

TROUBLE IN THE IMAGE

By Alex MacKenzie

“We believe things not because they are true, but because to believe otherwise would damage how we are accustomed to seeing the world.” Errol Morris

“...somebody’s perception is at odds with reality. Why resolve it? It never gets resolved in real life.” Andrew Jarecki

At this point in the history and trajectory of the documentary form, it might be taken for granted by the filmmaker that they are in a position which does not demand nor oblige them to neutrality.

Far from being objective, these filmmakers inevitably proceed with their own politics very much in mind, for neutrality is a self-determined claim. A belief system - their personal morality - is at the root of the work that they present, and reflects a politic at once complex and experientially based. The real challenge is for the filmmaker to successfully take the material they have acquired - be it archival, original, or contemporary newsreel - and shape it in a way that accurately reflects the subject. The genuinely successful documentary manages to tell some kind of “truth” along the way. If we look closely enough we will find that honest and independently driven documentaries have at their core the heart of their very maker – a heart in conflict.

The making of a documentary is dependent on very slippery and elusive factors bound by issues of timing, drama, and potential outcomes, to say nothing of chance and serendipity. Circumstance will often determine the film’s entire shape. And what of invention? Premeditated scenarios are far from rare in the making of documentaries, and the decision must be made as to the level of magic the makers can justifiably perform to make their point. The positioning of a subject might create drama or help emphasize an angle. Is this aiding and abetting, or simply shaping the point? The filmmaker proceeds on the assumption that his or her impact on the subject is minimal, but the intrusion of cameras on a life has already irreversibly altered its trajectory.

If I point a camera at you, in so doing I imply that I value your opinion at some level. It might bolster my point and make you look good, or do the same for me by making you look like a fool. Either way, you now have a potency you might not have had before I turned the camera in your direction. The simple intrusion of a film crew is enough to start a cycle that can play into a range of psychological factors on that subject: inflated ego, a fear of poor representation of a cause, renewed hope created through the illusion of help from the filmmaker, etc.

On-camera personalities, however manipulated, will quite likely be the deciding factor of how the audience relates to a film. So often in the non-fiction film form, politics is undermined and diminished by personality. The “charm factor” in most documentary films - whether we like or dislike the individuals presented to us - is the primary deciding factor in its success. This personality factor does not necessarily stop at people - a film made entirely out of archival footage presents a type as well - pacing, humour, voice-over techniques - all of these help to determine how we feel about a given subject. These manipulations are crucial to the film’s perception and are typically informed by the current Zeitgeist.

While the factors of personality and the personal politics of the documentary filmmaker are inevitable, if not necessary (or at least useful) in the creation of engaging works, the documentary filmmaker has an obligation in making a so-called “non-fiction” work to move beyond a single point narrative. The most successful and worthy documentaries do just that. A film excels when it can present conflicting positions, both internally through the personalities portrayed by the subjects, and externally by remaining open to multiple positions.

When Errol Morris interviewed Robert S. McNamara he may not have agreed with McNamara’s past politics and military process, but he certainly does sympathize with the very human plight to redeem oneself and to be honestly represented, to say nothing of his desire to use history as a tool to study the present. And when Andrew Jarecki chooses to pursue the family upheavals and trauma of the Friedman family, he is most certainly sympathetic to this family’s struggles, as much as he is also interested in uncovering new information that will open up the discussion even more. What it seems both filmmakers are most interested in is the shape-shifting and untenable form of truth.

Unfortunately, the fear held by many documentarians is that their thesis will be diluted or compromised if they take up too many positions, when the reverse is true: life is never black and white, and to deny this fact of complexity and the inevitable contradictions it raises does a disservice to the documentary and to the audience. The inherent conflict found in personalities and the many sides to be taken on issues make for honest, realistic and compelling portrayals of the world and the people who inhabit it. Sadly, it is rare to find this move beyond two dimensional personality and circumstance in documentaries, and rarer still to find a documentarian who can successfully achieve it without thwarting his or her thesis. The investment made on the part of the documentary filmmaker must go well beyond the projection of their needs, attitudes and desires by not only engaging us with their subject but by making clear that nothing is, in fact, clear at all.

(This essay first appeared in the DOXA documentary film festival catalogue, 2003 edition.)

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Michael Chanan, “On Documentary: The Zapruder Quotient,” Filmwaves No.4, 1998 Edgware, UK.

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