reality, Kracauer and Bazin, in their insistence that film create a world so close to the one it is representing that the differences between the two are essentially technical, provide a politically interesting platform from which to understand how the realist tendency informs much of the thinking about film. To see the filmic representation as an extension of the world in front of the camera implies that a main significance lies in utilizing the properties of the medium to most accurately capture the real. Yet, looking at such an approach in the context of the formalist tendency, which places primary importance on how the real is made to look most artful, illustrates how even realism is a type of film form. Since the choices a filmmaker makes with regard to how his or her subject is represented reflect a particular purpose or vision, the debate over film as reality or, for Arnheim, film as art can be answered, in a sense, by thinking of this media along both realist and formalist terms. In other words, film, and this is especially the case for documentary, is a conveyor of reality and that reality is also the source from which to create art. The self-reflexive film is, it seems, one mode which attempts to bridge the realist and formalist tendencies. Whether fiction or documentary, the self-reflexive film that recognizes the degree to which the filmic representation is made up of a negotiation between fiction and non-fiction illustrates how film can be both a conveyor of reality and a type of art.
CHAPTER II

GILLO PONTECORVO'S THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS: A FICTIONAL DOCUMENTARY

What has been is documentary, what comes into being is fiction; a movie is a fiction made up of documentary details.

– Gilberto Perez, \textit{The Material Ghost}\textsuperscript{1}

Documentary parodies that purport to be actual footage but are staged, scripted, and acted... cause audiences to question or at least become confused about their assumptions concerning fiction and documentary and ultimately, I suppose, their assumptions about reality.

– Jay Ruby, "The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film"\textsuperscript{2}

Gillo Pontecorvo's \textit{The Battle of Algiers} (1965) deviates from Jay Ruby's sense of the "documentary" in one fundamental way: his historiographic film opens with the notice, "This dramatic re-enactment of The Battle of Algiers contains NOT ONE FOOT of Newsreel or Documentary Film." Even with this acknowledgment of "actuality created" as a preface, Pontecorvo's film still holds the unique power of acting upon the audience's perceptions about reality. In fact, by highlighting the artifice and re-presentational qualities of the moving image, both the opening admission and the film as a whole offer much in the way of a

\textsuperscript{1}(Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 34.

sustained intellectual critique of the politics involved in fictionalizing reality, and vice versa.

The film is a fictional reconstruction of the Algerian National Liberation Front's (F.L.N) attempts to liberate Algeria from French rule in the years 1954 to 1957. And while Pontecorvo describes *The Battle of Algiers* as "un film de fiction," he further insists, "I called it that only to polemicize with those few who improperly called it a documentary. It's clear that the movie has a dramatic structure which has nothing to do with the documentary genre. Anyway, if it must be labeled let's just say it is a film with a collective protagonist." With less attention on the individual, and a focus instead on the social forces influencing the events and the characters of the film, *The Battle of Algiers* rejects the protagonist-driven classic continuity narrative pioneered by Hollywood cinema. Pontecorvo is certainly not the first filmmaker to do so, however. His decision "to downplay character psychology as a cause" reflects the influence of Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin, two of the leading figures in the Soviet Montage movement (1924-1930). The Italian filmmaker's cinematographic and mise-en-scene choices also draw from the Russian Formalists. Both filmmakers used nonprofessional actors, shot on location, and favored a "documentary" look for their films. With respect to Eisenstein, Stephen L. Hanson writes,

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the idea of shooting *The Battle of Algiers* in the Casbah on the exact locations where the original incidents has taken place, owes much to the Soviet director's 1928 film *Oktityaber (October)*, which revisited the actual sites of the Russian revolution and employed many of the principals as actors. Pontecorvo similarly utilized most of the inhabitants of the Casbah in his film . . . . Like Eisenstein's film, which was termed by some scholars a collection of 'imaginary newsreels,' *The Battle of Algiers* flits about the city, plays tricks with time, and ignores some of the historical events entirely to concentrate its focus on those incidents that place the French army, as surrogates of the French people, into direct conflict with the FLN.⁵

Pontecorvo's interest in social context over character provides the opportunity for a multi-level critique of the film from the perspective of both narrative and the interplay of fiction and documentary film techniques. While the subject of revolution for those who are colonized is not something especially radical, the manner in which *The Battle of Algiers* is represented is particularly interesting.

It should be noted that *Battle* has been criticized for pandering more to a Hollywood agenda than its anti-establishmentalist veneer might suggest. Jean-Luc Godard, for instance, saw *Battle* as "harmful to the Algerian revolution and a victory for Hollywood."⁶ And David Wilson in *Sight and Sound* expressed a similar belief that *Battle* opted for glamour over the "real": "All that dramatic irony and moral ambivalence is only a romantic humanist's sugaring of the pill for a liberal audience unwilling to stomach the hard facts of revolution . . . . A neat and comfortably retrospective piece of historical theatre; but the truth is a lot less

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tidy."7 Stanley Kauffmann, believing there to be no clear point behind Pontecorvo's choice of events and their representation—a "sentimentality of the past" for sentimentality's sake, perhaps—felt that "Films that recreate this past merely to revel in sufferings and triumphs, such films involve a sensual, obscuring self-indulgence that is pornographic."8 While I would agree that *Battle* in some ways glamorizes and relies possibly too much upon the atrocities of war—there is a resonant beauty, for example, in Pontecorvo's lingering close-ups—the artful nature of the presentation, from the perspective of mise-en-scene and cinematography, in no way lessens its anti-colonialist message.

Economically speaking, *Variety*, in its issue from September 7, 1966, recognized the film's fundamentally marginal position with respect to high and even moderately grossing Hollywood films: although "its sales points are political (with leftwing backing assured because of its paean to revolutions and revolutionaries) and as a suspense item of sorts, . . . it will need plenty of sell to move it into ampler fields."9 In fact, to equate *Battle* with Hollywood is almost a compliment to that industry, which caters to the mainstream and avoids anything outside of the mediocre.

Certainly the issue of colonial rule as the main character is complicated by the fact that Ali La Pointe, a leader in the F.L.N, and Colonel Mathieu, who is sent in by France to regain control of Algiers, function as the poles around which

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the Algerian and French activities revolve. Formally, Pontecorvo also makes liberal use of the close-up and freeze frame in order to draw the audience’s attention to the expressive faces and emotions of individual characters within the film. Still, his observational stance and attention to the larger social tensions between oppressor and oppressed in a society on the brink of revolution trumps these moments of individuation.

My attention to content will take as its conceptual framework Albert Memmi’s portrait of the oppressor and the oppressed in his seminal work *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. My use of socio-political theory as a lens for discussing film content, and, in the case of this study, film form, takes as its premise what the editors of *Cahiers du cinéma* saw as implicit to film criticism and filmmaking—the understanding that this medium is a commodity reproducing those ideologies of the system under which it is made. According to Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni,

> every film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it (or within which it is produced, which stems from the same thing) . . . . Clearly, the cinema ‘reproduces’ reality: this is what a camera and film stock are for—so says the ideology. But the tools and techniques of filmmaking are a part of ‘reality’ themselves, and furthermore ‘reality’ is nothing but an expression of the prevailing ideology.10

Working outside of the Hollywood system, particularly with respect to production, Pontecorvo created a film which challenges dominant narrative frameworks as well as modes of representation. In addition to being influenced by non-

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Hollywood filmmakers like Roberto Rossellini and Eisenstein, Pontecorvo was aware of the media through which his contemporary audience received their news. As Hanson explains, "in bringing his message to an audience weaned on television, he was also forced to develop new modes of expressing a cinematic veracity" (230). Consequently, *Battle*, an explicitly political film, is one whose ideologies are made more evident with the applied reading of *The Colonizer and the Colonized*.

Memmi's study grew out of his experience in colonized North Africa, where the "colonial relationship . . . chained the colonizer and the colonized into an implacable dependence, molded their respective characters and dictated their conduct."¹¹ This dueling portrait of oppressor and oppressed exists on the level of the individual as s/he is defined through the above mentioned categories. However, Memmi lingers only long enough on the colonizer and colonized's particular experience to make larger and more generalized comments on the system as a whole. Similarly, by moving the focus from the individual to "the political machine itself," Pontecorvo avoids the hazards of, for example, over-sentimentalization—found in the narrow interpretive lens of the hero/villain dichotomy—that can occur when the personal is privileged at the expense of the collective in a despotic environment where the few outsiders rule the many indigenous (qtd. in Solinas, 166). The filmmaker's characters are identified not by their personal stories but by their allegiances to the broader social issues

surrounding the Algerian National Liberation Front’s attempts to wrest Algeria from French occupation. The actions of key characters like Ali La Pointe and Colonel Mathieu are then contingent upon the more significant character of the revolution. Thus, the division between Algerian and French is located, not in the individual, but in the social context of the oppressor/oppressed relationship.

The fact that *Battle* is based on real events that are then dramatized or fictionalized only to be presented with the look of “real” footage is significant when considered alongside current apprehensions the viewer has about the relationship between truth and fact in the media’s treatment of real events and the growing uncertainty for Americans over what is authentic and what is staged in the news and entertainment industry. Reminiscent of Italian Neo-Realist films, like the “newsreel immediacy” of Roberto Rossellini (whose film *Paisa* [1946] was a factor in Pontecorvo’s decision to be a filmmaker), Pontecorvo’s mise-en-scene and cinematography include black and white film, a hand-held camera, on-location shooting, and the use of non-professional actors (Jean Martin, who plays Colonel Mathieu, is the only professional). Concerning the reason behind his use of black and white film, Pontecorvo explains,

we wanted to shoot under ‘the dictatorship of truth’ avoiding usual, easy, ‘profitable’ cinematic effects . . . . Since the people are used to coming in

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12 Perez 34. In part, as Pam Cook points out, a reaction “against the contrived and mannered melodramas and comedies, often called ‘white telephone’ films, popular during the Mussolini regime” (227), Italian Neo-Realist films “sought to reflect immediate reality in simple terms” (37). And, in the case of a filmmaker like Rossellini, the disjointed, newsreel-like manner in which the information that makes up the story is presented intimates that it “is not only the director but the spectator too who is being asked to ‘make sense’ by hopping over the stepping stones” (39). Pam Cook, ed., *The Cinema Book* (London: British Film Institute, 1994).
contact with the black and white reality of the mass media—telephotos, TV newsreels, etc.—an image seems most true to them when it resembles those furnished by the media, those which inform him about what is happening in Vietnam, China, or on the moon. People practically never experience the great events of history with their own eyes . . . . So not only did I want to shoot in black and white, I also wanted to use the same lenses which would reproduce images like those of the mass media. (qtd. in Solinas, 167)

Certainly television news formats are much different now compared to the mid 1960s. But what is significant is that Battle, with its suspense generating narrative, lingering close-ups, and jittery, on-location shooting, is exemplary of the tensions generated when two different modes of storytelling are combined. How Pontecorvo handles the notion of facts (objectivity) used in support of a specific truth (subjectivity) is as seditious as his use of the collective protagonist, in terms of the narrative’s radical departure from dominant Hollywood’s fixation with the individual. Just as the division between colonizer and colonized provides a beginning framework for understanding the discord in colonial society—what Frantz Fanon describes as a “world divided into compartments, . . . inhabited by two different species”—Pontecorvo’s interplay of fiction and documentary modes of representation signifies a making visual of this divided existence. Initially, form (the fiction/documentary binary) appears to follow narrative (the colonizer/colonized binary).

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13 And, to highlight the drastic differences in the public’s reaction to television news, simply compare Pontecorvo’s comments to viewer reaction to the recent destruction of the World Trade Center Towers: Ironically, while The Battle of Algiers was made to look like the footage of real events presented in television news, its been noted that initial reactions to the destruction of the World Trade Center Towers on national television were that what was being seen was a television movie, a fiction.

14 The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963) 32.
However, as I argue towards the end of this chapter, what makes the film's style of representation particularly revolutionary is the elevation of the manner in which the story is told beyond the limits of fiction versus documentary (meaning conflict) to a hybrid state where both modes of storytelling coexist in the same film. Thus, while Memmi's socio-political analysis is used to discuss the film's narrative, Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity is applicable to the form of *Battle*. In other words, at the level of narrative *Battle* is a dialectic, the representation of colonizer and colonized (thus, colonization) together transform into revolution. But the film's style, fiction and documentary, do not synthesize into something new. Instead, fiction and documentary techniques of storytelling coexist and play off one another, but never fuse.

Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*

Albert Memmi's study is made up of two main sections—as reflected in the book's title—and he identifies both sections describing the colonizer and the colonized as portraits. In the context of this chapter's film analysis, Memmi's opening with "images" of the two types echoes the representational foundation of a visual medium like film and, in particular, Pontecorvo's very similar depiction of the oppressor and the oppressed as groups (made up of individuals) at odds with one another and yet also dependent on each other to maintain the system of colonization. In opposition to the picture of the colonizer, "a tall man, bronzed by the sun, wearing Wellington boots, . . . [who, when] not engaged in battles against nature, . . . [is] laboring selflessly for mankind, attending the sick, and spreading culture to the nonliterate," the colonized is recognized, for example, by
the generalized quality of laziness: "Nothing could better justify the colonizer's privileged position than his industry, and nothing could better justify the colonized's destitution than his indolence. The mythical portrait of the colonized therefore includes an unbelievable laziness, and that of the colonizer, a virtuous taste for action" (Memmi 79). What Memmi portrays is a system built upon division where each side is a distorted, exaggerated reflection, perpetrated by the colonizer, of what the other is not.

Like Battle, Colonizer and Colonized is aimed at a readership skeptical of colonization's abuses because they benefit either directly or indirectly from such a system. Those of the Western world who have had no direct experience with colonies, for example, are provided, in Memmi's book, with a definitive breakdown of the various types which make up the colonizer and the colonized. While the former includes those who attempt to refuse the system (which is futile unless the expatriate physically leaves the colony) and those who accept, the latter describes the two choices of the colonizer, assimilation or revolt.

Pontecorvo's film is similarly forthright in offering oppression as his interpretive lens, and revolution as the only solution. "For the colonized just as for the colonizer," argues Memmi, "there is no way out other than a complete end to colonization. The refusal of the colonized cannot be anything but absolute, that is, not only revolt, but a revolution" (150). Memmi explains that he "did not conceive of this book as a work of protest or even as a search for solutions" (145). I would argue that in a manner similar to Pontecorvo, who imagined Battle as a "hymn... in homage to the people who must struggle for their
independence, not only in Algeria, but everywhere in the third world," the writer keeps the dubious reader in the forefront. Memmi goes so far as to address him/her directly by anticipating his or her response ("'Yes, but it isn't the same thing.'") to the statement, "domination is not the only possible method of influence and exchange among people. Other small countries have transformed themselves greatly without being colonized" (113). In addition to sharing the stance that strict division between groups within a society is needed to maintain oppression, what is so illuminating about "reading" The Battle of Algiers through the lens of The Colonizer and the Colonized is the revolutionary stance each work takes in stripping the system of colonization and its myths to its basics. Battle makes visual those mythic portraits of the colonizer/colonized described by Memmi.

The Collective Protagonist and the Politics of Representation

With respect to the political climate in Algiers during the years the film covers—1954 to 1957 with a brief flashforward to 1960—Pontecorvo admits that the Algerians and the French "are in a situation in which the only factor is oppression" (qtd. in Mellen, 24). And this atmosphere is clearly articulated through the stark depiction of the two factions. What Pontecorvo's conceptual frame of oppression reveals is the guise of "naturalness" that colonization displays once established as an institution. Memmi explains, "colonial racism is so spontaneously incorporated in even the most trivial acts and words, that it

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15 Qtd. in Joan Mellen, Filmguide to The Battle of Algiers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973) 24.
seems to constitute one of the fundamental patterns of colonialist personality” (70). And racism is most clearly articulated for the filmmaker in the division between French and Algerian. In this respect, Pontecorvo chose not to include the more complicated individuals and groups whose affiliations straddled the divide between the two groups. Because the film, as Joan Mellen points out, “omits in favor of scenes of terrorism and action a nuanced view of the conflict between the French and the Algerians,” nowhere, for example, is there mention of “the European Algerians who identified or even fought with the F.L.N.,” or “the presence of the Algerian bourgeoisie and its role in the struggle for independence.”

Yet, *Battle* is no less complex for such omissions. Pontecorvo’s historical reenactment reflects an interest in capturing the momentum needed for the revolutionary overthrow of the oppressor’s regime by the oppressed. And, in *Battle*, the vehicle for liberation is the collective. For Ali La Pointe and the F.L.N., the “negative myth thrust on . . . [them] by the colonizer is succeeded by a positive myth about . . . [themselves] suggested by the colonized” (Memmi 139). The viewer is introduced to La Pointe in his pre-F.L.N. days as someone unemployed who runs an illegal card betting table on the streets of the Casbah. Once spotted by the police, La Pointe runs and is eventually tripped by a young Frenchman. La Pointe’s reaction is to bloody the

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16 62, 63-64. An additional limitation is the film’s heroic portrayal of the Algerian women fighting for liberation. See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s discussion of *Battle* in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994). They note, for example, that the “film does not ultimately address the two-fronted nature of their struggle within a nationalist but still patriarchal revolution” (255).
youth's nose. Finally caught by the police, Ali's record is read, against the image of him being carried away, in a French voice-over. There are two competing images in this sequence, La Pointe as a criminal and La Pointe as someone ready to fight the oppressor. Eventually, he turns the colonizer's image of an illiterate deviant into that of a freedom fighter whose interests converge with those of the collectively oppressed.

Fascinated with "the feelings and the emotions shared by a multitude, the ability for the mass, in special moments, to express certain qualities and a kind of enthusiasm which you generally don't find in the individual," the filmmaker provides numerous examples of the extremism found in group behavior (qtd. in Solinas, 165). Although the film sides with the Algerian revolutionaries in their struggle for freedom, the collective actions, whether Algerian F.L.N. or French military, are projected through the same critical lens through which all violent conduct is questioned: "Violence is seen in the entire film in an extremely painful way. Its consequences are the same even when used by those who are historically right; using it is a tragic necessity" (qtd. in Solinas, 178). Here Pontecorvo aligns himself with the social critic Frantz Fanon, who argues that for the Algerian situation "colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning facilities. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence (48). Thus, the brute force asserted by the French in their possession of Algeria (and the city of Algiers for Battle) is logically met by those same means in the F.L.N.'s attempts to liberate themselves and their city. By dispensing with the details of personal history (and,
in some cases, providing only a broad sketch of the past), the filmmaker lays
bare the shared emotions that bind together the individuals of each group. Along
with assessing the film's treatment of the collective, Memmi's study, rooted in the
notional portraits of master and slave, invites us to observe those moments in the
film when each group imagines the other.

Tactically speaking, the F.L.N.'s greatest strength is that its structure is
based on a pyramid made up of individual cells with each person knowing only
the person above them and the two persons he selects to direct. Anonymity
exists to a great degree for the F.L.N. members, and this poses problems for the
French police and military conducting the investigation. The French are, thus,
left to invasive techniques like checkpoints and body searches in an effort to limit
the number of violent and murderous acts against the French population in
Algiers. In fact, the French strategy begins with halting all movement from the
Muslim or Casbah section of Algiers into the French section. With, as Shohat
and Stam point out, the "dividing line between these two worlds . . . formed by
barbed wire and barracks and police stations," the binary of oppressor/oppressed
is spatially enforced (252).

And it is against a screen showing footage captured from cameras
surveying the various checkpoints that the famed Colonel Mathieu imagines the
enemy they are up against: "Anonymous and unrecognizable, it mingles with the
crowd. It is everywhere; in the cafes, in the alleys of its ghetto . . . in the streets
of the French city, in stores and work areas." The French—in the dominant
position as the colonizer—are operating from a worldview that sees their
occupation of Algiers as positive and the presence of the F.L.N. as negative. At this point in the film, Algeria has been under colonial rule for one hundred and thirty years. Once the French start to imagine the other, they continue the process of imposing their definition of the Algerians against the personal, racial, and cultural identity the Algerian men and women already maintain. According to Memmi, the "most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and from the community" (91). As Colonel Mathieu explains, "To know them means we can eliminate them." Here the French leader is referring to a knowledge of the F.L.N. that goes beyond the surface qualities captured on surveillance footage. And yet a deeper understanding of exactly who these men and women are, their ideals and worldviews, is necessarily prefaced, according to the French, by being able to identify them on a surface level (profiling them, if you will, in the surveillance footage). *Battle* makes evident that to impose an identity or definition on another is to literally bring about the destruction of the other.

The imagining of the enemy and the power of the collective work together in the scene of an Arab street cleaner who is unjustly arrested for the murder of a policeman. From their balconies overlooking the street, French men and women hear the approaching police sirens and automatically assume the aged Arab man is to blame for the crime. The camera pans from an upward tilting shot of the crowd on the balcony down to the street cleaner sitting on the curb. The vertical distance between the individual and the group supports the dominance of the French. Pontecorvo captures the mob atmosphere and raw anger of the French
by cutting from a close-up of the street cleaner staring up in bewilderment to the faces of those shouting, "Murderer!," "Dirty Arab!," and "Kill all the bastards off—then we'll have peace." Trying to run away and escape, the Arab, with the camera tracking along beside him, is followed by the invectives until caught by the police. Once again, in this panicky need to identify the enemy, the individual is made representative of the group, and the F.L.N. in this case, is thought of as representative of the Arab population in Algiers. "The colonized," as Memmi observes, "is never characterized in an individual manner, he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity" (85).

Throughout the film, the duality of Us versus Them occupies the forefront of the colonial experience and is indicative of an atmosphere that is built upon a hierarchical structure favoring a particular race and culture. What the scene of the indistinct street cleaner shows is an external projection of the trauma found in the clash between the personal identity and the broad meanings imposed upon the individual by the dominant group. Conversely, the Algerian organization resists taking the French, and their definitions, into their consciousness.

Of the many resistance fighters for the F.L.N., the Algerian women are the most interesting as far as the challenges they face in temporarily abandoning certain Muslim traditions, like dress, for independence. As PierNico Solinas points out, the "real protagonists of The Battle of Algiers . . . are the people; and Pontecorvo has focused his narrative on them, tracing the process through which colonialism, once suffered individually, becomes a common foe" (xi). Concerning the issue of the Algerians imagining the French, Pontecorvo includes the practice
of certain F.L.N. women trading their veils for the clothing, hairstyles, and demeanor of European women so that they may pass safely and easily through the checkpoints with bombs intended for three popular establishments in the French section, the Air France terminal, a cafeteria, and a milk bar. The viewer is neither told nor shown anything about the women; only the removal of veils, and the cutting and dying of hair tell of the danger they are up against. The filmmaker includes a number of close-ups in this scene that can be traditionally read as attempts at character individualization. But as the scene description in the script reveals, "Every action is performed precisely and carefully. They are like three actresses preparing for the stage. But there is no gaiety; no one is speaking. Only silence emphasizes the detailed rhythm of their transformation . . ."\(^{17}\) Although the women each have their own task, their collectivity is stressed over their separateness. And as Joan Mellen claims, the "omnipresence of the mirror in this scene gives the effect that we are entering into the consciousness of the three, who are also symbols."\(^{18}\) While the major obstacle for the French is identifying each F.L.N. member, the Algerians are acutely aware of the colonizer's presence and must find ways to elude capture. "Within the psychodynamics of oppression," explains Shohat and Stam, "the slave, the colonial, the woman know the mind of the oppressor, while the

\(^{17}\) Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, 66-67.

\(^{18}\) 47. The mirror also represents the divided outward identities of the women: Algerian freedom fighters on the inside appearing European on the outside.
converse is not true.\textsuperscript{19} Hence, the women, who under traditional Muslim dress are fully covered when in public, are, unlike the men, successfully able to adopt different personas. This fluidity means a sophisticated control over individual identity and the meanings and representations forced on the individual by a more dominant group. In effect, these three Algerian women are using the colonizer's persona against them.

As far as Pontecorvo's treatment of the F.L.N. collective is concerned, there is a solidarity within the group that does not define itself against the French. This is very different from his depiction of the French in the scene of the Arab street cleaner, for example. It seems that the dominant group, in order to maintain its position, must constantly reassert its superiority over the other. And for the Algerians on the brink of revolution, resistance, partly under the guise of an acceptance of the oppressor's representations of the other, is necessary. As evidenced in the scene of a crowd of children reacting to a drunk Algerian man in the street, however, group solidarity can also be taken to the extreme for the Algerians. Following a communiqué by the F.L.N. that gambling, drugs, alcohol, and solicitation be prohibited and the transgressors punished (since "The Colonial Administration is responsible . . . for the degradation and corruption of many of our Brothers and Sisters who have lost all sense of dignity"), children, one of whom is the character of Le Petit Omar, are shown descending upon the drunken man. As described in the script, the scene is one of violent aggression:

\textsuperscript{19} 254. Thus, it makes sense that the women would be so successful at impersonating their oppressors, while the French, no where near "knowing" the F.L.N., are still wrestling with the outward identification of the rebellious colonized.
“Omar points to the drunk who is now moving away, and gives the order to attack. It is evident that this is not a game for them, but a duty . . . . The children are now on top of him, like small beasts on a carrion” (30-31). Evidently, Pontecorvo is not reserving his condemnatory view of violence for any one particular group; the Algerians, even the young ones, are capable of brutality towards both the French and those in their own society who have any connection with the colonizer’s iniquities. While the scene does little to bolster sympathy for the Algerian cause, it does illustrate, in addition to what Irene Bignardi describes as “the enthusiasm of a collective battle,” the obsessive behavior of revolutionary thinking and ideals that we see on both sides of the conflict.  

The Battle of Algiers succeeds in capturing both the raw emotions of the masses as well as the “black-and-white” atmosphere of the Algerian/French division. Pontecorvo is quite straightforward, and some may even say simplistic, in his representation of the political climate in Algiers leading up to the revolution. His decision to limit his reenactment to the tensions between the F.L.N. and Colonel Mathieu (the French military) allows the colonizer/colonized relationship to remain the central point. However, the film’s form, though rooted in division and highlighting the oppressor/oppressed relationship, suggests another state besides that of conflict. The combination of a dramatic treatment of reality and cinematography and post-production work reminiscent of newsreels and documentary footage represents not conflict between two separate entities, but a

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state of hybridity or what Homi K. Bhabha describes as “a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition.” In other words, Pontecorvo’s style of representation is neither a dialectical merging of fiction and documentary techniques nor is it simply representative of the traditional conflict between the two modes. Because the two modes coexist in the same filmic space, the relationship between fiction and documentary is one of interaction. As such, what the hybrid form of Battle disrupts is the authority that documentary carries as a vehicle of objective information and fiction’s authority in the realm of subjectivity.

Battle is a re-telling immersed in the lived reality of the Algerian/French situation in Algiers during the late 1950s. Pontecorvo’s narrow focus of “the birth, development, and crumbling of the NLF organization in Algiers, in effect, the battle of Algiers” (qtd. in Solinas, 164) is what animates Albert Memmi’s description of a society where “the more freely he (the colonizer) breathes, the more the colonized are choked” (8). The topic of the film, as expressed through the perspective of a marginalized people, is one of revolution, and its form, rooted in the separatist politics of the colonial situation, is significant for moving beyond the division expressed in the film to a situation of hybridity where

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21 The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994) 114.
seemingly opposing entities, like fiction and documentary, can coexist in the same space, each bringing into the question the assumptions of the other.

Film Form and the Politics of Fictionalizing History

Although Pontecorvo has denied the documentary label for describing his film, an analysis of the mise-en-scene and cinematography reveals how much the filmmaker "wanted it to look as though it had been 'stolen' from reality" (qtd. in Solinas, 186). Some critics have even gone so far as to describe his film as "cinéma vérité" (Mellen 58). For purposes of clarity, it is important to define what is meant by cinéma vérité because the term has come to signify both a type of filmmaking pioneered by French documentary filmmakers like, Jean Rouch, and, less precisely, the type of documentary filmmaking begun in America during the 1960s and practiced by such filmmakers as the Maysles brothers and Frederick Wiseman. The latter was actually called "direct cinema" at the time and is a better term for describing Pontecorvo's filmmaking. The documentary film historian Eric Barnouw provides a clear delineation between the two:

The direct cinema documentarist took his camera to a situation of tension and waited hopefully for a crisis; the Rouch version of cinéma vérité tried to precipitate one. The direct cinema artist aspired to invisibility; the Rouch cinéma vérité artist was often an avowed participant. The direct cinema artist played the role of uninvolved bystander; the cinéma vérité artist espoused that of provocateur.22

Pontecorvo's position is certainly that of an observer. However, as with the direct cinema documentary filmmakers, the obvious choices made in cinematography

and editing belie the "fly on the wall" stance the filmmaker purports to have
towards the subject of the film. And clearly, Pontecorvo's professed making of a
"film of fiction" foregrounds this as a reenactment of reality.

Unlike the documentary film that incorporates fiction film techniques, the
inclusion of documentary conventions as well as actual footage in fiction film is
often uncontested and even celebrated. But this blurring between reality (for lack
of a better term since even documentary is mediated and a representation of
reality) and fiction seems only acceptable (especially in terms of mass audience
appeal) in the realm of documentary film when the film's framework is that of a
mock or pseudo documentary. With respect to *The Battle of Algiers*, Pontecorvo
was advised by American film critics that he include the opening caption
explaining the fictional nature of the narrative: "After seeing the film they said,
'You mean there's no newsreel.' 'No, really,' I (Pontecorvo) told them, 'I swear it
on my children.' 'Well then,' they replied, 'you'd better put a note at the
beginning saying so, otherwise nobody is going to believe you'" (qtd. in Solinas,
172). Certainly, an analysis of the complex and politically infused relationship
represented on screen between documentary filmmaker and subject must be
prefaced by and built upon the premise that the documentary mode is neither
pure fact nor objectively told. As Stella Bruzzi argues,

> a documentary can never be the real world, . . . the camera can never
capture life as it would have unraveled had it not interfered, and the
results of this collision between apparatus and subject are what
constitutes a documentary – not the utopian vision of what might have transpired if only the camera had not been there.\textsuperscript{23} Consequently, the fictive elements in documentary film emanate from the interaction between subject and filmmaker/camera and, while it cannot be argued that documentaries make claims of truth, what is in question is the factuality of documentary film.

Pontecorvo's revisionist historical film is primarily a fiction film. With the exception of Yacef Saadi, who plays himself in the film as the character of Djafar, the F.L.N. commander, the other characters are played by mostly non-actors, ranging from farmers to prostitutes. Out of the interaction between Pontecorvo and the subject of the battle for Algiers comes what Shohat and Stam call "a constant dialectic between individual and community; certain personalities step briefly into the foreground only to recede again into the mass" (252). It is, therefore, at the level of the narrative that a dialectic resides. Through cinematography and editing, however, the filmmaker has made it abundantly clear that the film should look nothing like, for example, the classic fictional cinema of Hollywood. Even the newsreel and documentary look of the film represents a resistance towards paramount forms of media, such as television news and Hollywood film: Pontecorvo "hijacks the apparatus of 'objectivity' and the formulaic techniques of mass-media reportage (hand-held cameras, frequent zooms, long lenses) to express political views that would be anathema to the dominant media" (Shohat and Stam 253).

Formally speaking, then, the combination of a fiction film with a documentary look is not so much an example of dialectic as it is one of hybridity. Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of hybridity emphasizes not a dialectical merging of one identity with another identity to form a third, new identity, but simply the coexistence of the two identities, cultures, or forms in the same space, person, or object. In the context of, for instance, colonization, hybridity “represents the ambivalent ‘turn’ of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification — a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority” (Bhabha 113). The “paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontrollable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside” (Bhabba 116). Thus, hybridity’s presence implies a threat to the dominant framework that seeks to impose binary classifications. One type of dominant media Battle reacts against is what Pontecorvo describes as a “cinema d’élite for an elite.”

24 The filmmaker has countered the Hollywood factory of dreams with a film which includes fictional (i.e. classic continuity) and documentary styles of storytelling so that what results is, for instance, “the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 4). Another duality the film challenges is the assumed divide between documentary and fiction film and each mode’s authority

24 Qtd. in Solinas, 190. According to the class conscious filmmaker, “Cinema can be a way of revitalizing a people’s deadened responses. We have been conditioned to absorb a false vision of reality that is dominated by the tastes, morals, and perceptions of the ‘establishment’. To forego the possibility of opposing the fictions diffused by this establishment is in the least irresponsible.”
in conveying information either objectively or subjectivity. Because hybridity "is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures," or in this case two modes of filmic representation, it is an appropriate idea for describing the effect generated by a revisionist historical film being shot in the manner of a documentary film (Bhabha 113).

While Memmi's concept of a divided society is the framework for assessing the content of the film, hybridity is useful for understanding the film's form (the relationship between fiction and documentary film devices). The staged and stylized look of the quiet, more intimate moments—where the scene consists of only a few characters, some of whom are shot in close-up—exists alongside documentary-like scenes of crowds often captured in long shot. In some ways, the use of documentary devices to tell a fictionalized version of actual events does initially resemble the binary framework found in a colonized society, for example. Instead of a split between two entities or factions, however, where one is held superior to the other, the relationship of "subjective" and "objective" methods of visual communication is, for Battle, one of reciprocity.

Violence, as a means of protest and retaliation, is a theme that figures prominently in the film's cinematography and editing. As Joan Mellen explains Pontecorvo's editing of the images and sound "is used to contrast violence and chaos with quiescence and calm afterward during which each side may assess its situation and the effects of its latest retaliation" (45). Clearly, Sergei Eisenstein's influence also extends to the post-production aspect of montage. Pontecorvo utilized Eisenstein's theory of the "intellectual montage," a "conflict
juxtaposition of accompanying intellectual affects . . . [where] though the emotional principle is universally human, the intellectual principle is profoundly tinged by class." 25 Eisenstein conceived of film form as a dialectic—"logic of organic form vs. the logic of rational form yields, in collision, the dialectic of the art-form"—but the shot or scene is a combination of both narrative and form. Hence, the juxtaposition of calm and chaos, for example, in the narrative of Battle synthesizes into revolution of the Algerians. The combination of fiction and documentary, on the other hand, represents a coexistence of modes. A focus on Pontecorvo's placement of shots or montage—editing which "emphasizes dynamic, often discontinuous, relationships between shots and the juxtaposition of images to create ideas not present in either shot by itself"—reveals his creation of a hybrid film that questions both Hollywood representations and any ties the documentary may have to notions of objectivity (Bordwell and Thompson 432). Moreover, the conventions of Hollywood filmmaking, like continuity editing, and on-location documentary filmmaking, like the hand-held camera, are engaged with at the same time that they are critiqued. While Eisenstein's intellectual montage forms the foundation for the film (functioning as the bridge between scenes), the technique of continuity editing is used to cut together the shots that comprise many of the more intimate scenes. 26

26 Continuity editing is defined by Bordwell and Thompson as a "system of cutting to maintain continuous and clear narrative action. Continuity editing relies upon matching screen direction, position, and temporal relations from shot to shot" (429). Since the purpose of continuity editing is to maintain seamless narrative action, the director will abide by, for example, the "axis of action" and employ such strategies as opening a scene with an "establishing shot" followed by a "shot/reverse shot" and finally
In order to show how *The Battle of Algiers* represents an example of hybridity through its use of montage, I will focus on a sequence of scenes beginning with the French police commissioner and others at a dinner party and concluding with the well-known, previously discussed, scene, inspired by Frantz Fanon’s essay “Algeria Unveiled,” depicting three Algerian women trading their veils for the look of European women. The only scene depicting any aspect of French domesticity, the dinner party sequence represents one of those moments in the film where stillness prevails. Much is said visually about the theme of class, however, especially when compared to its Algerian counterpart. The wedding scene between Fatima and Mahmoud, two of the younger members of the F.L.N., is immersed in the political and social cause of the Algerian people. The ceremony is introduced with the poignant words that “to have dispensed with the French Colonial Administration in order to be married by an F.L.N. authority is an act of conscience and an act of war.” In contrast to the wedding’s serious and somber tone, the sense of economic and personal ease at the French party is conveyed through both the images and the sound; as Mellen points out, the “music accompanying the French bourgeoisie at their evening party is light and frivolous, a harmless jazz easily blending with the tinkling of glasses and the sounds of laughter. The sound at this moment satirizes the French” (32). In terms of cinematography, the scene opens quite formally with an upward tilting shot of the two children at an open window saying good night to their mother, a “reestablishing shot.” As Bordwell and Thompson point out, “establishment/breakdown/reestablishment . . . [is] one of the most common patterns of spatial editing in the classical continuity style” (266).
presumably the host of the party. The camera then pans down to include the mother's reaction in the foreground and the guests seated at a table in the background. The party is taking place outside. Pontecorvo then cuts to the police commissioner, leaning against a tree in the middle-ground, saying that the men need to be leaving for “the club” soon. The scene, in maintaining visual and narrative continuity, exhibits qualities associated with the fiction film. And this finished look carries over into the next scene as well.

Again, the central characters are the French police commissioner and his associates, except that they are now shown traveling by car to what the viewer knows of as “the club.” However, once the car pulls up to a checkpoint, we realize “the club” they are referring to might just be a cover since the men are proceeding into the Casbah. The discussion between soldier and driver is shot in typical shot/reverse shot pattern with the camera alternately positioned behind the shoulder of the soldier and inside the car looking over the shoulder of the driver.27 What then follows is the secretive planting of a bomb in the Casbah by one of the men. With an atmosphere of intimacy carrying over from the first to the second scene, it is apparent in Battle that the more personal, private scenes are those that appear less like documentary footage. While this is not to say that Pontecorvo has less directorial control over the more chaotic mob or bombing scenes, only that he is successful at combining fictional and documentary...

27 Concerning the shot/reverse shot pattern, Steven D. Katz claims that “No cutting strategy better represents the Hollywood style than this one.” Shot By Shot (Studio City: Michael Wise Productions, 1991) 175.
methods of filmmaking so that the film represents not a merging of the two but a hybrid—allowing each to exist on its own and in relation to the other.

The stealthy calm of the nighttime bomb planting scene is broken by loud explosions and multiple shots of thick, smoke-filled air. Serving as a transition from the actions of the French police to the reactions of the F.L.N., the destruction of the Casbah building dissolves into the excavation of its ruins the following day. As in the previous scenes, Pontecorvo's direction is intrusive. Yet, this beautifully orchestrated tableau of death and destruction carries with it overtones of extemporization similar to that of unscripted, on-location documentary filmmaking. Setting the tone for the scene is Ennio Morricone's evocative score, an adaptation of Johann Sebastian Bach's Mass in B Minor, which Mellen describes as "soft mourning music, a hymn to those whose lives have been lost" (32). Incidentally, the same music accompanies the aftermath of the F.L.N. orchestrated bombing scenes of the French cafeteria and bar. Although Pontecorvo's sympathies are with the Algerians, he "condemns all human suffering, . . . and suggests that terror committed against the innocent, no matter under what flag, undermines the cause in whose name it is deployed" (Mellen 34).28 Beginning with an overhead long shot looking down from the roof

28 Although Pontecorvo, clearly siding with the Algerian cause, ends Battle with the Algeria's liberation some years later, his subtle assertion that no act of violence is completely justifiable is perhaps one example of the romantic humanism critics like David Wilson charge him with. Stephen Hanson goes on to explain, "Pontecorvo's moral view, though somewhat dubious from an ethical standpoint, appears to be that bombs and torture employed by the French are fundamentally evil because they are employed in a lost cause—the defense of colonialism. On the other hand, the same instruments when employed by the revolutionaries become forces of liberation, and while their destructive effects are unfortunate, they are, in the end, pardonable in the light of the positive results of the emancipation of the Algerian people" (231-2). Even though the
tops at the destroyed building, the shot then cuts to a location in the ruins. Situated “in the action,” the camera pans up to those it was initially positioned alongside while gazing down at the workers and the wounded. The director, thus, sets up the scene for the viewer with a traditional establishing shot. Even though, as Mellen points out, “Pontecorvo varies long and middle shots, refraining from the close-up,” he has characters cross in front of the camera—moving in and out of the foreground—thereby creating unintentional close-ups (45). And it is these “inadvertent” moments that lend the scene the sense of being captured from reality.

Eisenstein’s notion that “montage is conflict” is exemplified by the F.L.N. reaction—a mob led by Ali La Pointe—that follows the bombing incident (38). Narratively speaking, the scenes of calm and chaos represent a dialectic. But from the perspective of form, the two scenes—instead of portraying the dialectical merging of thesis and antithesis into a third, new term—illustrate the ontological instance of hybridity. The angry response to the bombing death of Algerian adults and children is situated between the destroyed building (the reason for the F.L.N. wrath) and the transformation of three Algerian women as they prepare to deposit bombs in the French section of Algiers (the reaction to the police’s act of violence). While such editorial choices furnish a dynamic effect, the issue of “conflict” for the form of Battle does not imply division but a sense of symmetry between opposing elements. Thus, an accord exists

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filmmaker does, in the end, take a stand, he still seems to favor a simplistic depiction of history.
between, for example, the orchestrated despair displayed in the search for the dead/wounded and the spontaneous rage evinced by the mob.

The episode opens with a long shot of La Pointe at the center of a crowd rushing down the steps to the streets of Algiers. Shouting “Murderers,” La Pointe leads the group towards the camera, which sits stationary while people come close enough to begin appearing out of focus and indistinguishable. Unlike the previous scene, which exhibits a more stylized documentary look, the onrush of the crowd in the present episode suggests a spontaneous catching of “life on the run.” In fact, movement is dictated not by the camera (which is hand-held yet static), but by the crowd—as if the filmmaker is overwhelmed by it and can only keep recording. This sense of disorder and chaos is furthered by the camera level being kept at chest height while the mob runs towards and past the viewer. Panning around 180 degrees, the viewer feels lost in the crowd. The confusion ends, however, once the camera cuts to a tracking shot following Djafar as he emerges out of a side street to confront the mob. Mellen notes that “Djafar suddenly appears as if from nowhere to calm the demonstrators,” thus revealing “Pontecorvo’s facility in mixing nonrealistic, almost surreal aspects of life, with the most realistic documentary approach” (46). And such a blending of filmic modes extends to the image Pontecorvo uses to connect this and the next scene. Against the mournful cries of the Algerian women, an anonymous woman, dressed and veiled in white and surrounded by others in the crowd, stands in the center of the screen. Pontecorvo then cuts to a close-up of one of the three
Algerian women preparing to adopt the persona of a European. The bridge is complete with the woman, reflected in a mirror, taking off her veil.

Pontecorvo's use of the veil as a bridge between scenes emphasizes the significance of both its presence for the identity of the Algerian women and its absence for the cause of the F.L.N. Moreover, this sequence of scenes reflects the filmmaker's artful manner in piecing together the raw look of the documentary image and the stylized look of the fiction image. This is very different from the film's narrative, which posits a dialectical tension between colonization and liberation. The film's form, as an example of hybridity, points to a way of combining the conflicting modes of documentary and fiction filmmaking in such a way that in the end both modes remain intact and yet exist in their relation to one another. Thus, with the purity of each filmic mode in question, *Battle* exposes the basics of filmmaking—whether fiction or documentary—and, as the opening denial of actual footage implies, the politics of representing reality.

Conclusion

As is clear in the instances of racial division and hybridity that run through the film, *The Battle of Algiers* is not simply an historical reenactment or an example of historical revisionism. The film addresses not only the problematics of usurping colonial rule, but also the underlying premises of fiction and documentary filmmaking. As "Pontecorvo's fictionalizing [of] the documentary" suggests, his representation of actual peoples and events is made up of many complex layers, not the least of which is his decision to favor the collective over the individual" (Mellen 57). At the outset it would seem contradictory to argue
that while the film's narrative asserts division, the form reflects a melding of two
diverse modes without itself transforming into some new form. However, if we
think of a film's form as supporting the narrative, the combination of formally shot
scenes and scenes seemingly dictated by the actions of a crowd—from intimate
interior shots to riotous exterior shots—highlights the tenuous nature of the
Algerian struggle for freedom. Pontecorvo foregrounds the plight of living under
colonial rule and the measures necessary for exacting liberation, but the
filmmaker denounces both French and Algerian violence at the expense of
innocent lives.

As previously indicated, the documentary look of Battle is also the result of
Pontecorvo's attempt to represent the F.L.N.'s steps towards liberation through
the medium—"the black and white reality of the mass media"—most often
associated by the viewer with what is "real." Considering current apprehensions
about the veracity of television news and other mass media, Battle is as timely
now as it was then in its challenge of the objective roots associated with both
news sources and the documentary image. Pontecorvo's "ironic affiliation of the
real" with the characteristics of his "documentary" image may be considered
naive in light of today's cynical stance towards anything shot with, for example, a
hand-held camera. With movies like The Blair Witch Project (1999), and the
numerous movies it has inspired, not the least of which is The Bare Wench
Project (1999), the blatant overuse of the jittery hand-held style has resulted in a
loss of meaning, intention and formality behind the device. However, Battle
demonstrates the complexities involved with fictionalizing reality and the power of the documentary image, whether real or reenactment, to be read as unscripted.

What Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* offers is a serious portrait of the oppressor/oppressed relationship through the lens of a fictionalized documentary, which does not fall back on certain post-modern ideals of irony and relativism. Robert Shulman, in his discussion of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," offers an insightful critique of postmodernism that is useful when considering *Battle*: "Under the guise of an avant-garde opposition to the dominant society, post-modernism thus serves the interests of the market society . . . . It gives them a morally uplifting sense of rebellion that is at the same time certifiably harmless" 29 While rebellion is the point of Pontecorvo's film, this "homage to the people who must struggle for their independence, not only in Algeria, but everywhere in the third world," is far from harmless (qtd. in Mellen, 24). When looked at in conjunction with Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Pontecorvo clearly portrays the two sides of the fight for Algiers, and takes the unprecedented step of telling part of the story through the eyes of the non-western, colonized group. Thus, the term "revolutionary" is appropriate for describing the narrative of *The Battle of Algiers*. Concerning the artful manner in which the film is presented, however, Pontecorvo moves beyond the dialectic to a hybrid state in which the filmic representation is one not so easily delineated.

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CHAPTER III

LARS VON TRIER'S BREAKING THE WAVES: MERGING MELODRAMA WITH A DOCUMENTARY AESTHETIC

I, Lars von Trier, am but a simple masturbator of the silver screen.
— Manifesto, Dec. 29, 1990

On the one hand, there is documentary realism, the film as bleak record of events and milieu; on the other, the film's obsessive concern with itself . . . . Total distance—the documentation, observation, scrutiny, rendering identifications difficult, precarious—goes along with total implication—the camera frantically engaged in the action, seeking to find some truth to which to hold . . .
— Stephen Heath, "God, Faith and Film: Breaking the Waves"1

Lars von Trier, perhaps Denmark's best-known filmmaker since Carl Theodor Dreyer, has consistently made films exploring the uncommon representational possibilities available in the collision/union between a highly stylized filmic form and familiar film genres. Bizarre, surrealist imagery permeates both the detective story of The Element of Crime (1984) and Zentropa (1991), a thriller about post-Nazi German guilt. Moreover, the often moral, psychological, and para-theological bent of such films—including the skeptical search for a cure to disease in Epidemic (1986), the second in a trilogy

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1 Literature & Theology 12 (March 1998): 102.
comprised of Element and Zentropa—is expressed in and resisted by what von Trier has described as "an almost fetishistic attraction to film technology."²

Ironically, von Trier's forays into digital video—either to film the movie, as in the recent Dancer In the Dark (2000), or for the purpose of image manipulation, as in Breaking the Waves (1996)—represent a homage to and reaction against the artifice of Hollywood. Known for penning, along with Thomas Vinterberg, the now infamous Vow of Chastity, von Trier—and the collective of Danish film directors known as Dogme 95—created a set of rules meant to counter the fact that the "movie has been cosmeticised to death."³

However, many of the filmmakers who worked under the Dogme edict, including von Trier and even American director Harmony Korrine, rarely abided by every command. The rules are known more for the mere fact that they exist than as an explicitly followed framework. Although all of von Trier's films are "art cinema," it is the self-referential foregrounding of the filmic apparatus found in Breaking the Waves (1996) that I feel warrants further attention. Breaking the Waves is not a Dogme film, but, like von Trier's films since 1995, it is shot on location with a


³ What follows is the Dogme decalogue: 1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in . . . 2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. 3. The camera must be hand-held. 4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. 5. Optical work and filters are forbidden. 6. The film must not contain superficial action. 7. The film must take place in the here and now. 8. Genre movies are not acceptable. 9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm. 10. The director must not be credited. Dogme 95 Website, April 2002 <http://www.dogme95.dk>.
hand-held camera. In addition to the filmmaker's break with traditional Hollywood continuity editing, the hand-held camera work signals a move away from the non-jarring, seamless look of most Hollywood film. *Breaking the Waves* not only brought von Trier international attention, winning the Grand Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, it also highlights the tenuous relationship between fiction and documentary; a border area, which, in questioning the assumed divide between what is 'real'/‘fact’ and what is constructed, can reposition, as well as redraw, social and filmic types. A revealing negotiation occurs when the conventional melodramatic narrative of *Breaking the Waves*—“Von Trier himself categorizes the film as a sensual melodrama”—is represented visually in a style associated with grainy, jittery home movies.\(^5\)

Set against the backdrop of a small, yet very strict, patriarchal religious community on the Isle of Skye off Scotland’s west coast during the 1970s, the central love story of *Breaking the Waves* involves the marriage of Bess, a devout member of the religious community, and Jan, an outsider who works offshore on the oil rigs. There are various theories as to why von Trier would set this melodrama in the 1970s. One of the more interesting ideas, especially as it relates to the documentary considerations of this chapter, concerns Victoria

\(^4\) *Breaking the Waves* is the first of a trilogy of films. It is followed by the Dogme film *The Idiots* (1998) and concludes with *Dancer in the Dark*, whose lead character Selma shares traits similar to Bess in *Breaking the waves*.

Nelson’s reference to the “shaky motion of a hand-held camera, . . . [an] indispensable feature of 1970s cinéma vérité.” I would also add that this love story’s naivete and the existence of such a remote, rather self-contained community is more believable twenty years ago than if set in the era of late 1990s globalization.

Bess and Jan’s marriage is threatened when Jan is severely injured in a work-related accident and returns paralyzed and in critical condition. The simple Bess believes she is to blame for Jan’s condition since she prayed to God that he be sent home from the rig at all costs. She goes to dangerous, and what could be described as masochistic, lengths—ultimately alienating herself from her family and community—to keep him alive and restore his ability to walk. As per Jan’s request that by having sex with other men Bess will save his life, she offers herself until her death at the hands of a particularly sadistic couple of men. The funeral scene follows during which Jan is shown miraculously walking with the assistance of a cane. Bess’s death saved his life, and, in what many consider to be a moment of oversentimentalization, she “visits” her husband at the end of the film in the form of massive bells ringing down at him from the heavens.

*Breaking the Waves* employs many of the narrative devices associated with Hollywood melodramatic films of the forties and fifties, including religious and medical institutions both of which directly affect the central love story. Even

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though *Breaking the Waves* is told from the perspective of a woman and follows, initially at least, what Thomas Elsaesser describes as one of "the characteristic features of melodramas . . . that they concentrate on the point of view of the victim," von Trier's approach resists traditional conceptions of the oppressed female victim by investing Bess with the agency to appropriate and manipulate certain aspects of the patriarchal religious and medical institutions for her own ends.7 Moreover, since this powerful sense of self is asserted primarily through her intense emotional and physical love for her husband Jan, Bess reflects melodramatic notions of excessive and obsessive passion. However, her passion is also her greatest gift: during a scene in which Dr. Richardson is pleading with to Bess to think rationally when it comes to her husband, she points out that "God gives everyone something to be good at. But he wants us to find out for ourselves what it is. I have always been stupid. But . . . I can believe."

In one way, her power of belief (expressed as a naive moral), both religiously speaking and in terms of saving her injured husband from death, has the problematic effect of reducing her to a metaphor of "good." As von Trier explains, "I wanted to do a film about goodness" ("Naked Miracles," 12). And, in this sense, his description of Bess's character as "'good' in the spiritual sense ... living mostly in the world of her imagination, never really accepting that things apart from 'good'; might exist," supports the tragic, self-sacrificing, melodramatic

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woman.\textsuperscript{8} Whereas the simplistic character trait of goodness is what makes Bess a victim, it is also the vehicle for her passion.\textsuperscript{9} As I will show, Bess's character resists traditional portrayals of women in melodramas at the same time that she engages with them. The complexity of Bess's goodness is further articulated by Irena S. M. Makarushka, who argues that although she “signifies as the domesticated woman who is necessary to sustain culture . . . [Bess] also signifies chaos.”\textsuperscript{10} “Good” in the film, and by extension Bess, carries more than one meaning:

Effectively, Bess embodies the conflict between two radically different ways of being 'good' in the world. On one hand, she wants to belong by being a 'good' girl, which, under the conditions of patriarchy, requires submission and silence. On the other hand, when she chooses to be 'good' on her own terms, she is cast out by the church elders, her family and community. (7)

\textsuperscript{8}“Director's Note – This Film is About ‘Good’,” \textit{Breaking the Ways} (script) (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) 20.

\textsuperscript{9}The consequences of obsessive passion are further fleshed out in \textit{Dancer In the Dark}, a melodramatic narrative which centers around a woman's fixation with saving enough money to pay for an operation to cure her son's increasing blindness; the same condition which eventually takes her sight by the end of the film. Again von Trier's focus is familial devotion, but the lover's relationship has been replaced by that of mother and son. Perhaps because larger social issues, like capital punishment and capitalism, are woven into the story, the lengths to which Selma goes to secure her son's sight seem more serious and less outlandish compared to Bess. Or maybe the intense devotion of mother to son is more acceptable than that of wife to husband. Whatever the reason, \textit{Dancer In the Dark} begins to clarify the problematic issue of reducing the complexities of Bess and her relationship to the world to the generic trait of “good.” Both Selma and Bess are “good,” and it is through this quality that the more complex issues of passion and obsession are explored. To describe Bess as solely “good” is to take a superficial view of her character.

While the narrative of von Trier's film follows the conventions of melodrama, Bess's appropriation and subversion of authority in traditional patriarchal institutions, like religion and medicine, further complicates the genre's already paradoxical representation of women.

Although the protagonist maintains her own agency, regardless of the risks suffered from being cast from her church, family, and community, it cannot be ignored that the actions Bess undertakes to be "good" with regard to her husband's wishes are essentially masochistic. It could be argued that Bess is being punished in a sense for asserting herself as a sexual being both within and outside of marriage. She undergoes such tremendous pain and humiliation that at times it is difficult, as a viewer, to watch. And this is the fundamental contradiction in *Breaking the Waves*: at the same time that Bess is the ultimate self-sacrificing female—conforming to the conventional role of the melodramatic woman—the choices she makes represent a challenge to such dominant and powerful patriarchal institutions as religion and the medical establishment. This, however, is not a contradiction I wish the director had resolved. Lars von Trier has created a character and a film that complicates and, as a result, generates questions concerning, for example, the genre of melodrama, particularly that of Hollywood. That Bess is both agent and victim makes for a representation which exceeds the boundaries of what it means to be "good."

Because the unorthodox documentary/home movie style of *Breaking the Waves* is intimately tied to the narrative and mise-en-scene, it is important to preface an analysis of its melodramatic genre with some discussion of von Trier's
filmic approach. As is often the case, fiction films which incorporate documentary devices and footage can elicit the response that the documentary evidence makes the story, events, or characters appear more “real.” And such an effect was certainly what von Trier had in mind when he made *Breaking the Waves*, a film which Mark van De Walle describes as “documelodrama.” Filmed entirely in Cinemascope with a hand-held camera, *Breaking the Waves* has a grainy home movie appearance made all the more apparent since “Everything was initially shot in Super 35 mm, transferred to video for color manipulation, and then back to standard 35 mm format” (van De Walle 85).

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11 “Heaven’s Weight,” *Art Forum* (November 1996): 85. Since melodrama and documentary seem conceptually at odds with one another, a delineation between the two will perhaps make clearer my conclusions concerning von Trier’s melodramatic genre and documentary technique. Concerning the former—in reference to Thomas Elsaesser who is credited with broadly defining the melodramatic tradition as “an expressive code which uses drama and music to heighten and intensify emotional effects”—Pam Cook provides a concise summary of his detailed definition of forties and fifties Hollywood melodrama: “the most gifted directors used all the potential of mise-en-scene (colour, lighting, wide-screen) and narrative structure (compression, displacement, ellipsis) to create a closed, hysterical world bursting apart at the seams in which the protagonists, unable to act upon their social environment, suffered severe psychological and emotional symptoms (paranoia, masochism, hysteria) which were displaced onto the expressive codes of the films themselves.” “Melodrama and the Woman’s Picture,” *Imitations of Life*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991) 249.

Traditionally, documentary film, on the other hand, is, of course, much less concerned with familial drama specifically or provoking psychological issues. In fact, the direct cinema tradition (the one most closely aligned visually with the manner in which von Trier’s film was shot) is chiefly concerned with unobtrusively recording peoples and events, which carry in them the potential for a crisis. Thus, the filmmaker and viewer reside in the relatively “safe” position of objective observer. As Erik Barnouw notes, while the filmmakers “often poked into places society was inclined to ignore or keep hidden, . . . . the filmmakers were observers, rejecting the role of promoter.” *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 231.
What is the overall effect of seeing a melodramatic, epic length film—based on paradisaical notions of religiosity and divine miracles, personal and familial turmoil—when it is presented with all the un-seamless, fractured qualities of hand-held takes shot on-location? According to von Trier,

*If Breaking the Waves* had been rendered with a conventional technique, I don't think you could have tolerated the story... What we've done is to take a style and put it over the story like a filter... The raw, documentary style which I've laid over the film and which actually annuls and contests it, means that we accept the story as it is. ("Naked Miracles," 12)

In breaking with all formalist technique, the dynamic, and seemingly non-ordered approach elicited by the hand-held camera, certainly posits the viewer in the unique position of omniscient purveyor of the story; it is not very often that the camera adopts the perspective of a character, but instead appears to reside externally with the ability to explore unhindered the landscape, characters, and events. In fact, I would argue that the third person/voyeuristic perspective and self-referentiality of the film is so significant and apparent that the “realism” von Trier speaks of eventually gives way to fiction. In other words, his point that “We've chosen a style that works against the story, which gives it the least opportunity to highlight itself,” is not true since the documentary style of the film actually directs greater attention to the presence of a filmmaker and his construction of this story ("Naked Miracles," 12).

The unique ability of *Breaking the Waves* to efface reality at the same time that it adopts what von Trier claims is a more gritty, documentary style is further evident if considered alongside the notion of filmic montage. By stretching Eisenstein's traditional definition of montage to include not just the collision
between shots, but the collision between a story and the style in which it is filmed, what results, at least in the case of *Breaking the Waves*, is an unorthodox instance of Eisensteinian logic: It is "art's task to make manifest the contradictions of Being. To form equitable views by stirring up contradictions within the spectator's mind, and to forge accurate intellectual concepts from the dynamic clash of opposing passions."\(^{12}\) The filmmaker's use of a hand-held camera, together with frequent abrupt cuts and close-ups, destabilizes the melodramatic tale of tragic love between Bess and the worldly outsider Jan. As noted earlier, such a stylistic destabilization calls attention to the foregrounded construction and creator of the events. And the fact that von Trier's camera seemingly manages to invade all space posits him as perhaps the 'ideal' direct recorder of events. The viewer is in the position of witness and observer to the very private, raw, aspects of the film. Such a collision between fictional content and documentary style not only draws attention to the fictive nature of the film—and perhaps of any fiction film which predominantly uses documentary devices—but von Trier's 'direct' filming technique also heightens the emotional experiences the viewer shares with the characters.\(^{13}\)

\(^{12}\) *Film Form*, trans. Jay Leyda, 2\(^{\text{nd}}\) ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1949) 46. While Eisenstein concedes that montage "even can be a conflict in—the story . . . . when entire scenes would be photographed in a single, uncut shot," he does not hesitate to qualify this statement with the point that such an application of montage, however, "is outside the strict jurisdiction of the film-form" (38-9).

\(^{13}\) Editing was also dictated by the need to elicit emotions. According to Stig Bjorkman, "In editing the film, Lars von Trier seems to have wanted solely to bring out the most expressive moments, the truest and most intense aspects of their acting. The editing is uniquely audacious. It pays no regard to any given rules. It is based directly on the feelings and constantly strives for maximum intensity. This makes the portrayal
But what is so striking about the style itself is that its 'documentary appearance' can be narrowly indexed as an effect associated with a home movie. In hovering on the border of fiction and documentary, home movies—as the documentary filmmaker Michelle Citron describes in an intimate analysis of her own family home movies—signify . . . 'authenticity': an objective recording of an actual event captured by the home-movie camera . . . .[And yet we] know these images are staged . . . . With their moments of family members mugging at the lens and children's birthday parties that seem to exist only for the camera to record, home movies teeter at the edge of both documentary and fiction.¹⁴ Moreover, since in "home movies we look directly into the lens, a filmic moment rare, even for documentaries," consider the self-referential moments of Bess's character looking directly at the camera (Citron 27). Not only is her awareness of the camera's presence subtly destabilizing for the viewer, but her first conspiratorial grin in the opening scene of the film functions as an invitation to the viewer to join her—it is one of the only times that Bess is without her wide-eyed innocent look. Such an invitation, an early declaration of the protagonist's agency within the strict confines of the patriarchal community, makes apparent unusually raw-edged, and at the same time lends it an overwhelming immediacy."

Preface. Breaking the Waves (script). By Lars von Trier (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) 9. Concerning the act of filming itself, the actor Stellan Skarsgard, who plays Jan, has commented that "The use of handheld camera gives Lars the freedom to let a take continue until it reaches a natural end, which is much more satisfying for an actor than the short sharp takes usually used to cover a scene" ("Biographical Notes," Breaking the Waves (script), 146).

¹⁴ Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 17.
that, like the relationship between those in front and behind the camera in home movies, Bess knows she’s being filmed.

The expressive style of von Trier’s home movie technique, including the numerous close-ups of his characters, lends an intimate atmosphere to the narrative. Unlike conventional Hollywood film, with a distance between viewer and characters established by a steady camera and the “clean” look of continuity editing, *Breaking the Waves*, and the particular artifice of its looks, challenges the “theatrical” barrier between viewer and narrative found in conventional Hollywood melodrama (of course, Bess’s glances at the camera only compound this break).\(^{15}\) Furthermore, the film’s style also makes overtly visible the home movie dichotomy that on the “surface everything is wholesome and cute, but a dark shadow of power bleeds through” (Citron 9). Citron, here, is referring to her experience of watching home movies of herself as a child and her family and seeing moments that subtly hinted at the sexual abuse taking place between herself and her grandfather at the time. In other words, behind these very public events and displays of affection between herself and her sister and/or mother lurked evidence of her abuse. Understanding that the subject of Citron’s book is far removed from von Trier’s narrative, I think that similarities can be drawn between Citron’s theories on the home movie and the vehicle through which von Trier is depicting his melodrama.

\(^{15}\) One wonders if it is Bess who glances and smiles at the viewer or if it is Emily Watson, the actress. Stephen Heath rightly points out that the “film depends heavily on Bess... since it turns for much of its emotion on the documentation of her face, her gestures, her movements, on the sheer presence of her body on screen” (94).
As exemplified by Bess and Jan's wedding, the viewer is witness to the formal, public display of the ceremony and to what follows: the very private moment of sexual consecration between the couple in the wedding hall's bathroom. Unlike Citron's home movies, von Trier's camera does not hint at what lies beneath the surface of its narrative; it exposes that which is "wholesome" and that which is socially unacceptable in the Calvinistic community. As in Paul Schrader's *Affliction* (1997), the home movie style depicts the raw truth that lies beneath the surface of seamless everyday life. In Schrader's film, Wade Whitehouse, the character played by Nick Nolte, must face the fact of his father's brutal and sadistic behavior. And the evidence of the father's abuse towards his children is portrayed in flashbacks of what look like grainy, hand-held home movies. Compare this to the more common depiction of home movies in film as illustrated in Martin Scorsese's black and white *Raging Bull* (1981), which includes montage sequences in color of the abusive Jake LaMotta playfully frolicking with his wife. In one case, home movies expose corrupt behavior and in another they hide and lie. The home movie form of *Breaking the Waves* does both. In addition, such a scene underscores the multiplicity of what is considered "good" behavior. Thus, the clash between the melodramatic content and the home movie form functions as a liminal area between fiction and documentary, where the tragic, self-sacrificing female type in the love stories of the 'woman's film' is allowed a greater range of 'play'.
Religion and Love

Since, according to von Trier, "if you want to create a melodrama, you have to furnish it with certain obstacles... [and] religion provided me with a suitable obstacle," Bess is the character through which the traditional tenets of the powerful religious community are expressed ("Naked Miracles," 14). The strict patriarchal foundation of the religion—where a male council of Church Elders, along with a priest, act as representatives for God and lead all the activities of the Church—is represented both publically and personally/privately for the viewer through the character of Bess. For Breaking the Waves, both the domestic and community setting are infused and determined by the pervasive religious atmosphere. This institution's presence provides a unique sense of confinement, where private does not exist under the omniscient gaze fostered by a powerful religious deity. However, at the same time that, publically, Bess exists in traditional support of this institution—she reinforces the role of women as caretakers of both the church and the men—she also resists it by subverting the overarching patriarchy through her private, personal conversations with God. These unique conversations where Bess both speaks to and for God literally place her in the roles of both subject and object; she asks God questions and replies to her questions in "God's" own, gruff voice. As I will illustrate in the following discussion of both the opening scene of the film and two scenes during which Bess appeals to God for Jan's return from the oil rig on which he works, Bess provides space and validity for the female voice in an environment where, as she notes, "It's stupid that only men can talk in the service."
Significantly, the film opens with Bess visiting the church in order to ask the permission of the Elders for her marriage to Jan, an outsider to the community. This scene introduces not only the central, and conflicting, themes of religion and love, but also the juxtaposition between inside and outside, the prevailing sense of space in *Breaking the Waves*. In a series of shot/reverse shots, we watch Bess justify to the Church Elders why she should be able to marry Jan. Beginning with Bess’s introduction that “His name is Jan,” and ending with the Chairman’s request that “Out you go Bess McNiell and be seated,” the scene does not include a single frame in which both Bess and the Elders are together. In fact, at one point the camera is situated behind the Chairman and yet the other Elders are the only individuals we see over his shoulder. This confusion, resulting from the viewer’s uncertainty as to how the characters are physically arranged, certainly assumes the separation between the church and Bess. And the filmmaker’s choice of close-ups, frequent cuts, and abrupt pans, rather than long shots emphasizes this division. As Makarushka explains, if the “elders value sameness, Bess celebrates difference” (5). However, the official scene in the church is clearly resisted when Bess goes outside and smiles directly at the viewer. The camera frames her in a three-quarter profile close-up. Not only are we personally introduced to Bess, taken into her confidence, if you will, but the outdoors is also introduced as a contrasting setting, and one associated with the protagonist. Even though the outdoors represents unparalleled space in relation to the indoors—an effect made more dramatic by
on-location shooting—Bess's character makes private use of interior space just as effectively.

What the previous scene points to is the internal conflict Bess will soon experience concerning her devotion to the church and her devotion to her marriage. On the one hand, the protagonist is the object of the Church Elders' gaze. But once outside, Bess controls the gaze. John Berger's understanding of the psychological duality women in Western society experience on a daily basis—based upon an analysis of the representation of woman in art and advertising—maintains that

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men . . . . But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself . . . . From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.16

But for Bess the internalization of the male gaze has meant that her relationship with God, for instance, becomes something personal. In addition to Bess reflexively resisting the fact that she is the object of both the Church Elders' and the viewer's gaze, the protagonist also assumes the voice of God during her private conversations with Him in the Church. The protagonist's duality reinforces the contradictory roles of the female character as both agent and victim. Bess fulfills the expectations of the patriarchal church and, as will be explored below, of her disturbed husband. But while she "continually watch[es]"

herself" with respect to the behavior expected of her, Bess actively makes choices and at times controls both the gaze and her fate.

As we see in those moments when Bess steals away to the empty church to "talk" God, the young woman has created an alternative ritual to the traditional mass, which not only situates a male representative to act as the intermediary between God and people, but also disallows anything but the physical presence of the female. Following the chaotic and hysterical scene of Jan’s departure on the helicopter for the oil rig, Bess is shown crouched by a pew in church whispering to God. Framed in a tight close-up, with all background detail lost in blackness (hinting at the oppressive atmosphere and the protagonist’s need to be secretive), Bess’s voice takes on a gruff tone, a signal that God is speaking:

You are guilty of selfishness, Bess . . . . You put your own feelings before anyone else’s. I can’t see that you love him when you behave like that. Now you must promise me you’ll be a good girl.

Initially, this conversation reinforces the moral weight attributed to the stoic role women are expected to exhibit if they are to be considered a member of the community. Yet, even though Bess supports such an oppressive social position, the framework of her relationship with God reconsiders melodramatic portrayals of interior space and the interior world of the person; the power that Bess exhibits in speaking for God plays with the melodrama’s “emphasis on private feelings and interiorised (puritan, pietist) codes of morality and conscience” (Elsaesser 48). While Bess’s conversations could be evidence for the power religion has in interiorizing the presence and gaze of God, later conversations reveal a more
liberating effect taking place. Such an appropriation of God's voice indicates the even stronger presence and purpose of the female voice.

During the section of *Breaking the Waves* entitled "Life Alone," we watch Bess unsuccessfully attempt to negotiate her day-to-day existence without the physical presence of her husband. For some time this is certainly the case for Bess. She is unable to convince Jan that he should stay with her now that they are married and so happy. For many women of the Isle of Skye whose men work on the rigs, it is understood that they must tolerate their husbands being away; as Bess's mother cautions, "Why should you be any different? Every woman around here has to learn to be alone when the man's away at sea or on the oil rigs. Even you can learn to endure!" However, Bess, through the relationship she has created between herself and God, defies the melodrama's tendency to present women resigned to waiting. Her speaking to and for God could be evidence of Bess's "imagination." But when Bess desperately appeals to God—in a second church scene, where the frame is even darker and more suffocating—that "Nothing else matters, I just want Jan home again. I pray to you! Oh, please won't you send him home," she refuses to play the passive, waiting woman. Bess's appeal exemplifies the break from the traditionally passive role of women often depicted in the 'woman's film.' Bess refuses to endure Jan's being away as an expected role she must accept in her religious community.

If, through the discourse of religion, *Breaking the Waves* deviates from traditional Hollywood melodrama, then how does the film's love story refigure the
role of the female protagonist? The dueling definitions of “good” come from the clash between church doctrine and Bess’s obsessive passion for Jan. Bess is torn between the church’s devotion to God that manifests itself in the love of His word and her devotion for her husband that results in her admonition to the Elders that “You cannot be in love with words. You can love another human being.” The relationship between Bess and Jan is depicted as including not just strong emotional attraction, but physical attraction as well. Furthermore, Bess, during the wedding reception, is the first to initiate sexual advances. Hence, her childlike naivete exists alongside a very powerful, self-motivated sexual awakening. But, as I noted earlier, Bess’s feelings for Jan are considered overly excessive within the confines of her community and family. And with the intensity of Bess’s emotional and physical attraction for her husband foregrounded, a clear connection is created between her passion for Jan and the externalization of such passion for his salvation. During a relapse of sickness and his return to the hospital, Jan reconfirms his desire for Bess to take a lover. Jan explains,

> Love is a mighty power isn’t it? If I die it will be because love cannot keep me alive. But I can hardly remember what it’s like to make love. And if I forget that then I’ll die . . . . I want you to find a man to make love to and then come back here and tell me about it. It will feel like you and me being together again and that, that will keep me alive.

I think the viewer would agree with the prognosis of both Dr. Richardson and his nurse Dorothy—who both care for Jan—that many factors must be taken into consideration, like Jan’s medicated state, when determining the validity of his request. However, Bess refuses to see Jan’s request as the perverted ravings of an overly medicated man attempting to reinforce a sense of control, and instead
believes strongly enough in her own spiritual power and the power of their physical love that she can cure Jan.

Even though Bess's decision to sleep with other men is not for her sake, or her sexuality, but represents desires displaced from other men onto her husband, her adultery does function in a manner similar to its counterpart in traditional Hollywood melodrama: while adultery, according to Mary Ann Doane, "is allowable insofar as it itself mimics the matrimonial bond," the desiring woman and her excessive sexuality "may be doomed to die in order to insure closure for the narrative, but for a moment of cinematic time she is at least present, flaunting her excess." And in Bess's case the excess is her intense love. Admittedly, the protagonist's extra-marital experiences are associated, not with enjoyment, but with a physical and emotional pain that condemns her as a victim. With Jan's condition getting progressively worse, Bess believes it is necessary to go beyond simply masturbating an unknown man at the back of a bus (her first act) to initiating sex. Dressed in a short, tight, red skirt and fishnet stockings, Bess shyly introduces herself to a craggy, middle aged man in a local pub. After riding up on her scooter to an isolated hill (and ignoring the chief Elder whom they pass on the way), the man proceeds to have intercourse with Bess while she sobs uncontrollably. The gloom of the scene is compounded by the rain which falls on them. But what saves these moments from utter despair is the fact that Jan does get better, even if just temporarily. In this respect, I agree with Makarushka who

\[17 \text{ The Desire to Desire (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 109, 122.}\]
declares that once "Jan is impotent, Bess accepts responsibility for the phallus . . . As a woman, she is without a penis. But, as a woman who desires for her husband to live, she appropriates his power of creation/procreation: the phallus" (16). Against all the tenets of her religion and with her inevitable ostracization and exile from the church, her community, and her family, Bess fulfills Jan's wishes until it climactically results in her death.

While the viewer, immediately following Bess's death, is left to question whether Bess had the spiritual power and strength to bring about Jan's ability to walk again or if it was simply coincidence, it is difficult not to agree with von Trier's point that she "is a strong person taking responsibility for her own life" in an environment that severely condemns her definition of a "good girl" ("Director's Note," 20). Of course, the protagonist's choices are complicated by the fact that she sacrifices both her reputation and body. What cannot be bracketed is the decidedly masochistic nature of Bess's actions. But within what on the surface appears to be a conventional melodramatic genre, Bess successfully asserts her own sexuality and, at the same time, overwhelmingly affirms the power of her marriage to Jan.

Family and the Medical Institution

From the beginning of *Breaking the Waves*, the viewer is made aware of Bess's fragile emotional state, brought about in part by her brother's death, which led to her brief institutionalization. The delicate nature of her psyche is expressed in excessive emotion that the viewer witnesses in Bess's relationship to Jan. According to Doane, it is typical in Hollywood melodramas of the forties
and fifties that as "affect or emotion gone wild, passion always contains within it excess and a potential deviation from normalcy and constraint" (62). And, in many ways, this quality of Bess's character results in a childlike naivety, which Dorothy, Bess's sister-in-law, and her co-worker Dr. Richardson, attempt to discourage.

Two scenes that, through both performance and mise en scene, illustrate the extent of Bess's hysterics concern moments when Jan has not fulfilled some of Bess's expectations. Both scenes take place on the helicopter deck and depict Bess's reaction to, in the first scene, Jan's arriving late for their wedding and, in the second scene, Jan's departure for the oil rig. The erratic style of filming, attributable in part to the hand-held camera and von Trier's editing, also contributes to the "out of control" feel of the scenes. In both cases, Bess's intense desire for Jan, when she is disappointed by the fact that he may not or is unable to be with her, is reflected in her movements and the activities taking place around her.¹⁸ As opposed to the quiet negotiation Bess makes to privately assume the interior of the church (through her "conversations" with God), outdoors she lashes out, letting her passion dictate the environment and scene;

¹⁸ Victoria Nelson argues that what Bess's emotions reflected in the outside environment represent is new expressionism: "an implicit assumption that the outer mirrors the inner, that a storm embodies (does not symbolize or "stand for") psychological turmoil" (232). Douglas Sirk—an inspiration for von Trier—is also well known for his highly expressive settings: "His Technicolor worlds may be idealized, they may be simple and plastic and fanciful, but they are the creations of the character's emotions, and while it is true that the characters' emotional worlds threaten to subordinate them to the "machine" of melodrama (to "Will"), the characters are not thereby rendered foolish and blind, nor are sin and virtue abolished." Tag Gallagher, "Douglas Sirk," *Film Comment* Nov/Dec. 1998: 26.
Bess is either dashing angrily around in her wedding dress as she waits for the delayed Jan, or her frenzied, desperate reactions to Jan delay his departure. In addition to the erratic camera movement contributing to the hysterical tone of the scenes, the use of on-location sound—in the form of the helicopter noise that literally overpowers much of the dialogue—reflects Bess’s overpowering emotions. Although the viewer is not made aware of the exact nature of Bess’s emotional condition, we are certainly privy to the heightened state of her feelings towards Jan. And, as is illustrated later in the film, Bess’s condition is enough for Dorothy to find it necessary to get her medical attention.

The character of Dorothy (Dodo) is a type found in forties and fifties Hollywood melodrama. Often the passionate/excessive heroine is juxtaposed against a sensible “mother” figure and Dorothy fits with points five and six in Barbara Creed’s structure of the woman’s melodrama: “At some point in the heroine’s journey another character confronts her with the ‘truth’ i.e., the socially acceptable forms of female behavior . . . . [The] heroine is often contrasted with a conventional female.”19 Regardless of the fact that Dodo is an outsider to the religious community, she is the closest friend, confidant, and protector of Bess. Without her sister-in-law, Bess would spin out of control. Unlike Bess’s mother and grandfather (her only living relatives), Dodo does not abide by the church’s patriarchal doctrine, but believes that a woman “has to choose for herself

. . . . She has to have a mind of her own." And, in this respect, she is aligned with the rational qualities associated with Dr. Richardson and the medical community. Von Trier has an interesting way of creating both a division and a connection between characters who are interacting with one another. Regarding the former, as seen in the scene between Bess and the Elders, even though a conversation is taking place between the characters they are never included together in the same shot. And the same can be said for a scene between Bess and Dodo at the hospital. Dorothy has witnessed Jan telling Bess to prove her love to him by sleeping with other men and, as a result, pulls Bess out of the room and confronts her. However the difference is that, while very few shots during their heated conversation show them together, the camera does not cut back and forth, as between Bess and the Elders, but swish pans from Dorothy to Bess and back again. The effect is far less isolating and at the same time expresses the intensity of their discussion. With all of Dodo's good intentions, though, she harbors certain personal motives concerning Bess. Dorothy admits that the reason she still resides in her mother-in-law's house is "because of you (Bess)." While Dorothy goes beyond her duties as nurse to the injured Jan, she never truly trusts Jan and her relationship to Bess is subtly strained by the fierce love between the newlyweds. I would argue there exists a certain struggle for the attention and well being of Bess. And once Bess starts to believe that she can, through spiritual strength, determine whether or not Jan gets well, Dorothy steps in as a member of the medical community and insists that she see Dr. Richardson.
Bess's hysterical passion illustrates Doane's comments on the presence and function of the medical institution in Hollywood melodrama:

The female body is located not so much as spectacle but as an element in the discourse of medicine, a manuscript to be read for symptoms which betray her story, her identity. Hence the need, in these films, for the figure of doctor as reader or interpreter, as the site of knowledge which dominates and controls female subjectivity. (My italics, 43)

In *Breaking the Waves*, it could also be argued that psychology is the traditional secular alternative to religion. Hence, both institutions function similarly in, for example, internalizing the male gaze. Bess begins to visit Dr. Richardson at the hospital. At first, their meetings seem more like informal discussions rather than intense psychological evaluations. Even when Richardson concludes that "Maybe showing what you feel isn't the done thing where you come from, but it's certainly no disease," he still, however, operates as the rational, secular authority. Examples like "Dodo said I (Bess) had to come," and Richardson's reply that "I think you should come and see me now and then" all seem to reinforce Creed's conclusion that the heroine "does not speak, she is spoken for; she is the object, not the subject of the narration" (30). Bess's excessive passion and the power she believes resides in both the strength of her spirituality and the strength of her love for Jan are seen as opportunities by the medical establishment to step in and impose its order.

Before the doctor finally deems it necessary to have Bess institutionalized, the young woman reverses the doctor/patient relationship by insisting that Richardson assist in her attempts to cure Jan. Visiting Richardson at his apartment one night, Bess puts on some music and begins to dance for him. At
one point, he requests that Bess stop dancing and talk to him; she has other ideas, however, and asks that he visit her in the bedroom. Lying naked on his bed, Bess softly comments to Richardson that “You can touch me now . . .,” a request that he effectively turns down. In compromising the figure of the doctor, a second element—sexual attraction—is added to this “site of knowledge which dominates and controls female subjectivity.” Although Bess’s hope to seduce the doctor for the sake of Jan fails, in changing the terms of their association, Bess is the one who controls the doctor/patient relationship. She insists that the male gaze be directed at her.

Although the doctor initially wants to maintain a friendship with Bess, outside of her strict religious community, she seductively asserts her belief that his methods will not help Jan. And this is the difference between Bess and the medical institution; Bess wants to help Jan, but Dodo and Richardson believe she must think of herself first. Moreover, in the case of Richardson, his intentions are not entirely unselfish since von Trier inserts throughout the film gazes from the doctor towards Bess which imply attraction. He later confides to her his love. Similar to Dorothy’s concern with Bess’s obsession with Jan, Dr. Richardson also questions their relationship. However, his reasons, I would argue, are exceedingly more selfish and are apparent in the subtle meaning surrounding his insistence that Bess be committed again, in effect insuring that Jan and Bess will never see each other again. It is apparent once Richardson announces to Jan his intentions that this is the first Dorothy has heard of committing Bess. And her reaction is one of surprise. Richardson looks on “greedily” as he encourages Jan
to sign the commitment form: “You said you wanted to help her.” It seems that Richardson is also interested in “helping” Bess, but only on his terms. Dorothy, however, recognizes that Bess is intent on healing Jan her way and is finally the only individual in the community to tell Bess of Jan’s failing health, regardless of the fact that it could lead to further sexual encounters between Bess and anonymous men.

In her conviction that committing adultery, per Jan’s request, is solely for the salvation of her husband, Bess, it could be argued, is still operating under a male construct. Furthermore, her association with such arbitrary notions as “good,” regardless of the fact that “good” in this film does not carry just one meaning, also tends to limit the depth of her character. From the perspective of the medical institution however, Bess is not only unable to be “cured,” but her emotional condition is undefinable: Dr. Richardson finally admits during the coroner’s hearing that “if you ask me now, instead of ‘neurotic’ or ‘psychotic,’ my diagnosis might simply be . . . ‘good’!” Hence, Bess’s rich presence certainly complicates the viewer’s as well as the medical establishment’s understanding of her identity. In fact, the power of discourse, as expressed in her unique conversations with God, and human sexuality/love allows for a multidimensional representation of the female protagonist.

Pathos and a Documentary Aesthetic

The evocative power and mesmerizing effect of von Trier’s Breaking the Waves is not found solely in the narrative of the film. In fact, a fuller understanding of the heroine’s complexities requires attention to the mise en
scene of the film, including its documentary style and its creation of pathos. *Breaking the Waves* clearly reflects the melodramatic genre if we agree with Linda Williams that "melodramas are deemed excessive for their gender- and sex-linked pathos, for their naked displays of emotion." And, as I indicated earlier, the raw and yet intimate presence created by von Trier's hand-held takes, numerous close-ups, and editing for the sake of evoking sentiment foregrounds the viewer's sense that s/he are direct, and at times omniscient, observers, as well as participants engaged in the events of the film.

According to Williams, "we can identify melodrama's pathos of the 'too late!' . . . . in the lovers' fantasy of possessing one another in romantic weepies" (713). Clearly, Bess's numerous attempts to save Jan by committing adultery with other men, a necessity she believes since it is 'too late' to reverse her prayer that he be sent home from the rig at any cost, evoke a sense of anticipation for the viewer. And her final trip to the large trawler in the bay, where she knows and we know that significant harm exists within (the men's presence connotes 'evil' when juxtaposed against Bess's character), is the culmination of this sense of 'too late.' The brutality the heroine experiences is hinted at in her first

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21 In terms of the actors and their performance, this is especially the case for the most destructive man on the trawler played by Udo Kier. Unlike the relatively unknown actor Emily Watson at the time the film was released, Kier, "an actor who often assumes roles with demonic overtones," brings to the film enough of an implied meaning that the viewer need not necessarily be provided any further character development (Bjorkman 10).
visit, during which a knife is used to slash apart her clothing. After a quick
escape and a visit to the hospital, Bess sees that Jan's ailing condition
necessitates a return to the trawler and the fulfillment of her sacrifice. But the
viewer is never shown what takes place. Instead, Bess's battered, sliced up
body is wheeled into the emergency room and the horror of such a sight is
conveyed and cemented by Dorothy's reaction. The young protagonist's death
draws from sensible Dorothy a deluge of sadness. Bess and the viewer expect
immediate results from her ultimate sacrifice, but a certain overwhelming
powerlessness resides in the fact that no change has taken place in Jan's
condition and Bess finally, and for the first time, concedes that "maybe I was all
wrong after all." Though we learn that Jan is able to walk again, the fact that the
heroine dies before seeing her husband recover adds to the initial tragedy of her
death and the tears it elicits from the viewer.

In addition to Jan being able to walk again, Bess's final accomplishment—
the fantastical bells ringing high above Jan's rig at the film's end—affirms that the
heroine, within the constrictive environment of this melodrama, is able to fulfill all
that she initially set out to do. Shortly after they are married, Jan asks the priest
why there are no bells in the church. To the priest's reply that "We do not need
bells in our church to worship God," Bess whispers to Jan "I like church bells . . . .
Let's put them back again." The fact that her death is the result may still confirm
a sense of 'too late,' but existing alongside is the final point that perhaps the
pathos of the melodrama does not solely depend on the powerlessness of the
heroine or the viewer.
Lars von Trier's film reveals the degree of 'play' that exists—both in terms of female types and mise-en-scene—in "art cinema's" revisiting of conventional melodrama. The "art cinema" aspect of von Trier's film brings to the fore the unfolding of narrative as fantasy. And von Trier makes visible this juxtaposition of raw, everyday experience and divine miracles in the film's form. The home-movie look of the narrative is punctuated by panoramic, painterly scenes announcing each chapter. Each of the seven chapters, "grand, larger-than-life romantic landscapes," subtly move with the benefit of computer manipulation. Songs from the seventies accompany each scene and their lyrics hint at the events to come. Elton John's "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" goes along with the chapter entitled "Faith" and seems directed at Bess from her husband in reference to the destructive lengths she will go in her faith that she can heal Jan: "When are you gonna come down, when are you going to land / . . . . You know you can’t hold me forever / I didn’t sign up for you / . . . . This boy’s too young to be singing the blues." Bess makes direct mention of music in the film's opening scene when she responds "Their music" to the Chairman’s question, "Can you think of anything of real value the outsiders have brought with them?" Thus, In addition to introducing the male character, the music functions along the lines of Doane's point that "Desire, emotion – the very content of the love story – are not accessible to a visual discourse but demand the supplementary expenditure of a musical score" (97). An integral part of the pathos-inducing aspect of the

woman's film, music in *Breaking the Waves* furthers the effect generated by the actors', and especially Bess's, emotional performances.

Another element central to von Trier's rethinking of the woman's film is the style in which it is shot. With the ability to "both confess and hide," home movies, in "presenting the image of an ideal selective past, . . . announce what is absent" (Citron 19). But, as discussed earlier, *Breaking the Waves* is especially unique for all the very dark and personal aspects of Bess's life that it does confess to. Unlike its Hollywood counterpart—films like, Irving Rapper's *Now, Voyager* (1942), Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1956), and even Frank Perry's *Mommie Dearest* (1981)—von Trier's melodrama is "ugly." Perhaps the only episode which hides more than it concedes is the montage sequence following Jan's departure from the hospital. Constructed to emphasize Jan's paralysis and, by extension, his utter dependence on Bess and Dodo, a shot of Jan's friends dancing on the oil rig is followed by the disabled man being carried up the stairs to a bedroom in his mother-in-law's house. The shot ends with Bess walking behind Jan and, like the film's opening sequence, shyly smiling at the camera. Similar to the idea of a home movie being both unrehearsed but selective in what it shows, all subsequent scenes portray Bess's attempts to entertain Jan. Even changing his bedpan is a lighthearted affair. And yet Bess's somber glance at the camera while holding up Jan so that Dorothy can massage his back suggests the painful reality beneath this cheerful facade. *Breaking the Waves* is a meditation on the representative possibilities available in the mixing of genre and filmic mode. Von Trier's film makes evident, in the marriage of a melodramatic
narrative and a documentary visual style, the breakdown of archetypes found in both woman's films of the forties and fifties and in the family home movie.

Through the filmmaker's highly stylized construction—resembling the home movie genre of the documentary—the fantasy aspect of melodrama's narrative is made more explicit because of its existence between fiction and documentary. To make visually explicit, as filmmaker, and recognize, as viewer, this liminal area between "fantasy" and "reality" means that neither character types nor interpretations of the film are restricted to one meaning or reading. In short, any second-order reality is finally just a fantasy.
CHAPTER IV

IS THIS A DOCUMENTARY?: REFLEXIVITY AND AUTHORIAL CONTROL IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE DOCUMENTARY SUBJECT

For it is not that the documentary consists of the structures of filmic fiction (and is, thus, parasitic of its cinematic ‘other’) as it is that ‘fictive’ elements insist in documentary as in all film forms.

– Michael Renov, “Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction”

In States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies, Patricia Zimmermann, commenting on the scarcity of political documentaries that challenge, for example, monolithic entities like the nation, notes that,

Theatrically released feature-length documentaries, although making some inroads into commercial exhibition, often reproduce a realist style that focuses on the triumph or wackiness of unique individuals who flaunt overwhelming social and psychoanalytic structures . . . . They do not imagine new social spaces, but rather affirm unique individuals.

Some of the examples she cites are Crumb, Hearts of Darkness, and A Brief History of Time. While it is true that documentary films that question dominant political and social forces are neither marketed nor distributed for mass audience consumption, the creation of new social spaces within such films can exist with regard to the representation of the documentary’s subject. Even those

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2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 11.
documentarians that trace the individual negotiating certain obstacles in his or her life have options with regard to how they choose to represent their subject.

In opposition, however, to those documentaries which "reproduce a realist style" both in content and form, Nicholas Barker's *Unmade Beds* (1997) and Stephen Earnhart's *Mule Skinner Blues* (2001) utilize a reflexive documentary mode that, by drawing attention to the camera and filmmaker's presence, disrupts the fiction and non-fiction divide. Both of these films suggest that documentary representations are comprised of a negotiation between the two modes. "The label of 'nonfiction'," according to Michael Renov, "while a meaningful categorization, may, in fact, lead us to discount its (necessarily) fictive elements. It would be unwise to assume that only fiction films appeal to the viewer's Imaginary, that psychic domain of idealized forms, fantasy, identification, reversible time, and alternative logics" (3). It seems each mode, and specifically those qualities "inherent" to each, is disrupted by the presence of its theoretical "other." Although the label "documentary," for instance, suggests all those things the film is not with relation to its fictional counterpart, the division between fiction and non-fiction begins to weaken as some of the major differences between each approach reveal themselves to be grounded on assumption (the direct cinema tradition, for example, assumes that objectivity is intrinsic to its observational stance). Granted, there are real disparities between the two modes; documentary, whether mock or not, takes as its domain the real, while fiction, even when its based on actual events, has the privileged right to "dramatization." Perhaps the most common binaries that distinguish the two
modes are fiction/reality (with regard to content) and subjectivity/objectivity (with regard to form). But, as the documentarian Emile de Antonio argues, "Nothing could be more false . . . . Filmmakers edit what they see, edit as they film what they see, weight people, moments, and scenes by giving them different looks and values. As soon as one points a camera, objectivity is romantic hype. With any cut at all, objectivity fades away."³ So while there are two separate modes of filmic representation, what is erroneous is the idea that there can exist the purely objective documentary. A lack of objectivity implies the presence of a subjectivity, which means that the representation carries some elements of fiction since it is filtered through a particular vision, worldview, and/or lens. Documentary is, therefore, a negotiation between fictional and non-fictional elements, between what Stella Bruzzi describes as "reality on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other"—even the images a surveillance camera captures are defined by a certain location, angle, and authority responsible for its presence.⁴ 

Unmade Beds and Mule Skinner Blues, as examples of the reflexive mode of documentary representation, foreground both the falsity of objectivity and the fictional elements necessary for creating a filmic representation.

Barker and Earnhart’s films are so removed from the conventional look of direct or observational cinema that the threat that fiction might replace actuality in


the viewer’s reading of each film results in a statement—at the start of the documentaries—proclaiming the “reality” of their subjects. While *Unmade Beds* declares, “The characters in this film are real,” *Mule Skinner Blues* states, “The Following Story is True.” By such a claim, the filmmakers recognize the overriding presence of fiction in the construction of a documentary representation. In some sense what makes these films documentaries, as opposed to fictions, has more to do with their style than with any fundamental variation at the level of story or participants. It can be reasoned, for example, from the characters of *Unmade Beds* and *Mule Skinner Blues*, that there is little dissimilarity between actors and those who “act” for the camera. Both cases are indicative of an individual’s performance. And the idea of performance extends beyond who is in front of the camera to who is behind the camera as well; in each instance, there is an authorial presence directing (as in Barker’s case) and constructing (for Earnhart) the representation. Though neither director puts himself in the documentary frame, their presence is obvious in their highly stylized, reflexive approaches.

Neither Barker’s nor Earnhart’s documentary was a commercial success (the former has yet to find a distributor). Yet, both films follow Zimmermann’s narrative formula, but with a difference: unlike the “postmodern stylistic flourishes—disjunctive editing, mixed media, dramatic interventions” found in the films she cites, the reflexive tendencies of *Unmade Beds* and *Mule Skinner Blues* comment on more than just the surface level of the image (11). In the reflexive mode of documentary filmmaking, as Bill Nichols explains,
the representation of the historical world becomes, itself, the topic of cinematic mediation . . . . Rather than hearing the filmmaker engage solely in an interactive (participatory, conversational, or interrogative) fashion with other social actors, we now see or hear the filmmaker also engage in metacommentary, speaking to us less about the historical world itself, . . . than about the process of representation itself.5

While Barker explores the need for companionship through a representation that expresses the theme of voyeurism, Earnhart addresses the issue of creativity as it manifests itself in his documentary’s characters. Both films fall more specifically under the rubric of “deconstructive reflexivity,” in which the object “is to alter or contest dominant codes or conventions in documentary representation, thereby drawing attention to their conventionality” (Nichols 72). In addition, the visual style of Mule Skinner Blues shows the creative power that post-production editing has in blurring the boundaries between fiction and documentary.

With regard to the construction of the documentary subject, each film imposes upon the “real” certain elements of fiction, such as reenactments and fantasy sequences. If, as Bill Nichols argues, the “reflexive mode of representation gives emphasis to the encounter between filmmaker and viewer rather than filmmaker and subject,” then it is in the mise-en-scene of Unmade Beds that the viewer is made aware of Barker’s construction (60). For Earnhart, post-production work, like special effects (visual and aural), the manipulation of film speed, and the inclusion of stock footage, is the site for reflexivity in Mule Skinner Blues. Once, as in Unmade Beds and Mule Skinner Blues, the filmmaker foregrounds his or her presence, the traditional objective/subjective

5 Representing Reality (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 56.
dichotomy that has marked the documentary versus fiction debate dissolves into the understanding that objectivity towards the representation of one’s subject is a stance exceedingly difficult to maintain.

Unmade Beds

Barker’s film follows four single New Yorkers—Aimee Coup, Michael Russo, Mikey Destefano, and Brenda Monte—over the course of six months and documents their experiences on New York City’s dating scene after each has placed a personal advertisement. The director refuses to leave the viewer with a sense of “triumph” or closure at the end; instead all four individuals are still single, but with new strategies for dating, which do not include the personals. According to Stella Bruzzi—in an interview with the director—Barker’s declaration at the start of Unmade Beds, concerning the reality of his characters, was “a literalness that arose out of necessity, as those who attended the film’s London and New York test screenings ‘were convinced they were watching highly naturalistic fiction’” (158). The film’s intricately composed shots along with the performance of its four participants suggest a staged representation of reality. Without knowledge, therefore, of the documentary’s production, the viewer might be led to believe Unmade Beds is a mock-documentary. An interesting issue for both Unmade Beds and Mule Skinner Blues concerns those details of production that each documentary does and does not allude to. Although each film’s reflexivity, in directing the viewer’s attention towards its construction, is evident upon viewing, the circumstances of production offer a more inclusive sense of each filmmaker’s intention.
Nicholas Barker, in an interview included on the DVD version of *Unmade Beds*, describes the documentary as "a highly authored film." Authorial control and manipulation are crucial to the construction of the film. In the same interview, Barker explains that he and his crew followed these characters and filmed a great deal of what they did and said on digital video. And from the digital video rushes, I made transcripts and turned their dialogue into a film script. I would then have to negotiate and discuss with them what they would and would not be prepared to say on camera. And then under feature film conditions I had to teach them to perform what was essentially my version of their lives for our camera. (my italics)

It is difficult to categorize *Unmade Beds*, especially if the documentary mode is defined as "non-fiction." The context of the film is the daily lives of four men and women, but then it must be asked if even the digital video recordings can be considered non-fiction. Video interviews along with a video camera recording the daily activities of the participants imposes a certain framework onto the "reality" that existed before the camera was present. Consequently, Barker's documentary questions the objective premise of documentary film as a mode distinct from fiction film; a mode which is just as dependent as its fictional counterpart on the authorial vision of the director. And while the circumstances of production are never alluded to in the film, Barker's "self-conscious visual style" denies the documentarian's role as objective observer of reality (Bruzzi 158).

Fundamental to an understanding of the various fictions that permeate Barker's film is the issue of performance. The participants all perform for the camera a version of their lives, but the performance Barker directs is just one of
their "roles." Proceeding from the perspective that every interaction between individuals is essentially a "theatrical performance," the sociologist Erving Goffman believes that "life itself is a dramatically enacted thing."\(^6\) In other words, on a daily basis, everyone, including the participants of *Unmade Beds*, performs different roles depending on the context of the interaction:

> When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. (17)

Consequently, what Barker's documentary foregrounds is the performative, and by extension fictive, aspect of any interaction, whether that be with person or camera. The part each of the participants plays for the camera is based on the performance they initially provided for the video camera. Goffman's theory "that all forms of human interaction are in one sense stagy and that notions of 'character,' 'personality,' and 'self' are merely outgrowths of the various roles we play in life" explains why the performances given in *Unmade Beds* seem so polished—in addition to being controlled, in a sense, by Barker, the participants provide for the film camera a version two times separated from their lived reality.\(^7\)

And here is where the tension lies: *Unmade Beds* appears to be observational, but its construction, as made particularly evident by the production circumstances

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the film does not overtly convey, illustrates a high degree of authorial control. Barker's film makes clear the interaction between fiction and non-fiction, by artfully disturbing documentary's facade of objectivity.

The issue of voyeurism is made explicit from the start with the opening scenes, shot from outside their windows, of anonymous New Yorkers raising their window shades and performing their morning rituals. Not only do the window sequences in *Unmade Beds*, similar to those of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, foreground the idea that the filmmaker and viewer are spying on the lives of the documentary subject, but windows as "the recurring motif of this movie" echo the same kind of selectivity found in the camera frame and provide one explanation for the voyeur's interest in peeping: "when you look at a life through a window, you don't have enough information" (Barker, DVD interview). Both window and camera, therefore, provide only those details which are included within the frame of each. Such attention to the eye of the viewer and camera also harkens back to Dziga Vertov's *Man With the Movie Camera* (1929), a highly reflexive film, which describes itself as "an experiment in the cinematic communication of visible events." Vertov too begins his documentary about city life with a shot outside an anonymous woman's window in the early morning. But while *Man With the Movie Camera* counters Hollywood and fictional film's focus on the individual lives which make up the city with a montage of people, machines, and even the film's cinematographer and editor, *Unmade Beds* embraces the elements of fiction film. All of the individuals shown going about their daily lives through their apartment windows are actors; Barker recreated
those scenes he saw while living in New York with people willing to act them out. Even though the documentary itself does not convey this information, the question arises as to how Barker was able to capture such intimate moments—someone undressing to bathe or a couple lying vulnerable and exposed in their “unmade bed.” *Unmade Beds* unmasksthe naive belief that the documentarian can be so inconspicuous and that the pact between subject and filmmaker can be so trusting that the he/she goes on with life unawares. Yet both documentaries share an interest in the selectivity of the human/camera eye. As Vertov illustrates in the scene of a woman blinking, intercut with venetian blinds, along with his camera’s aperture, opening and closing, looking—and, for film, representing—is a selective act. Thus, Barker’s scenes of New York City residents waking up and opening their blinds for his camera furthers this metaphor of the blind/shutter/eyelid deciding what will and will not be seen or shown.

Such selectivity concerning how a film’s subject is represented is compounded by Barker’s intricately composed shots. Utilizing the many straight angles available in the city’s architecture, the windows are rarely centered in the frame. Instead, a window shown on the left side of the screen, for example, will cut to another window, this time shown on the opposite side of the screen. Despite the fact that composed shots are found in both documentary and fiction films, such stylistic choices are endemic to fiction films and are used mostly in documentaries, like Errol Morris’ *The Thin Blue Line*, that take a reflexive approach to representing their subject. Bruzzi points out that reflexive
documentaries “as they challenge the notion of film’s ‘transperancy’ and highlight the performative quality of documentary, will emphasize issues of authorship and construction” (163). The intermittent window sequences of *Unmade Beds* reinforce both the viewer’s and the filmmaker’s position as observer. But at the same time that the sequences present a “pure” instance of objective observation, they undermine the very existence of such a position.

The same can be said of Barker’s treatment of his protagonists, Aimee, Michael, Mikey, and Brenda. Unlike the window sequences, where the viewer is left to assume that the individuals are unaware that they are being filmed, the four women and men—who allow the viewer access to their anxieties about being single—speak directly to the camera. Such an interaction between filmmaker/viewer and subject certainly defeats the idea that *Unmade Beds* is strictly observational. However, Barker’s tightly composed shots and cutaways to material objects associated with each character carry with them a sense of detachment or what Bruzzi describes as an “alienation imposed by such stylistic mannerisms” (162). And when considered in the context of the personal advertisements, the primary mode by which the participants seek a mate, Barker’s representation reflects the impersonal nature of the personal ads themselves. Although the static shots of items, such as groceries, toiletries, and furniture, provide some information about the person who owns them, such shots do more in terms of furthering the voyeuristic theme of the documentary. Stella Bruzzi comments further on the effect such a detached stance has on the viewer:
Because Barker himself does not then mould these ostensibly superficial observations into a more rounded portrait, we as spectators are then left to do the contextualisation for ourselves and imagine, as Barker describes he did as he watched strangers through windows, what these details tell us about the characters as a whole. (162)

Barker's reflexive representation of his four characters, by drawing the viewer's attention to the filmmaker's presence as manifested in the controlled construction of *Unmade Beds*, unmasks the fiction that lies at the heart of documentary. Even though *Unmade Beds* is an example of a particular mode of documentary filmmaking, filmic reflexivity highlights an issue, I think, common to all forms of documentary filmmaking: "the text's problematic relationship to that which it represents" (Nichols 60).

Connections are drawn between Brenda and Mikey, neither of whom are interested in marriage—but who share a similar interest in how they appear to others as they get older—and Aimee and Michael, who both harbor immense anxiety at not being married yet. For the purpose of illustrating how it is Barker makes his presence known while at the same time drawing attention to fiction's presence in the documentary film, I will be focusing mainly on the director's characterization of Brenda and Mikey. Married once before, Brenda is never forthcoming with what she does for a living. Mikey, however, is quite open with his past sexual exploits as well as his B grade, unpublished, screenplays about a character named Michael and his trials with women. Both characters are identified by the un-idealistic, somewhat superficial reasons they are searching for a mate. Brenda explains to the viewer, by way of an introduction, that "Money has always been my only problem . . . . The most likely solution that I can see to
this financial problem is a man . . . . I decided that the personal ads are a way for me to proposition a man . . . . I just want a man to give me money, help me with the things I need and go away and in return, you know, we'll have sex a couple times a month, like maybe four." Brenda's view of men as the means for ending her financial burden is complemented by Mikey's particular interest in women. Concerning his apartment's 1970s-style decor, the fifty-something bachelor explains, "This is my cave. This apartment says to every woman who comes here, 'You're here to fuck.' If you're not here to fuck, leave. End of story."

Later on, a kernel of humanity breaks through Mikey's male macho facade (itself a fiction that aligns Mikey with what he describes as "the Jack Nicholson or Harvey Kietel kind of guy") when, in a moment of nostalgia and regret, he recognizes that his treatment of women may have ultimately resulted in his growing old alone. Against an image of Mikey sitting by himself at a bar, he recalls in a voice over, "The height of my bachelor days was back in July of 1974 . . . . [when] within a twenty-four hour period I made love to these three gorgeous women. But looking back on my life was that the right thing to do? One of these women would still be with me today if I was a faithful kind of guy." In an ironic, and most likely fictional, twist of fate, these two very incompatible individuals are destined to meet for a date; at the end of *Unmade Beds*, Mikey tells the viewer he is to be going out that evening with, according to her ad, a "sexy" Italian woman. By now, however, the viewer knows Brenda's come-on "You'll make my life better, I'll do the same," is not aimed at the economically unsuccessful Mikey. The liberties Barker takes in making the stories and lives of the documentary's
participants his own suggest that any representation, even one with a foundation in reality, is an authored fiction.

Barker's "controlling, manipulating presence" is especially apparent in the mise-en-scene (Bruzzi 163). Brenda and Mikey are identified by those personal items usually found in the bathroom. Each character, primping in their bathroom mirror as they prepare for a date, describes the process necessary for attracting members of the opposite sex. After Brenda explains that, regardless of her "slutty" image, she is rather conservative, the scene cuts to and connects with Mikey bemoaning "the shit I gotta go through to impress these women." With the camera positioned over their shoulders as they speak, the viewer sees only their reflection in the mirror. Perhaps Barker is commenting on the dual identities of Brenda and Mikey—the difference between what is seen on the outside and what the person is like beneath the surface of make-up products, styling aids, and nose hair clippers. Such reflections may also highlight the representational nature of film and its creation of another image aside from that of actor or participant in a documentary. Brenda and Mikey are also reflected in full length mirrors. And in this case it seems that the mirror reflects something that both individuals are having to cope with, the coming of old age. Mikey, in an undershirt and boxers, is shown sitting slouched in front of a wall of mirrors (which ironically, at the start of the film, he described as contributing to the libidinal quality of the apartment). This "fractured" reflection, in a color palette of greys and yellows, shows a "broken" old man. For Brenda, the mirror represents a place from which to assess the wonders age does to the body. She is
comfortable undressing in front of both mirror—which reflects the subject's gaze—and camera—which captures that reflection. This double gaze signifies the two central representations the director explores: the character of Brenda Nicholas Barker created and that character as a subject of observation in the documentary world of *Unmade Beds*.

Intimate, yet stylized, moments like these position *Unmade Beds* as a reflexive film, which complicates both the issue of representing "reality" and, by extension, the false division between fiction and documentary modes of storytelling. The fact that the film itself does not directly admit its fictionalization of these men and women's lives only draws further attention to the significant hold the "non-fiction" label has in indexing the documentary mode. The fiction/documentary split comes under closer scrutiny in a documentary like *Unmade Beds*, which has the viewer wondering throughout whether or not it is staged. Bill Nichols argues for this "tricking" of the audience in the case of a documentary like *No Lies* or even, I would suggest, *Dadetown*—both of which are mock-documentaries—but are so realistic that the viewer has no reason to question their veracity until the credits when it is exposed that the characters are actors and/or the events represented are false:

Some feel cheated by the revelation. They have tendered belief in the reality of a representation they should have treated as a fiction, but this violation of trust is precisely the point . . . [A film like *No Lies* or *Dadetown*] reflexively heightens our apprehension of the dynamic trust that documentaries invite, and of the betrayals—of subjects, and of viewers—made possible by this very trust. (60).
What *Unmade Beds* thus documents is the fictional world of the documentary film. And since documentary has its roots in actuality, perhaps Barker’s film also points to the “fictional” aspect of life, in which each interaction is a performance. The film’s characters enact a version of their lives and in doing so support Goffman’s “notion that we make a presentation of ourselves to others” (252). While Barker is somewhat covert in expressing to the viewer how much his characters and their performances are staged, Earnhart, through digital video effects, for instance, exaggerates the performative aspect of his characters—it is clear they no longer reside in their original, lived context, but are now “actors” in the context of Earnhart’s documentary.

*Mule Skinner Blues*

Formally, Stephen Earnhart’s documentary is very different from Barker’s *Unmade Beds*. While both documentaries are reflexive in the attention they direct to the act of constructing, *Mule Skinner Blues* adopts a more informal style. In contrast to the immense control Barker imposes on his subject, Earnhart is much looser, more organic. Yet, the form of both films supports the subjects represented. While the theme of voyeurism and the impersonal nature of personal ads is furthered by the controlled and detached look of *Unmade Beds*, Earnhart’s depiction of the making of an independent horror film, entitled *Turnabout Is Fair Play*, by residents from a Florida trailer park upholds his theme of creativity and collaboration in the act of creating. In support of a reflexive filmmaking mode, Earnhart explains,
As I believe all documentary filmmakers must influence their subjects to some degree in order to create a palatable product, I have tried to put my influence into the foreground rather than hide behind a purist mentality that a documentarian must be strictly objective. . . an impossible, if not lethargic, task.8

His presence as filmmaker, especially evident in the post-production area of editing and special effects, illustrates the degree to which a filmic representation is comprised of both fiction and non-fiction elements.

Earnhart includes fantasy sequences that serve to develop a number of the documentary’s characters. By using fictional techniques to move beyond the limited range of information available in conventional documentaries, Earnhart provides access to the very subjective side of his characters. Consequently, with the foregrounding of an authorial presence, the notion that objectivity is inherent to documentary film is revealed to be an erroneous assumption. As an example of deconstructive reflexivity, one of the main effects of Mule Skinner Blues is “a heightened awareness of what had previously seemed natural or had been taken for granted” (Nichols 72). For example, it is not common for the documentary to go beyond the external behavior of its subject and consider what David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson call the “mental subjectivity” of a film’s characters. According to the authors, mental subjectivity is achieved “if the plot plunges into the character’s mind. We might hear an internal voice reporting the character’s thoughts, or we might see the character’s ‘inner images,’ representing memory,

fantasy, dreams, or hallucinations." By employing this fictional film technique, Earnhart has created a reflexive representation that presents another type of authorial control in the construction of the documentary subject.

Like *Unmade Beds*, the relationship of filmmaker to subject is not something made explicit in *Mule Skinner Blues*. But the visual nature of the film is so outside the boundaries of the traditional documentary—with its insistence on objectivity as illustrated by an observational and/or expository position towards its subject—that the viewer is aware from the start of Earnhart's "goal to make a documentary film that's every bit as thrilling, engaging and visually stimulating as the fiction genre allows" (Director's Statement). The film's main character is Beanie Andrew, an out-of-work shrimp seller who has dreamed for sixty years of making a horror movie featuring a gorilla rising from the depths of a muddy swamp. Andrew admits, "All my life I've always felt like there was something trying to come out of me. Something a little murky." And this vision serves as the vehicle for the film's focus on the personal significance of creating. Earnhart, a New Yorker, met Beanie and various other residents of the Buckaneer Trailer Park during the search for extras for a music video being shot in the area. Andrew's determination to make his movie is explained in the documentary's opening intertitle: "Inspired by the filmmaking process, Mr. Andrew refused to part ways with the crew." Thus, *Mule Skinner Blues* was created with the collaborative help of the Earnhart crew who loaned Beanie a

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camera and offered their help in any other way. The filmmaker understands that Beanie Andrew, with no resources other than a camcorder, will have a much better chance at completing his film if he has at least the editorial help of a professional film crew. The synergetic nature of *Mule Skinner* is unique and offers new ways of thinking of the filmmaker/subject relationship in documentary film. Lewis Beale claims that, the many “characters” in *Mule Skinner* “may sound like grotesques, but Mr. Earnhart and Ms. Ford treat them with respect, no doubt because of the collaborative nature of the project.”

The “audition” tapes Andrew sent back to New York of him and his friends from the Buckaneer Trailer Park are used by Earnhart to open *Mule Skinner Blues*; in effect, allowing Beanie to introduce himself. Moreover, Earnhart’s limitations as an outsider are made clear when Andrew explains, against various images of the people and things which make up his neighborhood, “I wanted to show them that there was a lot of entertainment right there in that trailer park . . . *that they didn’t know anything about*” (my emphasis). Earnhart creates a space where filmmaker and subject coexist, where the subject is permitted to speak for him/herself. In other words, the documentary filmmaker is not the sole authority behind the narrative, since the viewpoint of someone directly involved with the community is placed alongside those images captured by the director. This, of course, is a much different filmmaker/subject relationship from what Nicholas Barker represents. His film truly exemplifies the concept of

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auteur cinema. But considered together, *Unmade Beds* and *Mule Skinner Blues* present a range of approaches to the reflexive documentary film that include the former’s objectively observational appearance and the latter’s interactive style, in which the subject seems to have a great influence in dictating what would be said and seen. Perhaps in this sense, then, Earnhart’s documentary is actually the more observational of the two. What is infinitely clear, however, is the close connection between fiction and documentary in both films.

Like Barker, Earnhart understands that his documentary’s participants are plucked from reality and represented through a particular lens. He writes,

> fantasy sequences, music videos, special effects and stylized sound design are some of the methods I have used to embellish the wonderfully imaginative inner lives of my subjects. While I would never favor style over substance, I wanted to visually represent the vibrant creativity that bursts out of my characters whenever I’m with them. This is my slant, my cinematic viewpoint of these people. (Director’s Statement)

*Mule Skinner Blues* emanates from the premise that filmmaking is a collaborative effort and the cast’s creative aspirations are explored alongside the making of Andrew’s film. One result of foregrounding the collaborative relationship between filmmaker and subject in documentary film is to draw attention to the false presumption that objective distance is necessary to constructing a documentary representation. Earnhart makes it clear that Beanie is the site of introduction for the many other characters who contribute to the making of *Turnabout Is Fair Play*. Steve Walker, Miss Jeanie, Larry Parrot, Ricky Lix, and Annabelle Lea Usher are all significant figures in Earnhart’s documentary. The viewer’s first introduction to Ricky Lix, described in the documentary’s press kit as a
“quintessential rock & roll guitarist, . . . [whose] focus never strays from his dream of making it big,” illustrates the some of the representational layers included in *Mule Skinner Blues*. The scene begins with a shot of Beanie, then zooms in on one of his audition tapes, which is the setting for a fantasy sequence.

In the darkened living room of Beanie's trailer, the viewer, looking over his shoulder, watches footage on the television of Lix playing the guitar and singing, in a voice coarse with the effects of smoking. This is Beanie's footage and he, as filmmaker, talks of Ricky's talent for guitar picking. As Earnhart's camera zooms in on the screen, the interior of Lix's home is replaced by a crystal blue sky and white clouds. Lix is shown floating free of any earthly constraints. Earnhart has transformed Beanie's footage into a fantasy sequence, which as he explains is representative of how Lix's music makes the musician feel. Ironically, film's fantasy world is perhaps the one place Lix can be depicted unfettered by the constraints of daily life, with its lack of money and overabundance of alcohol. In addition to collaborating with Beanie, the "front man of . . . [this] eccentric group of performers, Earnhart takes advantage of the readily available visual effects offered by video filmmaking to, in a stylized manner, make his presence as filmmaker known (telephone interview). As compared to Barker, Earnhart's representation does little to tamper with the original performances of the participants, but instead uses them as a means to display the performative and

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12 Stephen Earnhart, telephone interview, 4 June 2002.
interpretive efforts of the filmmaker. In the case of both films, however, what the reflexive mode results in is the dissolution of the documentary's ties to objectivity as well as the understanding that any filmic representation is a combination of fiction and non-fiction.

Much of the footage Earnhart has collected, including Beanie's audition tapes, is loosely organized under the theme of creativity. Creating, whether through music, writing, or entertainment, is something shared by each of the characters in *Mule Skinner Blues*. Annabelle Lea Usher, a member of the trailer park who—because of her background in costume design—has, among her collection, a gorilla outfit for Beanie, explains the significance of creating: "Everyone has to find a way to release what's inside of them and get it out. A lot of the great art works in the world you can look at and tell that that person was down in the depths of hell when they did it because it just pours out of the soul. It's a release." Earnhart stresses the power of this release—and uses the film's form to further the theme—by following Annabelle's observation with footage of various bombs (ranging from what look to be grenades to atomic bombs) exploding. Interwoven with the larger subject of making *Turnabout Is Fair Play*, which, for Beanie, functions to fill the space that drinking occupied for so long, are the artistic interests of those involved with the project. Earnhart takes specific liberties with, for instance, portraying the importance of music for Ricky Lix and friend Steve Walker, and writing for Beanie's friend Larry Parrot. In all three cases, Earnhart veers away from the objective tenets of documentary film in order to take advantage of the many effects and image manipulation options
available to digital video production. As a result, in making visually apparent his influence in and creation of the participants of *Mule Skinner Blues*, Earnhart "deconstructs" the idea that fiction and non-fiction are distinctly separate modes of representation.

Regarding Lix and Walker (who, in his own words, is "a drunk musician with a future") music provides a way of coping with past experiences and intense emotions. The former, described by Beanie as having "a spastic look about him," is succinctly represented in a short montage sequence. With a fixed stare and sweat-matted hair, Lix, while playing heavy guitar riffs, is superimposed against images recording the effects of an atomic bomb detonating. The building exploding and then disintegrating behind him reflects the intensity of his playing. In music video fashion, Earnhart has made visual Lix's belief that "Darkness is something that you experience in order to appreciate the power of the bright side." This same dynamism marks Steve Walker's montage sequence. Superimposed in three-quarter shot over black and white footage of soldiers carrying American flags during a parade, Walker declares, "My purpose at eighteen years old was to go to Vietnam and kill communists for America. Mother and God, and apple pie, and the whole deal." His recollection is constantly punctuated by military explosions of different kinds. Shirtless and looking thin and vulnerable against yellow tinted smoke reminiscent of war, Walker asks, "How could anybody want money so much that they would send their sons off to die or to kill?" Again, music is his release, in this case, from the nightmares he still experiences. Like some of Earnhart's fantasy sequences, there is a
tendency towards exaggeration and amplification—a pseudo-MTV feel marks these particular moments of “mental subjectivity.” While it may appear that the filmmaker is poking fun at, for example, Lix’s obvious playing for the camera, the effect in both instances is to highlight that they are constructions and to destabilize the relationship the viewer has to the documentary. By foregrounding the documentary representation as a construction that reflects Earnhart’s performance as filmmaker, *Mule Skinner Blues* exemplifies documentary film’s negotiation between fiction and non-fiction elements.

In addition to using stock footage as a means of illustrating the subjective emotions of “characters,” such as Lix and Walker, Earnhart includes scenes and characters, both actual and reenacted, from classic horror films. Central to the production of *Turnabout Is Fair Play* is the collaboration between Andrew and Larry Parrot, who, besides owning a cleaning business, has written close to forty short stories and a handful of novel-length manuscripts all in the horror genre. Unemployed since the shrimping business adopted stricter regulations for its trapping methods, Beanie has kept his focus away from drinking by determinedly pursuing a movie career. Larry Parrot, on the other hand, cites an anxious childhood based on the unpredictability of living with a father who was an episodic alcoholic. In reference to horror films and stories, Parrot explains, “I think there’s just something about that that helps me to relax. That neutralizes my own anxieties, my own inner rages, my own fears . . . . It probably helps to keep me sane.” In addition to the scenes from *Creature From the Black Lagoon* that provide a backdrop for Beanie’s “murky” vision, various recreated vampire
scenes furnish the visual references for excerpts Parrot reads from his horror stories. Campy computer generated blood and gore "wipes," similar to what Jim Sharman includes in his *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), are used as the transition between clips.

One reason for doing the horror film reenactments might be monetary (to avoid the fees that would amass concerning copyright). At the same time, the commingling of horror film classics, reenactments, and the sharing of story ideas by Beanie and Larry—the first step in the writing of a film script—reflexively highlight the movie making process. Moreover, the same significance is given to the Hollywood film as to those reenactments and stories that were influenced by it. With these three aspects of movie making sharing the same screen space, Earnhart is de-privileging not only the auteurist focus, but the division between low and high budget filmmaking. Granted, the horror film, traditionally a marginal genre, is more open to the independent filmmaker. However, perhaps the best place to start rethinking the relationship of filmmaker to subject, and the space such an interaction occupies, is in a genre where the issue of predefined roles and aesthetics is open to parody.

Earnhart’s statement that “What’s inspiring to me when I saw Beanie’s videos, . . . is that they aren’t held back by the confines of what art should be. There’s such a lack of pretension,” thus seems in line with the horror genre’s willingness to recreate itself with each film (qtd. in Beale, 13). What *Psycho*, *Scream*, and the seemingly endless succession of *Friday the 13th* movies suggest is a genre—very aware of its own conventions—in which are included film
formats and topics ranging from reflexive parody to camp to intense, psychological/paranormal subject matter. Regarding genres as a whole, Leo Braudy writes, “Because of the existence of generic expectations—how a plot ‘should’ work, what a stereotyped character ‘should’ do, what a gesture, a location, an allusion, a line of dialogue ‘should’ mean—the genre film can step beyond the moment of its existence and play against its own aesthetic history.”

*Mule Skinner Blues* is, on the one hand, a behind-the-scenes look at the making of a low budget, independent horror film. And Earnhart references the genre through the inclusion of scenes from classic horror films, reenactments of such films, and the use of editorial transitions (like dripping blood to signify a cut between shots or scenes). Earnhart takes full advantage of his decision to not “hide behind a purist mentality that a documentarian must be strictly objective,” and uses the framework of the genre to explore the extent to which filmmaker, like actor or participant, is able to make his or her actions, his or her performance apparent.

At the core of *Mule Skinner Blues* is Beanie Andrew, whom Earnhart has described as the “Moses of the trailer park” (qtd. in Beale, 13). Beanie might be a “Moses,” but as *Mule Skinner Blues* depicts, *Turnabout Is Fair Play*, like Earnhart’s film, could not have been completed without the cooperation of subject and crew. Earnhart takes his documentary portrayal one step further by

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foregrounding the collaborative efforts of filmmaker and subject, moving beyond the confines of American documentary's traditionally held objectivity. And, in doing so, *Mule Skinner Blues* is just one example of how the construction of a filmic representation is informed by the reciprocal relationship between fiction and non-fiction elements.

**Conclusion**

Apprehensive of the means by which the United States, as a nation, maintains "the chimerical construct of . . . [itself] as conflict-free multiculturalism . . . necessary for transnational capital," Patricia Zimmermann is concerned with the lack of noncommercial public space allotted to independent documentary projects which challenge such imaginary constructs (7). Zimmermann thus considers the role of the documentary in either maintaining or disrupting the nation's seamless image. Of particular interest for Zimmermann is the different ways this country is constructed through the dominant media. Her misgivings about the possibility of alternative representations—critiquing corporate-owned media, the nation's authority, or any non-mainstream subject/perspective—is also useful when applied to the documentary form itself. Regardless of subject matter, any documentary representation is a negotiation between the objective (actuality) and subjective (the narrative itself). Certainly, the issue of "safe" representations that do not challenge any dominant institutions of power also refers to the manner in which such representations are depicted. America as a nation and Buckaneer Trailer Park, while actual places, are both constructs
which put forth certain meanings based on the ideologies behind their representations.

Documentaries that put forth a seamless image of their construction, not acknowledging the compromises and fissures that exist between the subject and its representation, exhibit a similar “conflict-free” depiction of the filmmaker/subject relationship. Under this category, I would include Ken Burns’s historical epic documentaries for PBS, like *The Civil War*. According to B. J. Bullert, Burns’s “successful marriage of GM’s money with public television,” has “shown public broadcasters and corporate underwriters that his historical programs can make money and enhance corporate images for $5 million or less.”

Certainly, any documentary representation that garners corporate support is the least likely to challenge either dominant social, cultural, or historical images or the relationship of filmmaker to his or her subject. Documentary film in the United States, especially, has suffered from its association with the tenets of objectivity. Moreover, a certain danger resides in a representation which passes itself off as fact. Regardless of the documentary film’s subject, whether wacky individuals or the ideologies that dictate the preference for such subject matter, to impose boundaries that define documentaries as distinctly different from fictions is one way to ensure that “new social spaces” do not exist in the realm of documentary representations.

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But it is the reflexive documentary, those that specifically "introduce gaps, reversals, and unexpected turns . . . [drawing] attention to the work of style as such and . . . [placing] the obsessions of illusionism within brackets," which begins to disrupt the division between fiction and documentary (Nichols 70). Unmade Beds and Mule Skinner Blues, with their foregrounding of authorial control, suggest that the category of non-fiction is itself an illusion. Both documentaries with their covert and overt incorporation of fictional film techniques, expose the facade of a direct representation of reality. Barker's formal recreation of reality and Earnhart's interpretation of his characters' imaginations—both of which are founded on the experiences their various "characters" bring to the films—pose a threat to documentary representations that do not acknowledge, as Stella Bruzzi describes, "the fact that the camera and crew are an inevitable intrusion that alter any situation they enter" (157).

The interaction between documentary subject and filmmaker includes performances both in front of and behind the camera. While what Unmade Beds foregrounds is the performative elements of daily life (the "characters" are acting out and acting upon roles they presumably play when the cameras are not around), Mule Skinner Blues goes one step further to overtly highlight the role the filmmaker plays in interpreting what it is s/he sees before the camera. What both documentaries make clear is that the "self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it
will be credited or discredited" (Goffman 252-3). Goffman's theory supports the presence of fiction (multiple subjectivities) in the construction of the documentary subject; of the many fictive layers which may make up a representation, there are at least those of the filmmaker and the subject. And within the course of one documentary, for example, the parts a participant may play are multitudinous.

While documentary elements are no stranger to the fictional films of Hollywood, a purist mentality still exists for documentary film. Yet, the new social spaces such films as *Unmade Beds* and *Mule Skinner Blues* imagine in the way of fiction and documentary's interrelationship begin to break down the wall between filmmaker and subject. When the presence of the one constructing the representation is foregrounded, the images presented and the stories being told no longer exist as "natural" or "as is." Hopefully, what does come forth is the negotiation that exists between fictional and non-fictional types of storytelling.
CHAPTER V

DOCUMENTING THE FICTIONS

To grope down into the bottom of the sea after them; to have one’s hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world, this is a fearful thing. What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this leviathan!

-- Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*¹

While viewing the rushes from the first day of filming *25 Fictions*, I noticed how uncomfortable it was watching and listening to myself on screen. At the time, I still was not sure what kind of role I would play in the documentary as director, but I did know I wanted this to be a reflexive film, one that would call attention to itself as a construction. Reflexivity does not necessarily require the filmmaker to make an appearance on screen (Errol Morris’ brief “appearance” at the very end of his highly reflexive documentary *The Thin Blue Line* is comprised of a short, but key, audio segment from a tape recorded interview with David Harris, the man who would later be convicted of Officer Woods’ murder). But such a stance does intend to make clear that the “reality” captured on film or video is that of a second order, at least once removed from its original context. I thus decided that my presence, my control, would make itself known in the area of montage.

Regarding the debate on the purpose of montage between Russian Formalists Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein, the latter writes,

A graduate of the Kuleshov school, he [Pudovkin] loudly defends an understanding of montage as a linkage of pieces. Into a chain. Again, ‘bricks.’ Bricks, arranged in series to expound an idea.

I confronted him with my viewpoint on montage as a collision. A view that from the collision of two given factors arises a concept.\(^2\)

As evidenced by, for example, Pudovkin’s The End of St. Petersburg (1927) and Eisenstein’s Strike (1924), the former’s concept of montage is fitting for narrative films, which are centered on an individual protagonist. Eisenstein, however, saw the power of montage as something not wholly dependent upon narrative, but significant to the smallest element of film, the relationship between two shots. Regarding the famous scene in Strike of a bull’s slaughter intercut with the massacre of factory workers, Eisenstein explains, if “you want to find the most powerful means to suggest a slaughter, nothing works better than blood itself. The human mind cannot stay indifferent at the sight of real blood and will project the emotional response on any fictional event intercut with the shots depicting a real murder.”\(^3\) As such, it would seem that montage as collision or conflict is used to draw attention to editing’s manipulative or propagandistic powers, and is best suited to the varied forms of documentary film, while montage as bricks, with its slower progression through a series of shots or ideas, is less overt in the meaning it puts forth and follows the continuity of fiction films.

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\(^3\) Qtd. by Yuri Tsivian, voiceover commentary to DVD version of Strike.
In 25 Fictions, montage is used to create connections and highlight differences or contradictions between individuals that would not be so apparent in the world outside of film. By moving back and forth between disparate or analogous ideas as they are represented in interviews conducted at different times with two different participants, for example, I was interested in both depicting the fact that the film is a construction and subtly drawing attention to the relationship between each participant's worldview. As a reflexive film that makes the fact of its construction known, 25 Fictions and its use of montage, especially in the interview sequences, begins as collision but concludes as the construction, through shots, of a particular idea or argument.

Films that view the past in the context of the present must often incorporate ways of visually signifying temporal differences. Perhaps the most common method is to oscillate between black and white and color images. The documentary, as Michael Renov argues, is a filmic mode in which "the very act of plucking and recontextualizing profilmic elements is a kind of violence . . ." With the understanding, then, that documentarians have a certain ethical responsibility to their subject as concerns the process of representation, how is it that the Holocaust is envisioned in Alain Resnais's Night and Fog (1955) and Errol Morris's Mr. Death: Rise and Fall of Fred Leuchter, Jr. (1999)? Specifically, in what manner does each documentary use black and white and color images to

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represent the terrible past of the concentration camps and the relationship that past has with each film's present moment?

Having been interested for a number of years in the blurring of fiction and documentary, I decided to make a film that explored the many fictions that make up a place—in this case, historic 25th Street in Ogden, UT. Being from the East Coast and having lived for only about three years in Logan, which is north of Ogden, I was a definite outsider to this street and most of its people. But I knew Brad Wheeler, a harmonica player and the manager of a bar called Beatniks. And it was because of Brad and Beatniks that I met Bruce Carlson, Joe McQueen, Willie Moore, and Robi Kap. Shane Andersen and Jonathan Hurd often frequented the bar and Matthew Godfrey, the mayor of Ogden, was a source of tension for bar owners on 25th St. because his “vision” of this historic place did not include biker bars and outdoor concerts. In fact, a controversy concerning Ogden’s annual Street Fest, which had been going on for a number of years, and which included food, games, outdoor concerts, and arm wrestling matches, came to a head over the summer months that I was shooting. The Mayor decided to cancel the concerts and arm wrestling matches, claiming they brought an unwanted element to the Fest. He also renamed the festivities Summer Fest, and went so far as to end the activities before even reaching 25th St. All of these changes Godfrey implemented in the interest of creating a more “family-friendly” environment.
A meditation on the relationship between filmmaker and, by extension, viewer, to that which exists before the camera, Agnes Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000) takes its cue from paintings of women who would stoop and gather what was left over in the fields after the harvest. As the French filmmaker explains, "There's another woman gleaning in this film, that's me." This she says while standing next to the famous Jules Breton painting, *Woman Gleaning*. Varda herself poses in a "tableaux" reproduction of the painting, with a swath of wheat over her shoulder. Once wheat is replaced by a video camera, the transformation from harvest gleaner to visual gleaner is complete. Varda aims her camera at us, the spectators, thus shifting our perspective from subject to object; along with filmmaker, we become the ones who are gleaned. Signaling a disruption in the idea of a seamless text—where the viewer is secure in their position as spectator—such a move communicates that, in the process of filming, what exists before the camera is both an object and a construction.

*The Street Fest controversy did not make the final cut. It seemed too significant and too heated an issue to take on in a short documentary—the voices were many and often tinged by anger and resentment. Having just been introduced to a controversy that had its beginnings with Godfrey's first year in office, but which extended further back to the Mormon Church's influence in civic life, I felt ill prepared to represent adequately the nuances and complexities of such an issue. Instead, the sequences I included are meant to suggest only a beginning introduction to the diverse stories and personalities that make up 25th St. 25 Fictions represents a discourse of place, where the people define the
place and where the place itself defines the people. By stepping back from the central controversy involving 25th St. during the summer I was there, in some ways I also forfeited the chance to utilize Eisenstein's notion of montage as collision or conflict. Although such a use of montage could be applied to virtually any subject, it seems best suited for representations of conflict. While perhaps not as socially significant, my decision to instead bring out the similarities I found in the many wide-ranging experiences and opinions of the documentary's participants did have its foundations in discord. Rather than maintain discontinuities, however, I found it more interesting politically to notice and bring out possible connections that had their foundations in difference.

Night and Fog and Mr. Death are similar in their conventional use of black and white photographs and footage to represent the past and color film to signify the present. And, certainly, Morris was influenced by Resnais's landmark film. When it comes to juxtaposing the reality of the concentration camps during World War II and their abandoned remains today, Mr. Death resembles Night and Fog, but with a significant difference. In addition to Morris having the technological innovations capable of rendering highly stylized visual effects on screen, his representation of the Holocaust in the context of Fred Leuchter—a man hired by Ernst Zundel, Canada's most infamous Holocaust denier, to debunk the fact that the Nazis used gas chambers—moves the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis into the realm of the mass media. Resnais, filming just a decade after the end of
WWII, seems intent on, as William Rothman explains, restoring "the reality of the world in which these camps were built and operated."\(^5\)

Quite often it seems that documentary film represents a negotiation between fiction and non-fiction. Consider the Everwood sequence of 25 Fictions, for example. By luck, the WB network began filming their new show Everwood while I was still gathering footage for my film on 25th St. Ogden’s historic main street became the town of Everwood’s main street, where Treat Williams, who plays a recently widowed Manhattan doctor, decides to relocate and make a new start with his children in Colorado. Both the set of Everwood—with camera crew and actors—and the series’ first episode are fictions of a sort. The only “factual” information each shares is that 25th St. in Ogden, Utah is the show’s real location, not the fictional town of Everwood, Colorado. And to present footage from a day of shooting alongside that day’s transformation into the show’s first episode makes even clearer the many layers of representation that make up both types of fiction. Shane Andersen, who offered his “tour” of 25th St., is as much an actor for my camera as Treat Williams, the star of Everwood is an actor for the WB network. But where a definite difference lies is in the assumptions associated with fiction and documentary.

\(^5\) Documentary Film Classics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 60.
While television dramas and documentaries both share a concern with how it is they are representing the “realities” they depict, one mode is based on performance and the other is assumed to be taken directly from “reality.” Perhaps visual modes of storytelling should be looked at according to what they share—like the performance of both actor and participant—and not what makes them different. 25 Fictions is no longer, for example, just a documentary about historic 25th St., but a documentary about the many realities and subjectivities, including my own, that make up such a place. And by foregrounding the idea of multiple fictions, the Everwood sequence goes further to suggest that some fictions or realities, like that of the television series, have a more legitimate claim to being an official representation as compared to the non-mainstream, non-commercial version of Everwood as a “behind-the-scenes” construction.

Of Douglas Sirk’s Written on the Wind (1956), Thomas Elsaesser notes, “the cathartic violence of a shootout or a chase becomes an inner violence, often one that the characters turn against themselves. . . . In Sirk, of course, they are locked into a universe of real and metaphoric mirrors.” A domestic melodrama that plays with the issue of reflections in order to represent repressed tensions—often a mark of this genre and its claustrophobia—also suggests consideration of an actor’s dual identity as public personality and private person. A mainstream actor’s official identity is packaged and presented by Hollywood, but alternative sides of the star are often the subject of the fiction film’s

counterpart, documentary. Sirk's film, and its lead male Rock Hudson, specifically, thus exhibit an even greater depth when considered alongside Mark Rappaport's *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (1992), a film addressing the "illusory nature of the screen image." Rock Hudson's Home Movies is not a documentary in the traditional sense. Eric Farr, an actor, plays the reinstated Rock Hudson, who takes the viewer on a tour of his films and "the gay implications in every movie . . . . [The] evidence, irrefutable proof, it was all up there. My homosexuality in plain sight." Perhaps the only documentary elements in the film are the above mentioned clips from Hudson's films. Nevertheless, *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* does function like a documentary in the sense that such a film mode is the marginal counterpart to Hollywood film. Documentaries often expose the fact that Hollywood puts forth mainstream representations that are rarely politically charged since the commercial aim is to appeal to as large an audience as possible. And as is illustrated by Michael Apted's dual projects, the fictional *Thunderheart* (1992), which dramatizes, through the eyes of Val Kilmer's character, the F. B. I. investigation of a shooting on a Sioux Indian reservation in South Dakota, and the documentary *Incident at Oglala* (1991), also filmed by Apted, which presents the story of Leonard Peltier who was charged with the shooting of two police officers, documentaries often address the more complicated issues surrounding a particular event or person. Consequently, looking at *Written on the Wind* through the lens of Rock Hudson's

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7 Eric Farr (as Rock Hudson), *Rock Hudson's Home Movies*, Videocassette, Bear Video Inc.
Home Movies attests to a reciprocal relationship between fiction and, in this case, a semi-documentary film, where one mode—documentary—takes as its subject what literally exists outside of the dominant fictional film frame, Rock Hudson’s homosexuality.

One of the fictions I became particularly interested in was that of television news. Implicit to news stories is the understanding that the brevity with which they are conveyed means only a minute portion of information concerning the story is actually told. The Fox News Channel from Salt Lake City was invited to cover the CD-release party for Joe McQueen, who at the age of eighty-three had just finished the first compact disc recording of his saxophone playing. I had recorded one of Joe’s performances earlier that summer at the Ogden Ampitheater. While that was a free lunch time event, the release party promised to be more spectacular. The reporter from Fox conducting the interview allowed me to set Joe up with a lapel mike so that I would be able to record the questions being asked and Joe’s responses. Such a “release” was on the condition, which I agreed to, that I not intend to sell 25 Fictions.

I was quite surprised by the aspects of the interview that Fox finally aired. Their official version of Joe, including his life and the event of his CD-release, was very simple and non-threatening. Yet, the full version of the reporter’s questions was not. I knew then that I needed to “deconstruct” the Fox story in
order to reveal its status as a fiction and include some of what Fox considered "un-newsworthy." So, for example, following the portion of the interview in which Joe describes his history playing jazz, I inserted a question from the interview not included. The reporter asked Joe whether the "blacks were responsible for jazz." Aside from the fact that the way the question is phrased is itself rather offensive (I wonder if the same question would have been asked if Joe were white), it resides outside the narrow parameters of the "human interest" story. Television news time is better spent, it seems, creating mundane segues and connections between Joe's jazz and the Utah's professional Jazz basketball team. My "deconstruction" of the Fox story is, however, just as much of a fiction as theirs. What is hopefully suggested by the sequence on Joe's release party is that any representation is framed around the intentions of the individual or group responsible for the construction. Even the "unofficial" version in 25 Fictions is constructed in such a way that it explores my interest in the many fictions which make up what is generally considered to be objective, factual, and real.

Gleaning as a metaphor to explain the actions of the documentary filmmaker suggests that Varda, for example, is gathering those images that are the leftover bits and pieces of that which is most prized. Like those men and women Varda films, who scour the dumpsters outside of restaurants and outdoor markets after they have closed for all the unsold items considered trash, she is most interested in those people and places that exist along the margins and outside the frame of what is judged to be desirable and acceptable. In this sense, The Gleaners and I is in antithesis to those dominant, fictional images of
comfort, ease, and wealth that make up the majority of mainstream films. As she describes in a voice over to images of various materials discarded on city streets, "I like filming rot, leftovers, waste, mold and trash. But I never forget those who shop in the leftovers and trash when the moment is over." Implicit in Varda's choice of subject is class; many who glean now do so because they cannot afford to feed themselves and their families with food purchased from markets.

Cutting Continuity of a Selection from the Dog
Bite Films Production, 25 Fictions
Running Time: 2 minutes, 36 seconds

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<td>ANNOUNCER (Off)</td>
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<td>Live with Kerri Cronk and Tôdd Hanson</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>53. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – anchors Hanson and Cronk behind news desk</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CRONK</td>
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<td>He starting playing music during World War II, but it's taken this Ogden artist until now to release his first CD.</td>
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<td>With the help of photographer Craig Feller and film producer Todd Tanner here's a look at jazz man Joe McQueen.</td>
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<td>53. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – Joe playing the saxophone at his CD-release party</td>
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<td>54. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – Joe playing the saxophone at his CD-release party</td>
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</table>
Joe McQueen may not be a household name, but when it comes to Utah jazz he may be the most valuable player.

55. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – Joe and his band playing at the CD-release party

HANSON (Off)

Long before the NBA’s Jazz came to play in Salt Lake City . . .

Dissolve

56. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – MS of drummer in band

HANSON (Off)

Joe McQueen arrived in Ogden with the intention of staying to play for only a week . . .

Dissolve

57. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – INT of Beatniks and the crowd during release party

HANSON (Off)

But that was fifty-seven years ago. Joe McQueen has . . .

Dissolve

58. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – upward tilting shot of Joe playing

HANSON (Off)

been here ever since doing what he does best . . .

Dissolve

59. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – MS of Joe during Fox interview before performing at Beatniks during the CD-release party

MCQUEEN

Jazz.

Edge Wipe

60. INT. BEATNIKS LS – Joe being set up for Fox 13 News interview at Beatniks; not included in the Fox News segment that aired on television

Edge Wipe
61. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – Fox segment with Brad Wheeler, owner of Beatniks, outside of the bar on the night of the release party

WHEELER

At one time he had eight gigs a week on this street. Eight gigs a week.

Dissolve

62. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – INT of Beatniks, patrons paying cover charge

HANSON (Off)

Brad Wheeler is the manager of Beatniks blues and jazz club and a . . .

Dissolve

63. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – upward tilting shot of Joe singing

HANSON (Off)

huge fan of Joe McQueen.

WHEELER (Off)

The closest link we have to the . . .

64. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – CU of Joe singing

WHEELER (Off)

past is Joe McQueen right now. He’s played with . . .

65. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – upward tilting shot of Joe singing

WHEELER (Off)

everybody from Count Basie to Duke Ellington to Ray Charles to Lester Young to Nate King Cole.

HANSON (Off)

While 25th Street isn’t . . .

66. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – LS of Washington Avenue in Ogden

HANSON (Off)

as vibrant as it once was, at the age of eighty-three Joe is . . .

Dissolve
67. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – upward tilting shot of Joe singing

HANSON (Off)

as lively as ever. His first CD, Joe McQueen and Friends, has . . .

68. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – CU of drummer

HANSON (Off)

just been released. The recording, which as made possible by the Utah Arts Council, . . .

69. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – upward tilting shot of Joe singing

HANSON (Off)

contains a lifetime of experience.

Edge Wipe

70. INT. BEATNIKS MS – three-quarter shot of Joe during Fox interview

answering a question that was not included in the Fox News segment that aired on television

REPORTER (Off)

So are the blacks responsible for jazz?

MCQUEEN

Not necessarily. I mean, but they, they had a lot to do with it. But I mean it was a lot of, a lot of people started. When it first started out, it was a lot of people started playing blues and things like this and got things going, but they had a lot to do with it. That's the way I'm gonna say it.

Edge Wipe

71. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – Joe's band playing at the Beatnik's CD-release party

MCQUEEN (Off)

You can teach people how to play an instrument, . . .

Dissolve

72. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – from behind the bar at Beatniks during release party
but to really get the feeling of jazz you gotta have it . . .

73. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – MS of Joe during Fox interview

MCQUEEN (Off)

you gotta have it in here.

74. EXT. IN FRONT OF MCQUEEN'S HOUSE LS – interview with Joe conducted by the filmmaker

MCQUEEN

Well, I got off that bus station . . .

75. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – CU of bass player in Joe's band at Beatniks

MCQUEEN (Off)

December the 7th, 1945.

76. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – Joe playing his saxophone

MCQUEEN (Off)

Exactly four years after Pearl Harbor. And you people have just heard about Pearl Harbor, you didn't know nothing . . .

77. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – INT of Beatniks, MS of female patrons watching Joe and the band play

MCQUEEN (Off)

about it cause you were too young, you know.

Dissolve

78. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – Joe playing at Beatniks release party

MCQUEEN (Off)

But when I came to Ogden I was twenty-six years old. I've been here all that long time, fifty-seven years.

79. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – Fox 13 News anchor Todd Hanson

HANSON

Now April 18th was declared Joe McQueen Day by Governor Levitt in
honor of Joe’s contributions to the community.

80. INT. TELEVISION SCREEN CU – LS of news desk with Hanson, Cronk and the meteorologist

CRONK
That Joe’s a good guy. I can’t believe you can live your dream at any age.

HANSON
Yeah, well I think that CD is long over due, but we’re glad that . . .

CRONK
Yeah. Sounds like a good one.

HANSON
glad that it’s finally here.

METEOROLOGIST
And keep it clean right?

HANSON
Yes. That’s some hot music.

METEOROLOGIST
Outside today . . .

HANSON
That’s my segue. 

Fade out

Rock Hudson was often cast as the desirable leading man, an irony that, according to Michael Rappaport, in Rock Hudson’s Home Movies, manifested itself on screen in subtle ways. From the beginning, Rappaport highlights the conflicting identities of Hudson—the tension between his private life as a gay man and his public persona as a Hollywood icon. The film’s opening shot shows a freeze frame profile of Hudson on the left side of the screen with Farr as
Hudson addressing the audience from the right. The representation of Hudson as a heterosexual leading man is literally an image, compounded by the fact that Farr, an actor playing Hudson, is more "real," both in a physical sense and with regard to the star's posthumous admittance that "the icons they (the audience) love can sometimes be queer." The representational nature of the film image is further supported by the fact that all the clips "Rock" shows are grainy third or fourth generation clips. What a comparative analysis of both films presents is a complex interrelationship between onscreen image and private "reality," between the different subject matter fiction and documentary modes are interested in portraying.

Two influences in creating 25 Fictions were Eisenstein's dialectic vision of film form and Pudovkin's description of the relationship between shots as bricks. While filming Jon Hurd and Bruce Carlson, it became clear that these two disparate individuals actually connected on certain topics. Jon, a thirty-one year old self-proclaimed activist, and fifty-six year old Bruce, an engineer for the Department of Transportation, who spends about a thousand dollars a month on
clothing, have very different ideas on what it means to be socially aware. While Jon travels around the West working for indigenous rights, Bruce enjoys social events, like the opera, which allow him the opportunity to show off his outfits. Although in reality these two men would probably not be friends, for a moment of screen time there exists between them a "dialogue" of ideas. In other words, through the process of cutting together two wildly different worldviews, comparisons were created.

Opening with a tracking shot of some concentration camps as they appear in the present, the images of Night and Fog are accompanied by a narrator explaining that now in 1955, "The blood is caked, the cries stilled, the camera now the only visitor." And as the spectator follows along on this journey of the present by way of the past, Resnais makes "this past present, . . . to acknowledge that it never stopped being present" (Rothman 60). The documentarian moves back and forth between current images of the camps and photographs and footage that depicted the ways in which they were used a decade earlier. Following a black and white photograph of prisoners building a crematorium (Himmler wanted some means for a "productive extermination"), the past images cut to a color tracking shot of the crematorium currently. The narrator states, "A crematorium may look as pretty as a postcard. Today, tourists are photographed standing in front of them." Mr. Death, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the fleeting popularity of Fred Leuchter—a man skilled in creating machines of death for prisons—and it is during his infamous visits to such concentration camps as Auschwitz that Morris connects with Resnais in his
representation of the past as it functions in the present. Morris too seems concerned with countering the position that the Holocaust is simply an event of history. But, unlike Night and Fog, Mr. Death is the story of one man's publicized opinion that the Holocaust, more than just a relic of the past, did not include mass murders by the SS.

Instead of creating comparative connections between two disparate individuals, the sequence on segregation in 25 Fictions shows how montage can highlight the subtle differences that can exist between two seemingly similar life experiences. On the surface Joe McQueen and Willie Moore's experiences with discrimination are quite similar. Being black, both men dealt with the prejudice of the dominant white population while working on 25th St. during the 1940s and 1950s. However, while Joe's story is one of a public challenge to white dominance, Willie's resistance took on a more private, personal form. Whereas Joe fought against the denial of rights he and his band members experienced while playing for a white patron, Willie worked around the discrimination of a customer, who refused to have a black man cut his hair, by seeking connections. While Joe felt responsible for the many black people who were made to adhere

Figure 6 Willie Moore

Figure 7 Joe McQueen
to the unfair demands of their white employers, Willie felt responsible for the well
being of the white customer who looked to the barber for company as they talked
of their shared frustration with marriage. I sought to use montage as a way to
make my influence apparent in the process of constructing a representation,
while also creating relationships, which may or may not be so obvious in the
world outside of the film frame.

The tragic story of misplaced love and devotion in a wealthy, but in many
ways morally corrupt, Texas oil family, Sirk's Written on the Wind presents Rock
Hudson's character Mitch Wayne as a long time family friend of the Hadleys.
The leading man falls in love with Lucy Moore, the wife of his best friend Kyle
Hadley and is the unrequited love interest of Kyle's sister Marilee Hadley. Rock
Hudson's Home Movies includes a scene from Sirk's film: while driving Mitch in
her convertible, Marilee explains, "I guess that's why I hate him (Kyle) so, for
taking you away from me." The implication that there is some attraction between
Mitch and Kyle, or at the least a strained relationship between the two men and
Lucy, is further supported by a scene in which Kyle has whisked Lucy off to
Florida with Mitch tagging along uninvited. At one point, Kyle is showing Lucy
her suite with its closets full of new clothing, and the young couple is depicted on
opposite sides of a dresser with Mitch reflected in the mirror above the dresser
and between them. Moreover, Sirk chose a mirror that is divided into six panels,
thus splintering Mitch's reflection. Not only does such a scene present Mitch as
an obstacle in the way of Kyle and Lucy's relationship, but considered alongside
Mark Rappaport’s exploration of Hudson’s films, Mitch’s reflection, it could be argued, also represents the tension between Hudson’s onscreen and offscreen identity.

The exploration of some of the various fictive layers which make up 25th St. is introduced in the second sequence of 25 Fictions—or what I refer to as the introduction through montage sequence. It is comprised of three sections, each of which includes a variety of clips from interviews I conducted. Sometimes the individuals talk about 25th St. and sometimes they talk of themselves. Between sections one and two and two and three, the image fades to black and a number of words dance across the screen—place, past, prostitutes, alleys, globetrotters, revolution, idealistic. All of the words were spoken previously. The effect is to draw attention to the arbitrariness of the terms used to describe the place and the persons (these descriptors could be applied to different contexts), as well as foregrounding the fact that the images presented are a representation, a construction supporting my intentions. As a way of not fixing the identities of the participants, I also elected not to include their names. Instead, each person’s primary occupation is included at the bottom of the screen when they first appear. In many ways, an occupation title is more general and less personal than a name and it also provides a greater opportunity for the negation, which is at times ironic, of its associations. In other words, Willie Moore is identified as a barber, 

Figure 8 Joe at CD-release party
but he is shown talking about playing for the Globetrotters. While Bruce Carlson explains how shaving his head changed the way he was identified in social situations, his title reads "D. O. T. Engineer". And Joe McQueen is identified as a retired auto mechanic even though he is playing his saxophone on stage during his CD-release party. All of these "identities" are true, and they are but a portion of the various fictions which make up each of these individuals.

In *Mr. Death*, Errol Morris opts to present both past and present in a modified version of the split screen. Against the images, historian Robert Jan van Pelt, who is included by Morris as a counter to Leuchter's theory, explains, "There's no way that when you go to the crematoria you really can understand what it was to be led there as a victim." The screen is split between a black and white photo of some barracks on the right and an empty field of grass in color on the right. The television is obviously outside and the camera is placed in such a position that what is behind it is made to appear as the other half of the film screen. The barracks are blurry at first as the focus adjusts from the present day background to the photo. The images then cut to a photo of Jewish women and children (dressed with the Star of David visible) on the left and, again, a vacant space on the right. Robert Jan van Pelt continues, "To have to undress and be led in the gas chamber. And when you are in the building archive (where Nazi documents are stored), it is possible to reimagine what a place was like during the war." The split screen cuts to reveal three televisions, with two of them projecting the still images just shown, in a row against the razor wire and electric fences of the concentration camp. Unlike Resnais's graphic, black and white footage of
emaciated women and men in the concentration camps, these photos of Jewish adults and children do not yet reflect their future experience in the concentration camps.

*The tunnel sequence of 25 Fictions is the topic that most clearly depicts how it is a place or a lived reality is made up of multiple fictions.* The tunnels are Ogden's own urban legend—oftentimes it is a friend of a friend who actually saw the underground tunnel system, which supposedly ran up and down 25th St. and along Washington Ave. According to the story, during the height of Ogden's railroad years, when about 119 passenger trains passed through Union Station, there existed an above and below ground 25th St. On the street level there were legitimate businesses, like restaurants, bars, clothing stores, and barbershops, but below ground there existed a series of tunnels where opium dens, gambling, and prostitution were available. In fact, the spaces below the businesses are said to look like stores themselves. Beneath Beatniks, for example, there is what appears to be a storefront window under the bar's window. And the doorframe of this façade even opens out onto a "sidewalk." On one side of this walkway, the stone wall has been torn down and then bricked up. It appears that the "sidewalk" led further than just the basement of Beatniks. Inconsistencies like this fuel the debate over whether or not tunnels actually existed. Everyone is in agreement that the above ground businesses often had vaults used to lower goods down...
into the basements, but there is a definite question over whether these basements connected up and down 25th St. and Washington Ave., creating in effect another city centered on illicit activities.

Thomas Elsaesser argues that in the scene between Kyle, Mitch, and Lucy, where their reflection in a mirror signifies the sexual tension between the three characters, Douglas Sirk, in *Written on the Wind*, is “making a direct comment on the Hollywood stylistic technique that ‘creates’ a character out of the elements of the décor and that prefers actors who provide as blank a facial surface and as little of a personality as possible” (522). I would submit that in the case of Hudson, as explored by Rappaport, the negotiation between his public and private life leaves traces on the screen—the private is not fully erased by the film character. As a semi-documentary, *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* begins in the realm of fiction with Hudson's film roles, moves into documentary with the evidence being clips from those films and, finally, returns to fiction as the clips are analyzed by an actor who imagines what the leading man might say about what is occurring beneath the surface of the film image. Rappaport's film is unlike the traditional documentary that begins in non-fiction and, through representing that material, fictionalizes it in the sense that a certain subjectivity dictates the frame of representation. However, *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* does function as a documentary if it is thought of as a site of representation marginal to the dominant fiction, where documentary functions to draw attention to the homogenizing effects of mainstream, commercial fiction film.
Knowing of the tunnels, I made it a point to ask every person I interviewed what she or he knew or thought of their existence. My hope was that I could record enough opinions on the issue that a tapestry of competing and agreeing beliefs and experiences could be constructed. Admittedly, the tunnels sequence only touches upon the depth of the legend—it certainly extends further than even the architectural space in which this unofficial Ogden was said to exist. In fact, it is believed that Mafia bosses and Mormon leaders conducted “business” in the tunnels. A certain tension resides, for instance, in the fact that the thirty-something Shane Andersen can vividly imagine, along with Brad Wheeler, the majestic reality of the tunnels in “their heyday,” but Willie Moore and Joe McQueen admit to never having seen evidence of the tunnel’s existence even though they both worked on 25th St. Joe explains that while they very well could have existed, he “was above ground most of the time.” What such divergent beliefs point to are the various “realities” behind the fictions. It is interesting how Willie and Joe’s lived reality on 25th St. contests the imagined reality of a younger, and less experienced, generation. While it is difficult to imagine capturing all the different versions of the tunnel legend, what is more significant is what the various stories imply about Ogden’s official history and its competing street history.

By projecting the past of the Holocaust on televisions, Errol Morris in Mr. Death is certainly tapping into today’s most common source of news and information. But the televisions’ solid black frames, which clearly delineate between past and present, make it appear as if the two times inhabit different
worlds. Not only is a photograph a representation of reality, but to project that photograph on a television screen adds another layer of representation that further distances the subject of the photo from the context in which it was taken. And yet the photo is the real proof of the Holocaust, not the numerous samples of brick and concrete Leuchter illegally obtained from the gas chambers in order to test for noxious gases. Certainly influenced by Resnais's admittedly more intimate depiction of the concentration camps and their presence a decade later, Morris throws both past and present into question. Resnais, however, is interested in the Holocaust as an event, while for Morris the Holocaust is a part of Fred Leuchter Jr.'s story. Although Leuchter's theory is unanimously rejected, Morris makes it clear that both sides of the debate on whether the Nazis used gas chambers are based on evidence many times separated from the actual event.

*Built into a representation, whether photograph, drawing, map, or text, of actuality is the distance between the person constructing the representation and his or her subject. For the first sequence of 25 Fictions, I wanted to introduce 25th Street through a number of still shots intermingled with old photographs and maps. The effect is to point to the fact that my representation is itself a construction, a fiction. So, along with static shots of some of the buildings, I describe, in voice over, how I see myself as filmmaker in relation to the subject of the film:*

*Place, whether it's as large as a country, or as small as a street, is made up of both facts and fictions. Tactile building materials exist alongside geographical maps, architectural plans, and stories about the person living*
across the street. My documentary is also a negotiation because to know a place is to construct a montage, a negotiation, between its sanctioned history and its street history. Historic 25th Street, as seen through my camera lens, is itself a fiction, and one which I hope does not hide behind the guise of objectivity.

While the maps of Ogden are one type of imagining, many of the buildings I included are identified by faded advertisements, from the early half of the twentieth century, for such products as Coca Cola and Wrangler jeans. In a sense, these historic buildings, for many of them were originally built in the late 1800s, have also been identified and used for different purposes. Just like the fluid representation of identity of some of the film’s participants in the introduction through montage sequence, the buildings in this first sequence are not all identified by what they now house, but by what they once may have represented.

Along with an exploration of poverty and waste, Varda’s Gleaners and I is concerned with the “stroboscopic, narcissistic, and even hyper-realistic” qualities of digital video production. Of the trucks she films while driving on the highway, Varda says, “I like to capture them. To retain things passing? No, just to play.” Her hand repeatedly enters the frame, “grasping” as the trucks pass. Thus, this documentary is as much (if not more) about the filmmaker’s relationship to the camera as it is about the modern-day gleaners. While filming souvenirs from a recent trip to Japan, the documentarian focuses on postcard reproductions of Rembrandt paintings: “Saskia up close. And then my hand up close, I mean, this
is my project: to film with one hand my other hand. To enter into the horror of it. (The shot then moves into an extreme close-up of her skin, freckled and wrinkled with age). I find it extraordinary. I feel as if I am an animal, worse I am an animal I don't know.” Varda is commenting on the distance and detachment that results once the camera steps in between filmmaker and subject. Ironically, at the same time that the camera disconnects, it allows one to probe deeper than with the human eye alone. Consequently, a filmmaker's relationship to his or her subject is one framed by self and the eye of the camera represents the common, the familiar in such a way as to make it seem unfamiliar. It appears that Varda’s dual reflexivity—concerning the camera and herself—unmasks the idealism often assumed to exist between filmmaker, apparatus, and subject. Documentary film is as much about the filmmaker and his or her relation to their subject as it is about the subject itself.

25 Fictions does not claim to “know” 25th Street or even its participants. Instead, what I have attempted to create is a film that foregrounds the role of the filmmaker's, my own, subjectivity in constructing a representation. Because my position with respect to 25th St. was that of an outsider, and by extension an observer (but an observer who also has an effect on that which she is observing), I tried to visualize such a relationship in the sequence of shots depicting my looking through the window of what on the Everwood television show is the office of the doctor

Figure 11 The filmmaker
played by Treat Williams. Following a medium shot of me in profile, looking through the window, the image cuts to a position behind the facade. I am looking in at what should be a doctor's office waiting room, but instead is a vacant parking lot, and the viewer sees that this is all just a set. In some ways my looking through the facade is also a comment on the illusory nature of what on the outside appears to be, at times, a single, but always concrete, objective reality. From the "inside," 25th St. and some of the individuals who frequent it are much more complex and not so easily fixed. The self-reflexive film, and its depiction of a "constructed image rather than a slice of reality," provided the means for representing my position as filmmaker (literally in the above mentioned scene and more subtly in the editing process) with respect to the film's subject matter. Moreover, since my relation to the subject was framed by the idea that objective reality is made up of many subjective realities, the documentary became a place for playing with the idea that such a mode of representation is a negotiation between fiction and non-fiction.

By foregrounding the understanding that filmic representations are produced in a space between fiction and documentary, images are created that draw attention to and may even resist those of mainstream, commercial fiction. Such a space is best described as excess, which "in documentary takes the forms it does in fiction (acting or performance, spectacle, primary identification with the image as such, triggered emotions, and stylistic excess) as well as ones that

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hinge more directly on the documentary's historical referent" (Nichols 144). In Agnes Varda's The Gleaners and I, her highly self-reflexive presence exemplifies the excess not found in the conventional form of documentary film, while her focus on the impoverished is not the preferred topic of high grossing Hollywood fare. Douglas Sirk's Written on the Wind, on the other hand, as a Hollywood melodrama, follows the fictional use of excess with regard to the expression of repressed emotion through the film's set, as in the use of mirrors. As a semi-documentary, however, Michael Rappaport's Rock Hudson's Home Movies is significant for drawing attention to that fictional system of which documentary excess, history, is subordinate. Rock's public life as a leading man in the commercially successful, dominant world of the Hollywood leading man negates his private life as a gay man. Similarly, Fred Leuchter Jr., the subject of Errol Morris' Mr. Death, is depicted as a public figure who, for a short time, worked to disrupt the flow of a historical narrative like the Holocaust as portrayed in such documentaries as Alain Resnais's well-known Night and Fog. In almost every case, documentary excess is presented on screen through the reflexive mode and the attention it draws to the viewer's relationship to the filmmaker and text. It is the responsibility of documentary film, therefore, to, at the least suggest, but more importantly to provide space for that excess which is not included in the narrow narrative frame of fiction film or in the traditional documentary filmmaker's stance as objective observer.

Through the use of montage as both collision, according to Eisenstein, and as progression towards an idea, for Pudovkin, 25 Fictions documents numerous
excesses associated with historic 25th Street. Utilizing the editing technique of the split screen, my footage from the set of Everwood during the shooting of the first episode is placed alongside the finished episode as it aired on the WB network. On the left of the screen, the viewer is shown the actors as they are set up for the shot, with film camera and boom microphone in full view, while on the right of the screen is the scene as it first aired. In order to highlight the fact that the latter is a mediated, selected representation, I included the black frame of the television set to distinguish it from the on-location, albeit also mediated, footage to its left. As an instance of collision, the intention is to reinforce the idea that 25th St. is partly made up of fictions. Montage as conflict is also utilized in the news sequence concerning Joe McQueen’s CD-release party. I wanted to jolt the viewer into seeing the Fox News segment as a construction by intercutting it with what television news would probably considered to be the outtakes, or, in the case of this study’s focus on the reflexive film, the excess, of the full interview as it was conducted by the Fox reporter. Montage as the progression of an idea, on the other hand, is employed in, for example, the tunnels segment and in the “dialogue” sequences between Jon Hurd and Bruce Carlson and Joe McQueen and Willie Moore. In all three cases, montage functions to create a general impression about the sequences as a whole rather than create a single idea from the collision between two specific shots. Furthermore, the tunnel sequence especially represents an example of excess; Ogden’s official history contains no proof that the tunnels exist, and yet stories about them continue to be told. What
all of the sequences in 25 Fictions attempt to suggest is that there is at least one subjectivity involved in the construction of an image or representation.

But, more importantly, once that subjectivity or presence is brought to the viewer’s attention through the reflexive film mode, it becomes possible to begin exploring the process of representation and how a documentary portrayal, for example, differs from its dominant counterpart fiction. By foregrounding the presence of that which exists outside of the fiction or documentary film frame, the filmmaker portrays differing and at times dueling frameworks of representation. Consequently, what becomes possible is a more democratic filmic representation. My use of the term “democratic” comes from Robert W. McChesney’s argument that “the corporate media system, in conjunction with the broader trappings of a modern capitalist society necessarily generate a depoliticized society.” In order that, as he explains, the “many should and do make the core political decisions,” there needs to be a “media system that has a significant nonprofit and noncommercial component” (4, 6). It seems that the interest in allotting public space to non-mainstream, non-commercial media could also be thought of in terms of individual films and the ways in which fiction and documentary films provide filmic space for both the mainstream and the marginal, the conventional and the excess. In other words, one step towards a more democratic filmic representation would be to include voices that are alternative to the mainstream and represented in such a way that the viewer is

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made aware of their "construction" within the framework of the film. By this I am not claiming that 25 Fictions is itself made up of democratic representations.

Clearly the film illustrates several layers of mediated text; each of the interviews are framed within the context of particular questions and I select from those interviews to create, through montage, a particular representation and even meaning. Yet, by working within the reflexive mode, the intention was to foreground my influence (the fact that the film was built out of my choices) and direct some attention towards those example of excess that exist outside of the filmic (as a medium of representation) and the historic (that material which is represented).
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