

This is
not a



pipe
either.

3

Video and Resistance: Against Documentaries

The medium of video was born in crisis. This postmodern technology has been shoved back into the womb of history with the demand that it progress through the same developmental stages as its older siblings, film and photography. The documentary—the paramount model for resistant video production—gives witness less to the endless parade of guerrilla actions, street demonstrations, and ecological disasters than it does to the persistence of Enlightenment codes of truth, knowledge, and a stable empirical reality. The hegemony of the documentary moves the question of video technology away from its function as a simulator, and back to a retrograde consideration of the technology as a replicator (witness). Clearly technology will not save us from the insufferable condition of eternal recurrence.

Recall file entitled "Enlightenment." Enlightenment: A historical moment past, which must now be looked upon through the filter of nostalgia. Truth was so simple then. The senses were trusted, and the discrete units of sensation contained knowledge. To those ready to observe, nature surrendered its secrets. Every object contained useful pieces of data exploding with information, for the world was a veritable network of interlocking facts. Facts were the real concern: everything observable was endowed with facticity. Everything concrete merited observation, from a grain of sand to social activity. "Knowledge" went nova. The answer to the problem of managing geometrically cascading data was specialization: Split the task of observation into as many categories and subcategories as possible to prevent observational integrity from being distracted by the proliferation of factual possibility. (It is always amazing to see authoritarian structures run wild in the utopian moment). Specialization worked in the economy (complex manufacture) and in government management (bureaucracy); why not also with knowledge? Knowledge entered the earthly domain (as opposed to the transcendental), giving humanity control over its own destiny and initiating an age of progress with science as redeemer.

In the midst of this jubilation, a vicious scepticism haunted the believers like the Encyclopedists, the new social thinkers (such as Turgot, Fontenelle, and Condorcet), and later, the logical positivists. The problem of scepticism was exemplified by David Hume's critique of the empirical model, which placed Enlightenment epistemology outside the realm of certainty. The senses were shown to be unreliable conveyers of information, and factual associations were revealed as practical inference. Strengthened by the romantic cri-

tique developed later under the banner of German Idealism, the argument became acceptable that the phenomenal world was not a source of knowledge, since perception could be structured by given mental categories which might or might not show fidelity to a thing-in-itself. Under this system, science was reduced to a practical mapping of spatial-temporal constellations. Unfortunately, the idealists were unable to escape the scepticism from which they had emerged. Their own system of transcendentalism was just as susceptible to the sceptic's arguments.

Science found itself in a peculiar position in regard to the 19th-century sociology of knowledge. Since it did produce what secularists interpreted as desirable practical results, it became an ideological legitimizer even on the ordinary level of everyday life. Within the sceptic's vacuum, empirical science by default usurped the right to pronounce what was real in experience. Sensible judgment was secure in the present, but to judge past events required immediate perception to be reconstituted through memory. The problem of memory was transformed into a technological problem because the subjective elements of memory led to the decay of the facticity of the sensible object, and written representation as a means to maintain history was insufficient. Although theory and method were mature and legitimized, a satisfactory technology had yet to emerge. This problem finally resolved itself with the invention of photography. Photography could provide a concrete visual record (vision being the most trustworthy of the senses) as an account of the past. Photography represented facts, rather than subjectively dissolving them into memory, or abstracting them as with writing. At last, there was a visual replicator to produce a record independent of the witness. Technology could

mediate perception, and thereby impose objectivity upon the visual record. To this extent, photography was embraced more as a scientific tool than as a means to manifest aesthetic intent.

Artists from all media began to embrace the empirical model, which had been rejuvenated by these innovations in replicating technology. Their interest in turn gave birth to Realism and literary Naturalism. In these new genres, the desire for replication became more complex. A new political agenda had insinuated itself into cultural production. Unlike in the past when politics generally served to maintain the status quo, the agenda of the newly-born left began to make a clear-cut appearance in empirical cultural representation. The proponents of this movement no longer worshipped the idealistic cultural icons of the romantic predecessors, but fetishized facticity—tendencies that reduced the artist's role to that of mechanical reproduction. The visual presentation of factual data allowed one to objectively witness the injustice of history, providing those eliminated from the historical record a way to make their places known. The use of traditional media combined with Enlightenment epistemology to promote a new leftist ideology that failed relatively fast. Even the experimental novels of Zola, in the end, could only be perceived as fiction, not as historical accounts. The Realist painters' work seemed equally unreliable, as the paintbrush was not a satisfactory technological means to insure objectivity, while its product was tied too closely to an elitist tradition and to its institutions. Perhaps their only actual victory was to produce a degraded sign of subversive intent that meekly insisted on the horizontalization of traditional aesthetic categories, particularly in the area of subject matter.

By the end of the century, having nowhere else to turn, some leftist cultural producers began to rethink photography and its new advancement, film. The first documentary makers intended to produce an objective and accurate visual record of social injustice and leftist resistance, and guided by those aims the documentary began to take form. The excitement over new possibilities for socially responsible representation allowed production to precede critical reflection about the medium, and the mistakes that were made continue as institutions into the present.

The film documentary was a catastrophe from its inception. Even as far back as the Lumière brothers' work, the facticity of nonfiction film has been crushed under the burden of ideology. A film such as *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* functions primarily as an advertisement for industrialization—a sign of the future divorced from the historical forces which generated it. In spite of its static camera and the necessary lack of editing, the function of replication was lost, because the life presented in the film was yet to exist for most. From this point on, the documentary proceeded deeper into its own fatality. A film such as *Elephant Processions at Phnom Penh* became the predecessor of what we now think of as the cynical postmodern work. The documentary went straight to the heart of colonial appropriation. This film was a spectacular sideshow that allowed the viewer to temporarily enter a culture that never existed. It was an opportunity to revel in a simulated event, again isolated from any type of historical context. In this sense, Lumière was Disney's predecessor. Disney World is the completion of the Lumière cultural sideshow project. By appropriating cultural debris and reassembling it in a means palatable for temporary consumption, Disney does in 3-D what Lumière

had done in 2-D: produce a simulation of the world culture-text in the fixed location of the bunker.

The situation continued to worsen. Robert Flaherty introduced complex narrative into the documentary in his film *Nanook of the North*. The film was marked by an overcoded film grammar that transcendently generated a story out of what were supposed to be raw facts. The gaps between the disparate re-presented images had to be brought together by the glue of the romantic ideology favored by the filmmaker. In a manner of speaking, this had to happen, since there were no facts to begin with, but only reconstituted memory. Flaherty's desire to produce the exotic led him to simulate a past that never existed. In the film's most famous sequence, Flaherty recreates a walrus hunt. Nanook had never been on a hunt without guns, but Flaherty insisted he use harpoons. Nanook had a memory of what his father had told him about traditional hunting, and he had seen old Eskimo renderings of it. Out of these memories, entwined with Flaherty's romantic conceptions, the walrus hunt was re-acted. Representation was piled on representation under the pretense of an unachievable originality. It did make an exciting and entertaining story, but it had no more factual integrity than D. W. Griffiths' *Birth of a Nation*.

It is unnecessary to repeat the cynical history of the documentary oscillating along the political continuum from Vertov to Riefenstahl. In all cases it has been fundamentally cynical—a political commodity doomed by the very nature of the technology to continually replay itself within the economy of desire. Film is not now nor has it ever been the technology of truth. It lies at a speed of 24 frames a second. Its value is not as a recorder of history, but simply as a means

of communication, a means by which meaning is generated. The frightening aspect of the documentary film is that it can generate rigid history in the present in the same manner that Disney can generate the colonial meaning of the culture of the Other. Whenever imploded films exist simultaneously as fiction and nonfiction they stand as evidence that history is made in Hollywood.

The documentary's uneasy alliance with scientific methodology attempts to exploit the seeming power of science to stop the drift of multifaceted interpretation. Justifiably or not, scientific evidence is incontrovertible; it rests comfortably under the sign of certitude. This is the authority that the documentary attempts to claim for itself. Consequently, documentary makers have always used authoritarian coding systems to structure the documentary narrative.

This strategy relies primarily on the complete exhaustion of the image at the moment of immediate apprehension. The narrative structure must envelop the viewer like a net and close off all other possible interpretations. The narrative guiding the interpretation of the images must flow along a unilinear pathway, at such a speed that the viewer has no time for any reflection. Key in this movement is to produce the impression that each image is causatively linked to the images preceding it. Establishment of causality between the images renders a seamless effect and keeps the viewers' interpretive flow moving along a predetermined course. The course ends with the conclusion prepared by the documentary maker in constructing the causal chain of images, offering what seems to be an incontrovertible resolving statement. After all, who can challenge replicated causality? Its legitimation by traditional rational authority is too

great. A documentary fails when the causal chain breaks down, showing the seams and allowing a moment of disbelief to disrupt the predetermined interpretive matrix. Without the scientific principle of causality rigorously structuring the narrative, the documentary's legitimized authority dissipates quite rapidly, revealing its true nature as fictional propaganda. When a legitimation crisis occurs in the film, the image becomes transparent, rather than exhausting itself, and the ideology of the narrative is displayed in all its horrifying glory. The quality documentary does not reveal itself, and it is this illusionistic chicanery—first perfected by Hollywood realism—that unfortunately guides the grand majority of documentary and video witness work that leftist cultural workers currently produce in endless streams.

This pitiful display is particularly insidious because it turns the leftist cultural workers into that which they most fear: Validators of the conservative interpretive matrix. If the fundamental principle of conservative politics is to maintain order for the sake of economy, to complement the needs and desires of the economic elite, and to discourage social heterogeneity, then the documentary, as it now stands, is complicit in participating in that order, even if it flies the banner of social justice over its ideological fortress. This is true because the documentary does not create an opportunity for free thought, but instills self-censorship in the viewer, who must absorb its images within the structure of a totalizing narrative. If one examines the sign of censorship itself, as it was embodied, for example, in Jesse Helms' criticisms of Andre Serrano's *Piss Christ*, one can see the methods of totalizing interpretation at work. Helms argued that a figure of Christ submerged in piss leads to a single conclusion, that the work is an obscene sacrilege. Helms'

interpretation is a fair one; however, it is not the only one. Helms used senatorial spectacle as an authority to legitimize and totalize his interpretation. Under his privileged interpretive matrix, the image is immediately exhausted. However, anyone who reflects on Serrano's image for only a moment can see that numerous other meanings are contained within it. There are meanings that are both critical and aesthetic (formal). Helms' overall strategy was not so much to use personal power as a means to censorship, but to create the preconditions for the public to blindly follow into self-censorship, thereby agreeing to the homogenous order desired by the elite class. The resistant documentary depends upon this same set of conditions for its success. The long-term consequences of using such methods, even with good intentions, is to make the viewer increasingly susceptible to illusionistic narrative structure, while the model itself becomes increasingly sophisticated through its constant revision. Anywhere along the political continuum the electronic consumer turns, s/he is treated like media sheep. To stop this manipulation, documentary makers must refuse to sacrifice the subjectivity of the viewer. The nonfiction film needs to travel other avenues than the one inherited from tradition.

Planning a generic leftist documentary for PBS. Subject:
The guerrilla war in _____? (choose a third-world nation).

1. Choose a title carefully, since it is one of the primary framing devices. It should present itself purely as a description of the images contained in the work, but should also function as a privileged ideological marker. For example, "The Struggle for Freedom in _____." Remember, do not mention "guerrillas" in the title. Such words have a conno-

tation of a lost or subversive cause that could lead to irrational violent action, and that scares liberals.

2. If you have a large enough budget (and you probably do if you are making yet another film on political strife), open with a lyrical aerial shot of the natural surroundings of the country in question. Usually the countryside is held by the guerrillas. This is good. You now have the traditional authority of nature (and the morality of the town/country distinction) on your side. These are two foundational codes of didactic western art. They are rarely questioned, and will create a channel leading the viewer to the belief that you are filming a populist uprising.

3. Dissolve to the particular band of guerrillas that you are going to film. Do not show large armies, and show only small arms, not heavy weaponry. Remember, the guerrillas must look like real underdogs. Americans love that code. If you must talk about the size of the rebel army (for instance, to show the amount of popular support for the resistance), keep it abstract; give only the statistics. Large military formations have that Nuremberg look to them. If at all possible, choose a band comprised of families: It shows real desperation when an entire extended family is fighting. Keep in mind that one of your key missions is to humanize the rebels while making the dominant group an evil abstraction. Finish this sequence by stylishly introducing each of the rebels as individuals.

4. For the next sequence, single out a family to represent the group. Interview each member. Address their motivations for resistance. Follow them throughout the day. Capture the hardships of rebel activity. Be sure to show the sleeping

arrangements and the poverty of the food, but concentrate on what the fight is doing to the family. End the sequence by showing the family involved in a recreational activity. This will demonstrate the rebels' ability to endure, and to be human in the face of catastrophe. It is also the perfect segue into the next sequence: "In this moment of play, who could have imagined the tragedy that would befall them . . ."

5. Having established the rebels as real, feeling people, it is time to turn to the enemy, by showing for instance an atrocity attributed to them. (Never show the enemy themselves; they must remain an alien abstraction, an unknown to be feared.) It is preferable if a distant relative of the focus family is killed or wounded in the represented enemy action. Document the mourning of the fellow rebels.

6. With the identities of both the rebels and the enemy established, you must now show an actual guerrilla action. It should be read as a defensive maneuver with no connotation of vengeance. Make sure that it is an evening or morning raid, to lessen sympathy for the enemy as individuals. The low light will keep them hidden and allow the sparks of the return gunfire to represent the enemy as depersonalized. Do not show guerillas taking prisoners: It is difficult to maintain viewers' sympathy for the rebels if they are seen sticking automatic weapons in the backs of the enemy and marching them along. Finally, only show the action if the rebels seem to win the engagement.

7. In the victory sequence it is important to show the tie between the rebels and the nonmilitary personnel of the countryside. With the enemy recently beaten, it is safe to go

to town and celebrate with the agrarian class. You can include speeches and commemorations in this sequence. Show the peasants giving the rebels food, while the rebels give the civilians nonmilitary materials captured during the raid. But most importantly, ensure that the sequence has a festive spirit. This will add an emotional contrast to the closing sequence.

8. Final sequence: Focus on the rebel group expressing their dreams of victory and vowing never to surrender. This should cap it: You are now guaranteed a sympathetic response from the audience. The sympathy will override any critical reflection, making the audience content to ride the wave of *your* radical subjectivity. Roll credits. Perhaps add a postscript by the filmmaker on how touched and amazed s/he was by the experience.

In creating a documentary, one small adjustment could be made with minimal disturbance to the traditional model—to announce for a given work that the collection of images presented have already been fully digested within a specialized cultural perspective. Make sure the viewers know that they are watching a *version* of the subject matter, not the thing in itself. This will not cure the many ills of documentary film/video, since versions themselves are prepackaged, having little meaning in relation to other versions; however, it would make the documentary model a little less repugnant, since this disclaimer would avoid the assertion that one was showing the truth of the matter. This would allow the system to remain closed, but still produce the realization that what is being documented is not a concrete history, but an independent semiotic frame through which sensation has been filtered and interpreted.

Take, for instance, documentaries on a subject regarded almost universally as pleasant and innocuous, such as nature. It becomes readily apparent that nature itself is not the subject, nor could it be. Rather, the simulation of nature is actually a repository for specialized cultural perspectives and myths that are antithetical to the sign of civilization. Consider the following versions:

1. *Aestheticized Nature*. This is a viewpoint common to most National Geographic documentaries. In this formulation, nature is presented as the original source of beauty, grandeur, and grace. Even the most violent events become precious aesthetic processes that must be preserved. This is even true in the presentation of “exotic” racial/ethnic groups! The world is reduced to an art museum that testifies to the cosmological and teleological perfection of nature. Nature’s highest function is to exist for aesthetic appreciation. Both the aesthetics and the ideology that conjure this beatific version of nature come from a well-packaged nostalgic romanticism that determine both the documentary maker’s expectations and the method for filming and editing.

2. *Darwinian Nature*. This conception of nature is best represented by the series *The Trials of Life*. In this treatment the Hobbesian universe comes alive, and the war of all against all is graphically depicted. This blood-and-guts version of nature assembles the signage of survivalist ideology to re-present the blind gropings of a cold and uncaring universe. It is a remembrance of the fatality of the world prior to the order of civilization. Such work acts as an ideological bunker defending the luxury of order produced by the police state.

3. **Anthropomorphic Nature.** This interpretation revolves around the question of “How are animals like people?” Typical of Disney documentaries or television shows such as *Wild Kingdom*, these films are insufferably cute, and present the natural order as one of innocence. This is not surprising, since these presentations are targeted at children, and so the conflation of human beings (particularly children) with animals is regarded as a good rubric for “healthy” socialization. These films concentrate on animals’ nurturing behavior and on their modest “adventures,” interpreting nature as a bourgeois entity.

In all such readings, the viewer is presented with an artificially constructed pastiche of images that offers only limited possibilities for the mythic establishment of nature. Nature exists as merely a semiotic construction used to justify some ideological structure. Nature as code is kept fresh by showing animals and panoramic landscapes that are then overlaid with ideological interpretive frameworks. Nature films have never documented anything other than the artificial— that is, institutionally-constructed value systems. Much the same can be said about the political documentary, since only the contingent aspects are different. The filmmaker then shows us people and cities, rather than animals and landscapes.

The various versions of the present that the documentary imposes on its viewers are refashioned by the film/video form into electronic monuments sharing a number of characteristics with their architectural counterparts. Typically, leftist documentaries parallel the function of monuments and participate in the spectacle of obscenity to the following extent:

1. Monuments function as concrete signs of an imposed reconstituted memory.

2. Monumentalism is the concrete attempt to halt the proliferation of meaning in regard to the interpretation of convulsive events. Monuments are not the signs of freedom that they appear to be, but the very opposite, signs of imprisonment, quelling freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and freedom of remembrance. As overseers in the panoptic prison of ideology, their demand for submission is masochistically obeyed by too many.

3. The return of cultural continuity is what exalts the monument in the eyes of the complicit. In its cloak of silence, the monument can easily repress contradiction. To those whose values they represent, monuments offer a peaceful space through the familiarity of cynical tradition. At the monument, the complicit are not burdened with alienation arising from diversity of opinion, nor with the anxiety of moral contradiction. They are safe from the disturbance of reflection. Monuments are the ultimate ideological bunkers—the concrete manifestations of fortress mentality.

To be sure, there are differences between the architectural monuments of dominant culture, and the monuments to resistant culture, such as documentaries; those of resistant culture do not aspire to maintain the status quo, nor do they project a false continuity onto the wound of history. The problem is that many of these monuments do aspire to an eventual dominance; they aspire to produce an icon that is above critical examination. Thus far no sacred icons have been intentionally produced through the production of

documentaries, but some have been accidentally produced through media spectacle. The most notable examples are the Hill/Thomas hearings, and the Rodney King beating. Certain images derived from these tapes have transcended the mundane to become sacred images for a broad spectrum of society. Like any sacred image, these icons exhaust themselves on impact, and anyone who insinuates that meanings other than the one that immediately presents itself are layered into the image will be visited with a rain of punishment. These images are so emotionally charged that they produce a panic, motivating a blind and vicious attack on any interpretive heresy. They are to the left very much what the image of the aborted fetus is to the radical right. If autonomy is the goal of resistant image production, the monumentality of the sacred must be eliminated from it.

One practical advantage of reality video (video that appears to replicate history) must be recognized—its function as a democratic form of counter-surveillance. No matter how simple the video technology, it easily becomes seen as a threat. It is perceived as a receptacle for guilt that can instantly replay acts of transgression. As the perfect judicial witness, its objectivity cannot be legally questioned. Yet as an instrument of intimidation against the transgressions of power, video functions only within limited parameters. Its strict rational-legal power operates only in the context of exhausted meaning. It is a useful defense in the legal system and in media spectacle, but it is detrimental to the understanding of media itself, as it promotes the authoritarian aesthetics of exhaustion.

The supremacy of reality video as the model for resistant cultural production must be challenged by those who want

to see the medium of video go beyond its traditional function as propaganda, while still maintaining resistant political qualities. To eradicate reality video is unnecessary, but to curb its authority is essential. This goal can be best accomplished by developing a postmodern conceptual structure that blends with video's postmodern techno-structure. The fundamental contradiction of using 18th-century epistemology with 19th-century production techniques is that this will never adequately address the contemporary problems of representation in the society of simulation, just as medieval theology was incapable of addressing the challenges of 17th- and 18th-century philosophy.

To resolve this contradiction, one must abandon the assumption that the image contains and shows fidelity to its referent. This in turn means that one can no longer use the code of causality as a means of image continuity. Preferably, one should use liquid associational structures that invite various interpretations. To be sure, all imaging systems are mediated by the viewer: The question is, to what degree? Few systems invite interpretation, and hence meaning is imposed more often than it is created. Many producers, for fear of allowing interpretation to drift out of control, have shunned the use of associational structures for politicized electronic imaging. Further, associational films tend toward the abstract, and therefore become confusing, making them ineffective among the disinterested. These problems prompt the eternal return to more authoritarian models. The answer to such commentary is that the viewer deserves the right to disinterest, and the freedom to drift. Confusion should be seen as an acceptable aesthetic. The moment of confusion is the precondition for the scepticism necessary for radical thought to emerge. The goals then of resistant nonfiction video are twofold: Either to call attention to and

document the sign construction of simulation, or to establish confusion and scepticism so that simulations cannot function.

The associational video is by its very nature recombinant. It assembles and reassembles fragmented cultural images, letting the meanings they generate wander unbounded through the grid of cultural possibility. It is this nomadic quality that distinguishes them from the rigidly bounded recombinant films of Hollywood; however, like them, they rest comfortably in neither the category of fiction nor nonfiction. For the purposes of resistance, the recombinant video offers no resolution; rather, it acts as a data base for the viewer to make his own inferences. This aspect of the recombinant film presupposes a desire on the part of the viewer to take control of the interpretive matrix, and construct his own meanings. Such work is interactive to the extent that the viewer cannot be a passive participant. S/he must not be spoonfed a particular point of view for a pedagogical purpose. This characteristic often works against popular interaction, since strategies to break the habitual passive consumption of spectacle have not received much attention. What is more unfortunate is that such work is often perceived to be elitist, because its use of the aesthetics of confusion does not *at present* draw popular support. It should be noted that such commentary generally comes from a well-positioned intelligentsia certain of the correctness of its ideology. Its mission is not to free its converts, but to keep them locked in and defending the bunker of solidified ideology. It is disturbance through liquidation of these structures that resistant nomadic media attempts to accomplish. This cannot be done by producing more electronic monuments, but rather, by an imaginative intervention and critical reflection liberated in an unresolved and uncertain electronic moment.

IX
1667

And with asphaltic slime; broad as the gate,
Deep to the roots of Hell the gathered beach
They fastened, and the mole immense wrought on
Over the foaming Deep high-arched, a bridge,
Of length prodigious, joining to the wall
Immovable of this now fenceless world.

And with asphaltic slime; broad as the gate,
Deep to the roots of Hell the gathered beach
For the silicon chip immense wrought on
Over the foaming Deep high-arched, a bridge,
Of length prodigious, joining to the wall
Immovable of this now fenceless world.

X
1759

The land here was cultivated for pleasure as well as from necessity; everywhere the useful had been made pleasant. The roads were covered, or rather adorned, with beautifully formed carriages made of lustrous material, carrying men and women of extraordinary beauty and swiftly drawn by large red sheep whose speed surpasses the finest horses of Andalusia.

The simuscape here was cultivated for pleasure as well as from necessity; everywhere the useful had been made pleasant. The conduits were covered, or rather adorned, with beautifully formed carriages made of lustrous light, carrying men and women of extraordinary resolution and swiftly drawn by large red electrical surges whose speed surpasses the finest missiles of Andalusia.