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The art of record

A critical introduction to documentary

JOHN CORNER

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For my parents
John Leonard and Vera May Corner

Documentary theory

In this chapter, I want to examine some general ideas about documentary, ideas which are taken up in more detail in the chapters on individual works, in the next chapter (which looks at drama-documentary and *vérité* forms) and in the final chapter on future developments. General ideas about documentary have often been generated in critical debate about particular films and programmes but there also exists a body of commentary which seeks to address the whole genre of documentary work. This is often referred to as 'documentary theory', indicating a set of connected propositions and concepts concerning the socio-aesthetic nature of documentary practice. It is my view that the use of the word 'theory' in the social sciences and the arts is currently prone to abuse, such that a relatively modest if suggestive idea or two may often lay claim to the status of 'theory' in a way that is pretentious as well as imprecise. And since being theoretical is now quite widely thought to be a good thing, probably better than being analytical and substantive if one has to choose, this is not surprising. However, in many other areas (for instance, the cognate ones of film and literature) the development of theoretical work has often increasingly divorced itself from attention to specific practices and artefacts, setting up as a relatively autonomous discursive activity 'above' the level both of practice and practical criticism. It has frequently sought 'horizontal' connections with theories in other fields (particularly big theories like Postmodernism) at the cost of maintaining good 'vertical' relations. Given the marked (if problematic) referentiality of work in documentary, it would be a great pity if this happened to documentary studies.

In fact, compared to many other areas of media production, 'theories' about documentary are quite few and most of them maintain a strong connection with specific practice, either by way of critique or recommendation. The sheer range of practices to come under the 'documentary' heading, together with the specific contingencies of docu-

mentary representation, perhaps work against the kind of flourishing self-sufficiency which has occurred elsewhere. I hope so, anyway.

Documentary is also distinguished by the degree of 'self-theorising' which accompanied pioneer work in the area. John Grierson's early deliberations on the nature and role of documentary in society (collected in Hardy 1979) provide it with an eloquent, ambitious (and often highly misleading) 'mission statement'. The theory of this early advocacy still provides a primary target for that body of much later theory (mostly, though not exclusively, academic in origin) which projects itself primarily as 'critique'. So whilst the main aim of the early theory is to make the case *for* documentary, quite often with a strategic focus on those practices and forms which the author wishes to advance, the main aim of much recent theory is to make the case *against* it, with some variation on the question of whether or not documentary can reconstruct itself into a project with a future.

Undoubtedly, the main issue around which recent theory has organised its 'deconstructive' interests in the documentary canon and the documentary enterprise has been the question of realism. Or perhaps one should say questions of realism since, as it is part of this book's purpose to demonstrate in some detail, the ways in which relations to the real are posed in documentary discourse vary considerably as well as being complex. Nevertheless, it is the claim, made in different ways throughout the history of documentary work, that a special relationship to the real is being achieved (indexical, evidential, revelatory) and, on the basis of this relationship, that 'truths' are being communicated, which excites the energies of critique and refutation. To many students of the media and film, documentary has seemed to be so bold and complacent in its epistemological assumptions and its devices of showing as to be, in itself, an *offence* to theory, an outrageous act of naivety, frequently compounding its philosophical and aesthetic shortcomings with a social and political complicity which trades on them.

There are a number of different ways in which a brief account of the variations and the historical shifts in theorising about documentary might be organised. I propose to work primarily with three broad classifications which have a 'developmental' logic. First of all, I want to look at some of the principal aspects of 'foundational thinking'. Secondly, I want to examine the major variants of 'critique' to emerge (amounting at times to the putting forward of an 'anti-documentary' position). Finally, I shall look at what is currently on offer by way of guidelines for the future of documentary, for its social, imaginative and discursive reconstruction. There is no doubt that those currents of aesthetic and social ideas gathered (precariously) together under the heading of Postmodernism have had an impact here. And as documentarists themselves have become more reflexive and more inclined to recognise the contingencies of their practice, the consequences of engagement with Postmodernist ideas have often been energising and productive.

In looking at 'theory' according to my scheme, three related themes will regularly emerge, each one of which can be represented in the form of a couplet of tension and potential conflict. These are *art/reportage* – the status of the documentary as aesthetic artefact and as referential record; *truth/viewpoint* – the perennial question of documentary veracity in relation to the subjective dimension of its methods and discourses, and *institution/forms* – the 'embedding' of documentary-making within different political, economic and social orders, within different landscapes of public knowledge which, though they may not be directly visible, carry implications for practices and usage.

Foundational thinking

I sketch out a brief account of the work of the 1930s British documentary film movement in Chapter 3, where I concern myself with two important films of the period.¹ Here, I want to look at some of the ideas which were advanced in support of the documentary project at this formative period of its institutionalisation as a generic enterprise. My purpose is to bring out the major theoretical themes which were articulated rather than to look at the contemporary literature of commentary and debate surrounding particular films. These themes occur mostly in the writings of John Grierson, by far the most significant figure in the movement. Grierson was active at every level in the formation of the documentary project – as a producer and director but also as an organiser, campaigner and manifesto-writer.

I undertake this account knowing that recent academic work on the 1930s movement, including that on its philosophy and guiding principles, has contributed substantially to what is now a detailed literature of scholarship and commentary. In particular, Ian Aitkin's study of John Grierson (Aitkin 1990) sets his ideas about the documentary in the context of a detailed intellectual biography, whilst Brian Winston's important revaluation of the documentary tradition (Winston 1995) brings out the extent to which Grierson's approach to definitions, aims and objects was shrewdly tactical and not to be taken at face value.

Of all Grierson's many essays on documentary form, 'First Principles of Documentary' (written between 1932 and 1934) is most often cited. In it, Grierson makes both the social and the aesthetic case for documentary by comparing possibilities in the 'new form' with two other kinds of film-making. First of all, with the fictional cinema, primarily that of Hollywood, and secondly with the earlier tradition and the current conventions of the factual film. Grierson finds documentary superior to the former in so far as it engages with the real rather than encouraging fantasy and superior to the latter in so far as it works imaginatively and dramatically, rather than confining itself to the limited aesthetics of the newsreel and the illustrated lecture. Before considering his arguments further, it

might be useful to quote a few of the more familiar and more important formulations from the 'First Principles' essay. Here is Grierson arguing that the category of 'documentary', though it has become attached, in its short history of usage, to a wide range of films, should be applied much more specifically:

So far we have regarded all films made from natural material as coming within the category. The use of natural material has been regarded as the vital distinction. Where the camera shot on the spot ... in that fact was documentary. This array of species is, of course, quite unmanageable in criticism, and we shall have to do something about it. They all represent different qualities of observation, different intentions in observation, and, of course, very different powers and ambitions at the stage of organising material. I propose, therefore, after a brief word on the lower categories, to use the documentary description exclusively of the higher. (Hardy (ed.) 1979:19. My italics)

In talking of one of the 'lower' species, the 'lecture film', Grierson goes on to identify limitations in further detail:

They do not *dramatize*, they do not even dramatize an episode: they *describe*, and even *expose*, but, in any aesthetic sense, only rarely *reveal*. (Hardy (ed.) 1979:20. My italics)

By contrast, he notes the way in which 'documentary proper' goes beyond these limits:

one begins to wander into the world of documentary proper, into the only world in which documentary can hope to achieve the ordinary virtues of an *art*. Here we pass from the plain (or fancy) descriptions of natural material, to *arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it*. (Hardy (ed.) 1979:20. My italics)

In further, prescriptive commentary on the 'vital art form' which the documentary offers, Grierson notes how, in contrast with 'studio films', documentary would 'photograph the living scene and the living story'. His antipathy to current fictional cinema can be seen in this comment on the benefits of working with 'the raw':

We believe that the materials and the stories taken from the raw can be finer (more real in the philosophic sense) than the acted article. Spontaneous gesture has a special value on the screen. Cinema has a sensational capacity for enhancing the movement which tradition has formed or time worn smooth. Its arbitrary rectangle specially reveals movement; it gives it maximum pattern in space and time. Add to this that documentary can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and effect impossible to the shim-sham mechanics of the studio, and the lily-fingered interpretations of the metropolitan actor. (Hardy (ed.) 1979:21.)

Drawing on the work of Robert Flaherty,² Grierson pursues the 'distinction between description and drama':

but it is important to make the primary distinction between a method which describes only the surface values of a subject, and the method which more *explosively reveals* the reality of it. You photograph the natural life, but you also, by your juxtaposition of detail, *create an interpretation of it*. (Hardy 1979 (ed.) 22-3, My italics)

Finally, we can note how he introduces the idea of documentary aesthetics carrying 'sociological' responsibilities which are not easy to discharge:

This sense of social responsibility makes our realist documentary a troubled and difficult art, and particularly in a time like ours. The job of romantic documentary is easy in comparison: easy in the sense that the noble savage is already a figure of romance and the seasons of the year have already been articulated in poetry ... But realist documentary, with its streets and cities and slums and markets and exchanges and factories, has given itself the job of making poetry where no poet has gone before it, and where no ends, sufficient for the purposes of art, are easily observed. *It requires not only taste but also inspiration, which is to say a very laborious, deep-seeing, deep-sympathising creative effort indeed.* (Hardy (ed.) 1979:25. My italics)

These quotations variously indicate key aspects of Grierson's documentary philosophy, and I think that a more extended citation of them than is usually offered brings out the distinctive character of this more directly than does a focus exclusively on particular phrasings. Of all the phrases that have been used in discussion of 'foundationalist thought', the one which is cited most often is 'creative interpretation of actuality' but as Andrew Higson points out (Higson 1995:191), this is hard to find anywhere in Grierson's extensive writings, although 'creative treatment of actuality' occurs. Higson cites a 'first found use' for this in an article on 'The Documentary Producer' written by Grierson for *Cinema Quarterly* in 1933. However, in the penultimate quote we can see the elements out of which a paraphrased comment about 'interpretation' might easily be made. Such a degree of exegetical interest in Griersonian formulations might seem beside the point (in fact, I think it often turns out to be so), but the question of precisely what kinds and degrees of intervention Grierson is introducing into his favoured generic formula, and how these serve to distinguish documentary from other practices (especially from fiction) has been a matter of great practical as well as theoretical interest in the subsequent history of factual film-making.

What is absolutely clear is that, in the advocating of his ideas about documentary method and the documentary 'mission', Grierson is not in the grip of a naive realism. What he says may not always be either clear or consistent but the kind of practice which he is putting forward is grounded in a considerable degree of discursive skill and creative 'vision' (revelatory, 'deep-seeing'), it is not simply a result of any 'capturing' performed by the camera. It is therefore thoroughly and self-consciously aestheticised, a symbolically *expressive* activity, and Grierson portrays it as such except on those occasions where his polemical purpose is best suited by emphasising the nature of documentary as public information. Here, he is inclined to marginalise the 'creative' and 'transformative' factors and, indeed, sometimes to perform a complete U-turn and describe the project as being essentially 'anti-aesthetic' in char-

acter (see, for example, the claims in Hardy (ed.) 1979:112). Aitkin brings out extremely well the error of many previous critics in accusing Grierson of a far stronger commitment to mimetic realism or illusory naturalism than was the case, mostly due to an unawareness of the philosophical sources (including British Hegelian) of many of his ideas. So, for instance, in extract D. above, the phrase 'more real in the philosophic sense' points not to an empirical grounding but to an idea of underlying essence to which the documentarist's creative seeing provides access. Of course, thus to excuse Grierson from a charge of empiricist realism does not remove at all from the problems caused by the metaphysical abstraction of his remarks or by their irritating inconsistency.

Documentary is *authorial* in that it is about creativity and transformation based on vision. In being this, it is also emphatically *dramatic*, as part of its bid for the public imagination, although we should note that the term 'dramatic' can mean something to do with intensity of narrative shaping and also something to do with 'enactment'. Although both are relevant, it is useful to differentiate between the two (see Chapter 2 for a more extended discussion of this point). However, the 'raw material' for the creative endeavour is provided by 'reality' and it is the address to this, albeit with transformative intent, which provides documentary with its claimed superiority over fictional cinema. It also provides Grierson with the basis for his social democratic theory about film as an agency of citizenship and reform, since only to the degree that it has a 'core' of *reliable referentiality* in its depictions can the documentary film be argued to be a key agency of modern public information. We are still a very long way from the time when, within television, documentary would be regarded as primarily a form of *journalism*, with all the constraints and obligations which this entails, but an informational role was central to the foundational enterprise. It would be difficult for documentary to discharge its responsibilities simply as 'Art', whilst to emphasise a licence to propagandise and promote would also be to undermine its public informational value. Grierson was, in fact, a believer in the need for state publicity, and indeed, not surprisingly given their source of funding, many documentaries of the 1930s and wartime performed a highly instrumentalist role in this respect (again, unrestrained by journalistic convention). Making this role a defining feature in the official 'manifesto' was, nevertheless, a different thing entirely. A bedrock of veracity was essential.

Winston's reassessment of Grierson finds the play-off between creativity and realism unconvincing:

Grierson's taxonomic triumph was to make his particular species of non-fiction film, the non-fiction genre while at the same time allowing the films to use the significant fictionalising technique of dramatisation. (Winston 1995:103).

This is a usefully provocative point, though agreement with it will largely rest on certain, contestable ideas about 'fictionalisation'

and 'dramatisation'. The issue is dealt with directly in Chapter 2, as part of considering the debate around drama-documentary forms, and it occurs in relation to specific works throughout this book. Not surprisingly, it also forms a main strand in that large body of documentary theory which is primarily intended as 'critique'.

Before turning to examine that strand, however, I want to conclude this very brief examination of Grierson's view of documentary by attempting a summary evaluation of its main features.

We can see the Griersonian position as a combination of two rather precariously positioned sets of ideas – one concerning the social purposes of the form and one concerning its nature as a filmic practice. The social purposes of documentary are not journalistic nor are they propagandistic – they are promotional, certainly, and didactic, but they are interwoven with the development of citizenship in modern society and with the cause of social democratic reform. As a practice and a form, documentary is strongly informational (and therefore requires a level of 'accuracy') but it is also an exercise in creativity, an art form drawing on interpretative imagination both in perceiving and using the sounds and images of 'the living scene' to communicate 'the real' (not finally a matter of phenomenal forms but of structures and relationships).

We have already seen how the often uncertain (and sometimes strategically inconsistent) terms in which Grierson develops his case on both these counts make his general position a vulnerable one. Moreover, they mean that any attempt to apply the principles as direct guidelines for practice or even for critical judgement (the constituents of 'good documentary') is likely to be faced with a stiff challenge.

Grierson's legacy to subsequent documentary film-making has been considerable but it has been much 'looser' than the handing-down of a prescriptive clustering of social and aesthetic ideas. It essentially amounts to the varied practice of the 1930s and wartime film-makers (most of whom worked under Grierson at one time or other) together with the broad linking of socially realist depiction to public informational goals. We can see the legacy coming through clearly in the comment made by Paul Rotha in 1954, about the new BBC television documentary department of which he had been appointed Head – "To those who still believe that documentary has a specific social job to do, this mass access ... is of paramount importance" (Cited in Bell 1986:71).

But the transmission of Griersonianism in any more direct form was inhibited by a number of factors. First of all, there were the specific, philosophical origins of his views, in which much of the distinctiveness of his vocabulary as well as his strong sense of 'totality' lies. Secondly, there was the reconstitution of documentary within television as a major extension of journalism, introducing social and aesthetic requirements and expectations quite different from those with which Grierson had worked. Finally, there was the introduction of new, lightweight equipment which allowed for extensive

location shooting and which brought a new drive towards directorial minimalism and against self-conscious elaboration.³ One can see these last two changes as involving new forms of *empirical* emphasis – journalism's concern with *inquiry and analysis*; *vérité* and direct cinema's concern with *observation* – displacing Grierson's loftier engagement with the imaginative capturing of a non-phenomenal 'real'. However, in many films of the early period, including those made within Grierson's units, at least partial precedents for these newer modes can be found.

Critique

As I noted earlier, the very broad range of theories which can be classified as critique engage with documentary mainly in denunciation of what they see to be its failings and dangers. At the cost of a little over-simplification, we can usefully classify these theories into two types. There are those which address themselves primarily to a *critique of documentary evidentiality*, to its claimed capacity to reference the world. These can be comprehensive 'denials' of documentary but they can also be offered as form-specific critiques; for instance, *vérité* or commentary films may be singled out for primary attention, with other forms shown more tolerance, if only implicitly. Then there are those theories which address themselves primarily to a critique of the *institutional character of documentary*, to its specific location within political, economical and social systems. Clearly, this latter approach will show a degree of national variation. It will also vary in the extent to which the critique is offered as 'terminal' or put forward with the implication that a *re-institutionalised* documentarism might be able to perform an acceptable and useful communicative function. Since I am going to look at 'reconstructive' ideas in the next section, I will concentrate here on the deconstructive aspect of the two strands, which can of course often be found in combination.

Critiques of evidentiality and institutional bias

I observed in the above section how Grierson's own ideas on documentary are vulnerable to a misreading which regards them as empiricist when in fact they are strongly idealist. In some of the criticism of documentary realism written during the 1970s, under the influence of Structuralist film theory, Grierson was quite often seen as a primary source of 'bad' thinking about documentary evidence. So, for instance, in his short essay on the documentary in Britain for the 1978 British Film Institute catalogue, Julian Petley reviews the work of the 1930s movement in terms which are strongly critical of Griersonian naivety. Petley's piece, and the subsequent commentary on individual films which follow it, was a very helpful aid in directing critical attention to the non-fiction film and to its distinctive history in Britain. However, although it contains much

shrewd assessment, the way in which its appraisal of Grierson inclines towards *dismissal* is very much of its time. For instance, having noted some of Grierson's main formulations, Petley goes on to observe:

This was probably the closest Grierson ever got to a theoretical statement on documentary, and its lack of sophistication reveals his mistrust not only of narrative cinema and formal innovation, but also of theoretic formulation. (Petley 1978:5)

Elsewhere, in his commentary on the film *Housing Problems* (1935) (see my discussion of this in Chapter 3), he develops the point further:

Unfortunately, because of Grierson's empirical anti-theoretical bent the problems of 'realism', the problematic notion of 'reality', were never fully recognised and centrally never fully discussed in print. It is only now – in this country – in journals like *Screen* that the issues are being raised. (Petley 1978:13)

Whilst, as I have suggested, Grierson's thinking may well stand accused of obscurity, inconsistency and of self-promotion (the nub of the assessment in Winston 1995), it is hard to find it guilty of the kind of unreflective belief in the 'transparency' of film which Petley seems to find. For Grierson's accounts are dense with ideas precisely about how documentary-making is a creative intervention and about the need for 'formal innovation'. A critique of his views gets off to a much better start, and is able to develop a more productive engagement with post-Grierson practice, if it recognises the extraordinary *elaboration* of his ideas and his commitment to reference points beyond the appearances 'captured' in individual shots.

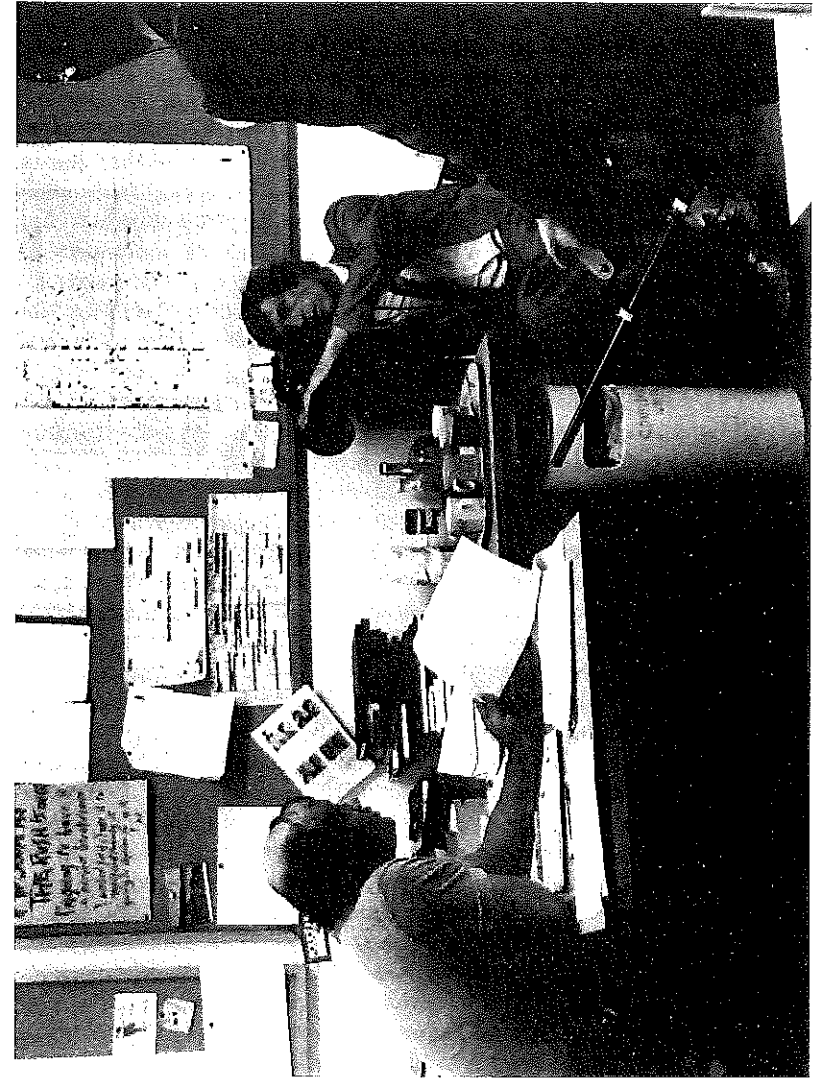
Winston's critique, which I have touched on earlier, takes a rather different tack. Here, Grierson is accused of producing an *apparently* coherent documentary philosophy which in fact includes a number of rather drastic inconsistencies, not least those surrounding the guiding idea of 'the real'. The main worry which Winston has concerns the key formulation about the 'creative treatment of actuality'. Just how much 'actuality' might we expect to survive 'creative treatment'? he asks. What kind of balance or play-off is Grierson himself assuming? Winston's own judgement is that the phrase effectively works as a self-accorded licence to fabricate. Thus the central tension between documentary as artefact and documentary as record is, in practice, resolved in favour of the former without the genre relinquishing the special status which derives from the latter.

Taking Winston's argument, at least for the time being, as a convincing one, there are three issues which seem to me still to require attention. For a start, there is the difference between regarding the 'actuality' as the real itself, which the film-maker perceives and creatively relays, and regarding it as *primary* representation, the recorded sounds and images from which the film is constructed. From the evidence of his usage, it does not seem altogether clear

which meaning Grierson intended. The 'raw material' of documentary film-making is seen to be both 'reality' and the primary recorded units. If we give emphasis to the first, then the whole question of the indexical fidelity obtaining between particular image and element of reality, the whole question of documentary as *evidential representation*, is bracketed out. If, however, we give emphasis to the second, then it follows that this fidelity is simply assumed and, moreover, that no 'creative' intervention in the 'primary' production of image and sound is admitted, creativity being applied only at the 'secondary' stage of construction.

It is worth noting here how large a part connotations of 'primary' and 'secondary' stages (or contested versions of differentiation between these stages) play in dispute about documentary. The referential values of primary depiction are essentially to do with the fidelity of images and sounds to specific features of physical reality. As well as involving technical accessibility, this is a matter of conventions of shooting (e.g. the degrees of directorial intervention and assumed levels of behaviour modification in the speech and action of filmed subjects). However, the truth claims of documentary exposition reach well beyond this level of specific, rendered appearances to encompass abstract propositional/argumentational matters. The whole textual system of the film or programme, its expository organisation, forms of argument, modes of adducing visual and verbal evidence and the lines of causality indicated in the narrative scheme are all implicated here. General truth claims in documentary cannot be seen to be fully grounded in primary fidelity since such fidelity underdetermines them, even within the particularistically focused (sometimes, indeed, obsessed) project of *vérité*. Nevertheless, as all the chapters in this book variously demonstrate, it is on the warrant provided by the integrity of their 'raw materials' that most documentaries base their discursive status. The relationship between the two levels has to be perceived by the viewer as having a strongly *inductive* element for this to be accepted. Should the employment of the primary level be regarded as too heavily a function of secondary level discursive requirements, then there are problems of credibility *even though the primary veracity of the material remains undisputed*. Different documentary forms pose the relationship in different ways; the Griersonian form, as we have seen, has a quite distinctive – by turns emphatic and evasive – rhetoric of combination (see Vaughan 1976 for an analysis of the relationships obtaining in *vérité*, and Branigan 1992 for a brief but suggestive discussion of the determination of reference in non-fiction).

A second problem following from Winston's critique, illuminating though it is, involves the assumption which I think he is inclined to make that allowance of 'creative treatment' necessarily collapses the documentary project into 'fiction'. What is needed here is more attention to the case-law apparent in 1930s documentary practice, where it is clear that the gravitational pull of actuality is registered in a number of different ways, most of which



A fly on the wall: filming Police
(BBC 1982)

require that the textual system of the films be organised in a manner distinct from narrative fiction. So, for instance, the poetic-dramatic shaping of *Coalface* (1935) is in tension with the indexical appeal of the particular images of miners, mining machinery and minework, whilst the to-camera testimony of *Housing Problems* (1935) grounds the socially reformist rhetoric of that film in representations of situated individuality. Winston's deconstruction of the Grierson holistic vision usefully problematises phrasings that have too often been allowed to carry a self-evident grandness, but the requirement is still to explore further the *different levels* at which documentarist practices relate to the 'real' and the different ways in which 'creativity' can operate, within various political and social conventions of representational propriety.

A third problem is much more general. Winston's assumption is that the precedent of Griersonian thinking has served to mislead much subsequent documentary practice. But, as I have argued above, once documentary came to be regarded primarily as a form of extended journalism – a development concurrent with its emergence as a television genre – it was subject to a wholly new set of discursive constraints within which the lofty imperatives of Griersonianism could only survive as little more than fragments of rhetorical decoration, as 'lineage'.

The case against 'evidentiality' has been more tightly and more productively pursued in relation to later models of documentary, where indexical claims are often much stronger. Television documentary has often made these claims in seeking to fulfil journalistic criteria concerning 'factuality', whilst the *vérité* or 'fly-on-the-wall' sub-genre (See Chapter 2) has made them as part of its project of purist observationalism, the mere 'relaying' of an ongoing real. Although I pursue questions of *vérité* style in some detail later, including the criticisms which have been made of its epistemology, it may be useful here to look at some of the broader theoretical issues which it raises. In his valuable (and somewhat under-recognised) study *Television Documentary Usage* (1976), Dai Vaughan presents what is finally a rather ambivalent, if brilliantly perceptive, assessment of the *vérité* mode, noting the possibilities of the viewing experience it offers at the same time as being concerned about the opportunities for bad faith which it presents to the film-maker. Among these, the dependence of the whole project on the illusion that the viewer is watching social action in which the actors are unaware of being watched is central. This produces, as Vaughan says, a problematic fusing of putative event (what things *would* have been like without the camera there) with pro-filmic event (what happened when the camera was there). Commitment to a practice of minimal intervention in the direction of the pro-filmic does not address this fusion. Nor does it address the question of the 'authorial' function of editing, in which shot material (however 'pure' in its immediate referentiality) is turned into the basis for a narrative and a diegesis. It is the very lack of *discursive ambi-*

tion in much *vérité* work, its interest in (at times, its fetishisation of) the observational rather than the expository, which has made it so vulnerable to criticism in a way which contrasts with the particular vulnerabilities of Griersonian views. *Vérité* has often been championed as 'bedrock' documentary, not merely drawing on evidential materials but making its entire project the production of them. Vaughan also anticipates the later criticism of Nichols (1983) and Winston (1995) in seeing this emphasis, one in which any overtly sense-making function – critical, analytical, argumentative – is displaced by the activity of 'showing', as encouraging an abnegation of responsibility on the part of the film-maker. An innocence is assumed towards the world and this is either feigned (a mask for persuasive strategies) or genuine (naïve). In neither case is the viewer encouraged to develop any self-consciousness in the act of conferring meanings to what is seen and heard (e.g. *whose* meanings, related to *what* larger view?). It is part of Nichols's argument that such discursive 'shyness' (such lack of 'voice' as he puts it) is politically dangerous and, more recently, it figures within Winston's (1995) critique as a retreat from the *intellectual* rigour of documentary practice which has had an influence stretching wider than the *vérité* form alone. Winston believes that varieties of intensive and engagingly watchable 'showing' have too often replaced investigation, analysis and argument in contemporary television. Of course, for advocates of *vérité*, it is this 'unvoiced' character which guarantees its 'openness', its apparent placing of the viewer 'in the driving seat', as Nichols deftly puts it.

So that line of critique which is primarily interested in questions of representational form has aimed to 'uncouple' the relationship between putative reality, pro-filmic reality and screened reality which much documentary depends upon, if not exclusively. It has done this by raising questions about the way in which the pro-filmic is variously modified by the very act of filming, whether through conscious management or otherwise. It has seen the practices of shooting as 'authorial' in themselves (primarily through the positioning, angling, settings and movement of camera) and regarded the phases of editing as involving major transformations not easily distinguished from the transformations of conventional fiction. Since narrative organisation provides a principle of coherence for many documentaries, the links with fiction have been given added emphasis. From the perspective of the strongest of these critiques, documentary is nothing more than a sham – a fraud – which needs exposing. A connection is often made with theories of ideological reproduction, in which relationships of power are variously naturalised and displaced in public communications in such a way as to encourage (if not enforce) a misperception of the real terms within which economic, political and social 'life' is structured. However, theories of ideology have often been prone to miss the actual complexity of representational practice (visual and verbal) in public forms as well as drastically to ignore the processes by which viewers use television in forming their views and

dispositions. From this perspective, documentary is just one more cognitively contaminated genre of television, but perhaps one more culpable than most in its claimed and seeming fidelity to the real. I shall come back to the question of ideology in discussing 'reconstructive' theories below, since the ways in which power relations bear on depiction are still of great importance and require far more inquiry. The inadequacy of much recent and current theorising about ideology and documentary points towards the need for greater attention to the issues, not less.⁴

There is no doubt that the project of *vérité*, with its sometimes extreme epistemological claims, has drawn the most vigorous and perhaps the most cogent critical attacks. But few if any documentaries would want to relinquish the 'indexical warrant' of their images and sounds and therefore few if any documentaries escape the implications of the representational critique.

I want to look now at criticism which has concentrated more on the particular conditions of documentary production (political, economic and socio-cultural) rather than on its forms, though in fact attention to conditions bears finally on questions of form. This kind of criticism may or may not regard *documentarism itself* as a suspect practice – what it concerns itself with is the specific interests being served, the specific voices being heard and being silenced.

Such concern has been expressed about the British Documentary Movement of the 1930s; in fact it is a line of criticism which goes back further than the debate about 'evidentiality'. Much of that work of that movement was done within the essentially 'civil service' setting of film units working on government sponsorship of one kind or another (Grierson was involved in activities, successively, at the Empire Marketing Board, GPO films and later, less directly, at Crown Films (see Aitkin 1990: Chapters 4 and 5). Quite apart from the extent to which this source of funding positioned the documentary film as a form of 'official information' (and therefore as a form of propaganda) rather than a form of independent critical communication, Grierson's own ideas about the 'social purpose' of documentary show, as we have had opportunity to see, the same degree of tension and potential contradiction as do his ideas about documentary's depictive practices. A commitment to imaginative civic education and to the revelation of the 'real' went along with doubts about the efficacy of the democratic process and a belief in the need for national morale to be strengthened and opinion to be 'directed'.⁵ Although the films can by no means be read off as simply reflecting their immediate circumstances of funding and production, there has undoubtedly been a considerable degree of taint perceived in these circumstances. This is made more noteworthy by its contrast with Grierson's own inclination to celebrate and ennoble his enterprise. Again, Winston's study (1995) provides an excellent, sceptical commentary on the relationships between ideas, practices and institutional settings at the time.

Broadcast documentary poses the 'institutional' question very

differently, as I have noted earlier. It is not usually any direct sponsorship that provides the grounds for suspicion but the location of broadcast production within a set of quite tight, if often implicit, conventions concerning the 'public interest' and 'due impartiality'. Documentary practice exists within the same general climate as news production – encountering problems of non-cooperation from official sources, anxious monitoring from interested parties and potential self-censorship from nervous production executives. It has been argued that the working practices which result from this climate are 'skewed' systematically towards reproducing a dominant view of the political and social world and marginalising where not actively traducing other views. This is documentary as a tool of the established order. In previous writing (Corner 1995a) I have distinguished between the 'univocal' and the 'multivocal' functions of factual programming and such a distinction may be useful here. 'Univocal' functions primarily involve the speech of presenters and commentators, and perhaps the directorial viewpoint as established visually. 'Multivocal' functions involve the selection, combination and weighting of the different voices and viewpoints which a programme may 'access'. Argument that documentary works *for* certain groups and *against* others may choose to highlight one or both of these functions, but they involve rather different communicative methods and (as I shall show in many of the chapters which follow) documentaries use them in very different ways, implicitly and explicitly – sometimes developing a strong univocal strand, sometimes working exclusively through multivocality. All this can greatly increase the complexity of questions about *what* view a programme privileges over others, let alone questions about *how* this privileging is done.

Although the 'Tool of State' perspective has often been expressed in refutably simplistic terms, more subtle commentaries have undoubtedly shown the degree to which documentary accounts – particularly those directly concerning State affairs – are frequently subject to considerable circumscription through a mixture of straightforward censorship and an unwillingness to offend senior political figures. This, despite the fact that a strong strand of independent inquiry exists within British current-affairs programming and that it is by no means to be regarded as acting as a straight relay device for the interests of the State. We can see some of these issues exemplified in the debate surrounding programmes like *Death on the Rock* (Thames Television 1988) which went out on the ITV network despite a strong request from the British Foreign Secretary that it be banned for being in contempt of court. The programme offered a critical investigation of the circumstances surrounding the recent killing of three IRA members by British security forces on Gibraltar. An independent inquiry finally cleared the programme of any substantial breach of propriety in production and format, but not before a strong campaign had been developed against it, a campaign which was to have its influence on the subsequent climate of programme-

making.⁶ Many other examples from the most confident period of Thatcher government in the 1980s could be cited too, including the seizure of tapes from broadcasting premises by Special Branch police when it appeared that certain 'sensitive' material was about to be aired.⁷ Of course, whilst pointing unambiguously to 'pressures', these examples also point to a measure of 'independence'.

A final institutional criticism often made against television documentary should be noted here, although I alluded to it earlier when talking about the influence of *vérité*'s success on the broad character of programming. This is that in the interests of maximising audiences (and profits) television documentary is essentially a part of the entertainment industry and thereby 'generically' lacks the investigative energy and argumentative rigour to offer 'proper' critical analysis. Such a judgement could simply not be upheld against much of British television at the moment, but there are increasing signs of documentary being put under pressure to win larger audiences by becoming 'lighter'.⁸ Moreover, some of the most significant hybrids in recent programme development have had a marked 'infotainment' character (see Chapter 11), a trend which is likely to persist. A general, if gradual, movement in the identity of documentary television can therefore be seen to be under way.

Having established a sense of the range of positions from which documentary has been subject to criticism, I want to turn finally to the recipes for reconstruction which have been suggested.

Reconstruction

Those who offer guidelines for redevelopment often do so selectively and with very different aims for documentary in mind. For instance, some are concerned primarily with the documentary as a vehicle for critique operating largely outside of mainstream broadcasting – placing reconstructive ideas in the context of a political and aesthetic development of the 'independent cinema' sector. Others engage with the changing nature of broadcast journalism and relate their recommendations to this. It is important to be clear about purposes, since, as the above discussion has shown, although there is no unity of intention which all the forms of documentary share, this has not stopped much critical debate from carrying a universalistic ring. My own sympathies are with those suggestions making a firm connection with existing broadcast practice rather than with those which are premised on 'alternative' models. For whilst a great deal of innovative work has been done within the 'independent sector' of small units, ones sometimes arranging their own distribution and mostly much less constrained politically and aesthetically by matters of institution and audience, the public significance of documentary work is at its highest when it forms part of the major national and international currency of symbolic exchange.

Perhaps we can start by noting that there are no proposals for

somehow strengthening the 'indexical warrant' of documentary, or providing its images and sounds with a surer referential guarantee. Indeed, many reconstructive theories treat '*vérité*' formats as beyond redemption. So the attempted reconstruction of documentary starts with the vulnerability of *documentary as record* and does not seek to remedy this. What it does seek to remedy is the nature of *documentary as a discursive practice*. In doing so, ideas vary in the emphasis and role they give to the 'evidential'.

Across different writers, the most common general recommendation has been for documentary work to become more *reflexive*, to 'show its hand' more openly to its audiences. Not surprisingly, enthusiasm for discussing and then for implementing this has been strongest in the independent documentary sector, where the resulting aesthetics of self-consciousness have been perfectly congruent with the minority audience's understandings and expectations concerning political Modernism and the reconfigurations of Postmodernism. Within broadcast television, strong journalistic codes as well as acute anxiety about ratings present problems for self-reflexiveness except when pursued in the most token and minimal of ways (e.g. the occasional shot of the sound-recordist; the brief inclusion in the commentary of remarks about the particular circumstances of the film-making).

Bill Nichols's much-cited article, 'The Voice of Documentary' (1983), gives clear indications of what a more comprehensive approach would entail. Surprisingly, Nichols draws his examples not from Modernist fictional film (e.g. Godard) but from the experimental work of anthropological film-makers like Timothy Asch and David and Judith MacDougall.⁹ This work employs such devices as intertitles marking off one scene from another, the regular appearance of the film-makers in the film, the calculated breaking-up into parts of scenes which might conventionally have been constructed in 'narrative continuity' form, and the use of titles as a level of discourse which can be placed against speech (as, for instance, in the rendering of the questions and answers of an interview).

Perhaps one of the most important questions raised by reflexive notions of documentary construction concerns just how, and in what way, audience perceptions of the material are changed. Underlying some of the more naïve versions of reflexionism there appears to be the suggestion that, *unless it is explicitly indicated otherwise in the film or programme*, audiences will hold to a firm and comprehensive trust in the 'truth' of what they see. They will become the subjects of illusion in a way which produces faulty understanding. Audience research suggests that there are strong grounds for doubting this.¹⁰ As in fiction cinema, 'reminding' the audience that they are watching a film can carry strong tones of vanguardist condescension. A second problem here is the extent to which reflexive practices work only as occasional, peripheral indicators of the problematic status of the main depiction or, conversely, are integrated into the very *production* of that depiction.

In the latter case, apart from exercises in 'anti-documentary' or exercises in simply advertising the difficulty of doing documentary, the issue is soon raised of how slender the referential claim can be for a depictive discourse which still wants to engage an audience with the 'worldly' status of its sounds and images. A thoroughly self-destabilised documentary may not only have problems of intention and address (it sounds formidably hard viewing), but it may also suffer from problems of regression – how can it deconstruct its own discourses of deconstruction, how can it stop the contribution which *untested* assertions and assumptions make to its portrayal?

Rather than advocating a specific line of formal development, Brian Winston (1995) switches attention to viewers. He notes that: 'Grounding the documentary idea in reception rather than in representation is exactly the way to preserve its validity' (Winston 1995:253). This will produce a situation in which '[T]he relation of image to imaged depends not on the image's intrinsic quality guaranteed by science but on our reception of it as an image of the real guaranteed by (or corresponding to) our experience' (Winston 1995:253). But this radical shift from 'indexical warrant' to a notion of correspondence grounded in reception effectively subjectivises depiction to the point where it is beyond argument because, in many respects, it is beyond arguable criteria of veracity and adequacy. Documentary becomes radically relativised, placing terminal limitations on its role as one of the key discourses of the public sphere. Such a movement is quite often claimed as a progressive bringing-back of documentary into the ambit of 'fiction' after having its distinctiveness honoured for far too long, though just how this works progressively in the context of specific political and social structures – in, for instance, the formation of consensus and the articulation of conflict – is far from clear.

Winston moves to this position because of what I regard to be a too uncompromising assessment of the play-off between 'actuality' and 'creative treatment' in the traditional version of documentarism. I have referred to his useful discussion of Grierson earlier, but it is interesting to note how, in advancing his ideas on reconstruction, he sees the Griersonian mode in relation to the audience: 'The Griersonian idea of "actuality" depends on an assumption of a particular naivety in the audience. Without such naivety, the audience could not believe that anything of the real would survive "creative treatment"' (Winston 1995:253). 'Anything' of the real? Isn't it possible for audiences to believe in factors of degree and interplay here rather than to be caught between two absolutes? And isn't it possible (even allowing for more discursive complexity in the production of the referential than might ever become generally realised by audiences) for them to be right?

Factors of degree and of interplay are clearly going to be of the greatest importance in the future of documentary, whatever the tenor of critical debate, reflecting in part the broader hybridisations

of television's generic system. Part of the interplay will continue to involve referentiality, the appeal of the indexical, the authenticity of testimony, the revelation of the shot, and so on. It might be useful for those who wish to argue the case for reconstruction to hold all of the above to be problematic without rejecting them entirely as principal modes not only of established image-viewer relations but also of image-imaged relations. This is especially true if recommendations are to have some outcome in changed practice.

A rejection of referential 'purism' (as found very differently in, for instance, versions of *vérité* and authoritative commentary) and a heightening of the expressive and dramatic element in documentary are to be found extensively in contemporary work and are variously indicated in the works chosen for discussion in this book. The narrative structuring of exposition, providing chronology and causal connections as well as a principle of coherence and engagement, has long been a feature of documentary. Moving close to the conventions of dramatic fiction in some productions, its usage has been partial and less prominent in others. A general shift towards making documentary more attractive is likely to produce narratively prominent formats. It will, indeed, be one of the most interesting aspects of documentary in the late 1990s to see how increased symbolic densities relate to the continuing requirement for realist literalism and to the newer, urgent modes for presenting ongoing actuality (a matter taken up in the last chapter).

Modalities of documentary language

I want to finish this critical survey of theoretical questions by looking more closely at some of the principal depictive modes of documentary discourse. Clearly, these have been a primary element in most, if not all, of the issues and disagreements discussed above, made explicit in my discussion of 'levels' of discourse, but it might be useful to give their formal character more attention and to note significant variations. This is different from attempting a generic typology although it clearly relates to typological matters; it is to identify some of the principal ways in which communication is organised in documentary. Although not strictly speaking 'theory', such identification provides a useful analytic basis for the more intensive investigations of documentary vocabulary and syntax in my subsequent chapters.

I want to suggest that we can divide use of the image up into four modes and speech into three. Simplistic though this may be, it seems to me to catch adequately at the range of existing and emerging practice. In most of these modes, the 'evidential' is variously privileged, a point which unsurprisingly follows from the tenor of the discussion above.

Taking the image first, I would identify as follows:

Evidential mode 1 (reactive observationalism)

This is the mode of minimal directorial intervention in respect of pro-filmic events. It is the mode of 'fly on the wall', which I shall explore with examples in the next chapter, although it is also used outside that particular format. It is an indirect mode, placing the viewer in the position of vicarious witness to ongoing events and often requiring of them a high level of interpretative work in converting the particularity of what is seen and heard into 'significance'. Given the circumstances of filming, it often has very limited scopical mobility (for instance, the filming of an ambulance crew attending a road accident) and cannot offer the range of close-ups, matching shots, complementary shifts of perspective and anticipatory shots by which other modes can enhance their visuality. It is often edited in such a way as to emphasise durational values, temporal sequentiality and immediacy – the use of real-time segments within an overall strategy of time elision being important here. This provides a visualisation of process which is akin to the diegetic plane of dramatic fictional narrative, though without the authorial controls of the latter and therefore far more dependent on the comprehensibility, interest and visual 'strength' of the pro-filmic events themselves. If this is not forthcoming, loss of depictive coherence as well as of viewer engagement can occur.

Evidential mode 2 (proactive observationalism)

Here, a scene or sequence adopts the basic mode of observationalism, but with management of the pro-filmic allowing increased scopical mobility (including continuities of depicted movement), a more discursive use of *mise-en-scène* and smoother time-compressions. One might image a student being filmed boiling an egg in their cramped bedsit as part of a documentary on student loneliness – the fundamental mode is still indirect but the depiction has been more heavily coded, perhaps more richly inflected, as a result of the increased management of movement and space as well as of shooting. Whether these codings of *mise-en-scène*, composition and shot type are marked in the depiction (as self-conscious *styling*) or whether, conversely, they are collapsed into observational 'transparency', will vary with their kind and degree, with directorial choice and with the function to which the sequence is put in the overall documentary design.

Although I do not propose to deal with it here, it is interesting to consider how this mode, when pushed further, can be transformed into that of dramatised reconstruction (not only in one-off productions but also, for example, in recently successful series like the BBC's 999). Here, of course, considerable narrative and depictive controls can be exerted, including that over characterisation (see the next chapter for further development of this point).

Evidential mode 3 (illustrative)

This is a mode used widely in current-affairs documentaries. The visualisation is subordinate to verbal discourses, acting in support of their propositions or arguments, which they can frequently only partially 'confirm'. Often, the narrative drive is visually weak (as in many news stories) with low levels of continuity and little if any attempt at achieving the durational values of observationalism. At times, distinguishing between the evidential claims of image and speech in a given combination of the two can not only be difficult but also controversial, as later chapters will show.

Associative mode

Here, the visualisation is primarily engaged in the making of second-order meanings, producing a kind of visual exposition or visual evaluation. This exploitation of the connotations and symbolic resonances generated by pro-filmic, shot type and editing can reinforce, and coexist with, the use of the images for more directly referential purposes. So, for instance, a sequence in a report on life in a South African town can use elements of the pro-filmic (the homes of black and white families, farm implements, children playing, a civic occasion) within a depictive rhetoric of marked symbolic purpose. But some uses of the associative may be primarily aesthetic rather than cognitive, aiming to produce a pleasing representation not necessarily one with increased informational yield. Of course, if this goes beyond a certain point, it may bring a charge of impropriety, a privileging of form over content. Again, a number of the chapters which follow document such charges.

The three modes of speech are somewhat simpler both to identify and describe, at least in the broad terms I am adopting here. I would classify them as follows:

Evidential mode 1 (overheard exchange)

This is the speech of observed subjects, whose ostensible reason for speaking is to be located in pro-filmic action. The way in which action is 'objectified' within the visualisation varies (see reactive and proactive modes above) and the proximity of overheard speech to the coherence and pointedness of dramatic dialogue will vary too, as will the speaker's indications of self-consciousness and of performance.

Evidential mode 2 (testimony)

This is interview speech, variously obtained and used. The marking of interview speech along the axis objective/true – subjective/partial can be achieved by visual editing (including subversive juxta-

position) as well as by sound editing. In the chapters which follow, a number of ways of using interview material will be examined. These include its use as voice-over in a manner which can serve to 're-focalise' visual portrayal (see Bránigan 1992) and encourage empathetic feeling from the viewer.

Expositional mode

The 'classic' mode of documentary speech, including full and partial commentary, occasional out-of-frame bridging, presenter direct address, etc. Although eschewed by many recent documentarists as an unacceptably authoritarian mode, expository voice is still necessary in a range of television productions which require to engage with abstract, propositional matters and to link across disparate visualisations. It is inevitably given to objectification (hence the use of the term 'voice of God' to describe the classic, 'heavy' commentary) but recent documentaries have also used subjectivised exposition effectively, including the dispersal of the expository function across a number of speakers, seen or unseen.

All these modes are to be found at work within different textual systems in contemporary documentary; my typology is provisional and heuristic. It is clear that it holds implications not just for documentary form, however, but also for the affective and cognitive character of documentary reception, understanding and use. Both implications will be taken up at points throughout the book, in respect of particular forms and, indeed, of specific films and programmes.

In this chapter, I have reviewed some of the more important ways in which ideas about documentary – organised at the level of 'theories' – have posed it as a particular kind of discursive practice. I have looked at the inconsistencies and difficulties of terminology in its foundational phase, a phase of rather grand claims-making, and then at the ways in which it has been situated as a practice to be exposed and denounced. I have considered some theoretical reflections on its future, on its reconstitution (more substantive comments on current tendencies and future possibilities are given in Chapter 11). Finally, I have put forward a basic schema which can inform more detailed attention to the communicative modes of documentarism.

Throughout, I have tried to retain awareness of the fact that the practice has always been more various than the theory and, indeed, that it has often belied theory. That the shapes of documentary-to-come will be determined by a mix of factors amongst which theoretical commentary is unlikely to figure should also 'go without saying'. However, many of those currently writing about documentary regard it as an exciting and an essential form rather than something simply to be either championed or attacked, and I take this to be a very good sign indeed.