

[4] *Political Mimesis*

The first thing to remember is that there is, or rather should be, no cinema other than agit-cinema.

:: Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Film Attractions," 1924

Did Documentary Films Ever Produce Social Change?

In *Claiming the Real*, the first theoretically informed history of the documentary film in the English-speaking world, Brian Winston tells us what we have suspected all along: John Grierson's famous definition of the new mode was seriously flawed from the start.¹ Recently, the ambiguities in this concept have begun to intrigue scholars, some of whom began to organize a series of conferences in the mid-1990s that took up the question of what makes one work of film and video a "documentary" and another not a "documentary." Would there have been a need for these conferences if the pioneers had been more precise? Why did it take scholars so long to see the obvious (to which Winston finally draws our attention)—that the "creative treatment of actuality" describes fiction as well as nonfiction film?²

From the ambiguity in the term *documentary*, I want to turn to another aspect of the tradition that the pioneer fathers left vague. What, over the years since Grierson's 1929 definition, has produced and maintained the theoretical connection between documentary film and social action or social change? Winston demonstrates that the goal of the Griersonians, who were essentially British civil servants, was to produce promotional pieces for the government. The result was a carefully constructed and totally inoffensive public relations vehicle. The legacy of *Drifters* (1929), *Night Mail* (1936), and *Housing Problems* (1936) is today's "balanced" television documentary, the form that scrupulously avoids taking stands. And just as

today's "balanced" television documentary is viewed in living rooms far from the front lines of political upheaval, the Grierson-produced films were never really shown in the context of social struggles. In contrast with today's television documentary, however, the Grierson films could not even claim social "influence" by virtue of having been widely *seen*, given that they received such limited exhibition.³ Winston goes on to remind us that it is not only the early British documentaries, the forerunners, that, compared with fiction films, were seen by relatively small audiences. Few of the classic documentaries have ever had mass audiences. With the exception of some unusual films that enjoyed limited success as feature releases in the United States (*Harlan County, U.S.A.*, 1976; *The Atomic Cafe*, 1982; *Roger and Me*, 1989), the films in the documentary canon have not been box-office blockbusters. Actually, most scholars know this. But given this knowledge, why has the myth of sweeping social change remained attached to the documentary film both inside and outside the academy?

An earlier study to which Brian Winston refers drew my attention to this question. As Winston recounts the study, in 1995, Kirwin Cox of the National Film Board of Canada was asked to produce a list of "the 10 documentaries that changed the world" for the Centennial of Film celebration. The forty-eight scholars and filmmakers polled had difficulty thinking of films that had actually "changed" the world. In the end, they settled for films that had had some local "influence" for want of examples associated with cataclysmic change.⁴ Inspired by this exercise, I decided to take my own poll. Much smaller and more informal, my sample consisted of some friends in film studies and people I know who work in distribution at Third World Newsreel and California Newsreel. This knowledgeable group also had trouble with the question, which they thought would have been better phrased, What films *should* have caused social change? Although they could list documentary films that moved them personally, they could not be certain that these films had actually changed anything for anyone. As I anticipated, they argued that it was only in connection with moments or movements that films could be expected to make a contribution to social change, and that in and of themselves, they had no power to affect political situations. More important, my sample group confirmed the existence of a mythology on the Left, telling me that many of us want to think that documentary film has a legacy of social change. We not only hope for social transformation in our lifetime, but we hope that independently produced documentary film and video will have something to do with this upheaval. Tom Waugh cleverly captures this sense in his introduction to "*Show Us Life*," which he titles, "Why Documentary Filmmakers Keep Trying to Change the World, or Why People Changing the World Keep Making Documentaries."⁵

Waugh's emphasis on "trying to change" is useful because it conceives of social change as an effort, an almost utopian goal rather than an instrumental project. He offers the term "committed documentary," a concept that by foregrounding political allegiance neatly sidesteps the thorny problem of social consequences.⁶ When we actually look at the history of this mode of intervention, this mode of engagement, we see very few examples of films that have even been viewed widely let alone have sparked anything resembling a chain of social reactions. Most curious of all, given that the Grierson model (carried over into the United States in the Pare Lorentz tradition of *The River*, 1937, and *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, 1936) is so undeniably apolitical, how is it that this model came to be associated at all with later film movements that claimed to have radical political agendas? Here I think that Winston is right to locate the U.S. women's movement films in the tradition of New Day's *Union Maids* (1976) as the aesthetic heirs of the Griersonian "problem moment" film, as he calls it.⁷ If nothing else, the comparison reminds us of how *Union Maids* cautiously avoided dealing with the role of the American Communist Party in U.S. labor history.

But Winston's alignment of the U.S. women's movement films with the Grierson tradition also runs the risk of de-emphasizing the public policy agenda of the Griersonians, a state mandate that was significantly different from the goals of the independent Left, the engine behind New Day Film's production of *Union Maids*. Perhaps we need to do more to assert the differences in the conditions of production of the films that end up so often under the same vague banner of "social change." Most curious is how, given Grierson's job with the British government, the films he produced have been associated with radicalism at all. Winston suggests half facetiously that *Drifters* won its radical reputation because it once shared a double bill with Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), which was for a time banned in Britain.⁸ The record shows, however, that Grierson eschewed the Russians—was disinterested in Vertov and was not particularly deferential to Eisenstein. Basil Wright once said of Grierson that he "never used the word revolution."⁹ Although Grierson and the National Film Board of Canada as well as Pare Lorentz and the Farm Security Association may have a foundational relationship to social activism in the textbook version of documentary film history, most of us would be more inclined to look to the United States histories of Nykino and the Film and Photo League in the 1930s, and Newsreel in the 1960s in the United States for examples of films that "shook things up" politically.¹⁰ Invariably, however, the search for social relevance leads us to Joris Ivens and Henri Storck's *Borinage* (1933), a film that ranked high in my informal poll. Considering

the way the film was used as an organizing tool among Belgian Communist groups, it would seem to be a model of Tom Waugh's "committed documentary." But further, *Borinage* resulted in improved housing conditions among the miners it featured, and is thus perhaps one of the origins of the social change mythos. Significantly, the film also pioneered a look. A milestone in the history of political aesthetics, *Borinage*, Grierson later told Ivens, had influenced the cinematic style British documentary makers used to shoot slum conditions.¹¹

Borinage also has the requisite socialist credentials, a political badge that many other documentaries made in the West cannot claim. Ivens began to shoot just after a visit to the Soviet Union, and it is well documented that the filmmakers as well as the workers featured in the film were engaged in a revolutionary struggle as part of the international Communist movement. Thus, in addition, *Borinage* raises the question of what it meant to import revolutionary politics from the Soviet Union and introduce them into Western economic and historical circumstances. Further, it also raises the question of changed and changing historical contexts and the difference between using revolutionary film to reeducate or resolidify solidarity among the converted and using film to initiate and convert. We might recall here that Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein were primarily doing the former and not the latter, and that none of the Soviet works that came to epitomize revolutionary film were shot in the heat of revolutionary overthrow, even though they have come to carry this connotation.

As we know, a wide range of filmmaking schools, often connected to political moments, have drawn from the Soviets, from Godard in his Dziga Vertov period to the feminist avant-garde of the 1970s.¹² The debt to the Soviets in film and video production as well as film and television studies is great and includes everything from theoretical principles of filmmaking to the image of workers to ideological analysis. However, when we think of "social change" in the contemporary sense, we may not immediately think of the Soviets, and this may be due, in part, to the way the Griersonian tradition mediates the relationship to the Soviets in the English-speaking world as well as to the way Robert Flaherty has eclipsed Dziga Vertov, as discussed in the introduction to this collection. Paralleling these developments in documentary film history, in Western political theory, "social change" has been decoupled from "revolution," disconnected in such a way that we are led to see revolution as an unrealizable extreme as opposed to a daily possibility. C. L. R. James, seeing such a possibility in the 1981 Brixton riot, helped to reconnect everyday events with social transformation when he declared of the totally spontaneous eruption, "That is revolution."¹³ And if there is any doubt about the connection between

changing conditions and the revolutionary moment, there is always the authority of Marx: "The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*."¹⁴

Since the 1970s, a great deal of theoretical work as well as film-making practice on the Left has been devoted to developing a revolutionary aesthetics—a combative form that poses the right questions in the intellectual struggle against capitalism. But with all of this work, we still know too little about the radical film and the politicized body of its spectator. We are hampered, of course, by the empirical questions: What do we count as change? How do we know what effects the film has produced? How do we determine where consciousness leaves off and action begins?

Eisenstein, never one to be deterred by the need for empirical evidence, forged ahead with a theory of what it is that the film actually *does* to the body of the politicized spectator, while maintaining his close observation of the physical reactions of audiences to his films, closely noting applause and laughter. A recent return to the important essays on the "montage of attractions" in theater and film has also given us the chance to reconsider Eisenstein's fascination with the possibilities of the "agitational spectacle." This is the fascination that led him to consider the powers of "primitive" imitative practices.¹⁵ The instrumentality of Eisenstein's theory is well-known. It is a theory that would go so far as to "calculate" the spectator, proposing a precise calibration of the film in relation to desired emotional response, often in terms of blows and shocks to the psyche.¹⁶ But always softening Eisenstein's didacticism, which at times can sound rigid and authoritarian, is his emphasis on sensuality. This sensuality that tempers Eisenstein's driving intellectuality is less well known in his thought, perhaps because it never seems to have found its way into the work of his closest contemporary admirers following in the Godardian-Brechtian tradition. Sometimes, these references to sensuality sound like a carryover from Marx, for whom even the commodity was a "sensuous thing," and for whom idealism was at fault for not knowing sensuousness.¹⁷ Putting the sensuous back into the theory of political aesthetics would require significant reconceptualization. In Eisenstein's theory of social change and cinema, the bodily senses *lead* the spectator, whose involvement is not strictly intellectual—politics is not exclusively a matter of the head but can also be a matter of the heart. Relevant here, I think, is Jacques Aumont's observation that in Eisenstein's critical vocabulary, "attraction" was supplanted by "pathos."¹⁸ Was this a move from the importance of sensuality to the importance of extreme feeling?

With all that Eisenstein has to say about the spectator, it is interesting

that in the new work on spectatorship, particularly from within feminist film theory, there has been no move to reconsider his insights into the "production" of the audience.¹⁹ The easy explanation for this would be the incompatibility between the unabashed behaviorism of the Soviets and the more or less psychoanalytic approach of contemporary feminist film theory. And against the fullness of the psychoanalytic account, the Soviets *do* sound hopelessly mechanistic at times; the vocabulary of reflexes and stimuli in Eisenstein often smacks of the empiricism of contemporary "media effects" research.²⁰ Nevertheless, particularly since psychoanalysis does so little to help us with political action, we are returned to Eisenstein, who satisfies our interest in what it is that the body is *made to do* by the political film. To restate the problem, I am concerned with the question of what it might be that *moves* viewers to want to act, that moves them to do something instead of nothing in relation to the political situation illustrated on the screen. I raise an almost unanswerable question, I know. It is unanswerable because it is too large, requiring the intellectual resources of a range of fields, but also unanswerable because of the many empirical traps in the problematic. (What constitutes action? How do we measure that action? What are the signs of political consciousness?) Finally, the question of political action is unanswerable without exact knowledge of the political conditions in the world of the audience. In our approach to this question we are required to artificially put on hold the question of the political situation—the agitational climate within which a committed documentary is received, knowing that separating out the determinations in any multiply determined historical moment also has its drawbacks as an exercise.

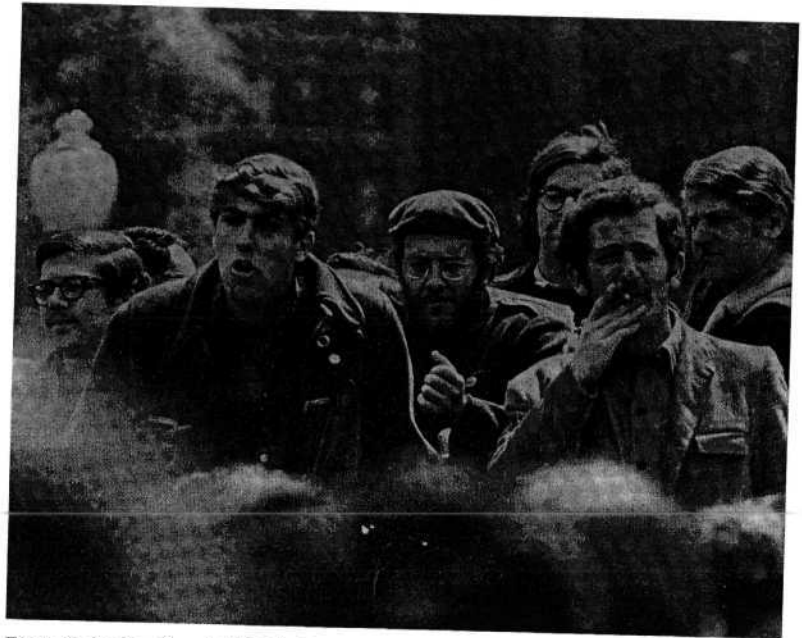
I should be clear that what we are considering is also somewhat of a fantasy (and contemporary critical theory has something in common with fantasy, remaining as it does in the realm of the unactualized). This fantasy is based on some powerful documentary mythologies that have become intertwined with actual historical events. For instance, the idea of the audience that is collectively *moved* to get up out of their theater seats and take some kind of group action on behalf of a political cause is part of the mix of documentary lore and documentary reality (somewhat like the stories of filmmakers shot at in the process of filming politically volatile events).²¹ There is at least one example of spontaneous audience activism on record. The radical newsletter *Rat* reports the reaction to a screening of newsreel films at the State University of New York, Buffalo, in 1969: "At the end of the second film, with no discussion, five hundred members of the audience arose and made their way to the University ROTC building. They proceeded to smash windows, tear up furniture and destroy machines until the office was a total wreck; and then they burned the remaining paper and

flammable parts of the structure to charcoal.”²² An isolated incident yet part of the history and mythology of documentary, it is this kind of spontaneous reaction, sign of the politicized body, that I want to discuss in relation to what might be called *political mimesis*.

Political Mimesis

Political mimesis begins with the body. Actualized, it is about a relationship between bodies in two locations—on the screen and in the audience—and it is the starting point for the consideration of what the one body makes the other do.²³ Inspired by Linda Williams’s discussion of three genres that “make the body do things” (horror makes you scream, melodrama makes you cry, and porn makes you “come”), the concept of political mimesis addresses what it is that the committed documentary wants us to do. Although we might not want to make a case for the radical documentary as a body genre, we still need to think the body in relation to films that make audience members want to kick and yell, films that make them want to do something *because of the conditions in the world of the audience*. And what we want to retain from the body genre is this powerful mirroring effect. Body genres, as Williams defines them, feature a sensationalized on-screen body and “produce” on the bodies of spectators an “almost involuntary mimicry of emotion or sensation of the body on screen.”²⁴ Our question will be one of the degree to which radical documentaries “produce” a similar “almost involuntary” imitation in sympathetic audiences. More than seventy years after Eisenstein’s theories of the mechanical production of the spectator, we return to the idea that the “machine produces the body,” but with the difference that all of the intervening and mediating factors are now givens. Whereas once it would have been theoretically unsophisticated to say that machines produced bodily effects, now to say that the “machine produces the body” is to say that machine discourse is powerful enough to bring entities into being.²⁵

There has been little or no discussion of the sensationalized body in radical documentary films, perhaps because one tends to think of sense and body in terms of sexuality, and the committed documentary has always been seriously asexual. Appropriately, if one were to undertake an inventory of sensual documentaries, it would need to begin with Eisenstein’s *Strike* (1924), which I am treating as an honorary documentary following Bill Nichols’s new work on the film.²⁶ And I am not thinking of the sensual scenes of the male workers bathing, I am thinking of scenes of rioting, images of bodies clashing, of bodies moving as a mass. These are images of



From *Columbia Revolt* (1968). Courtesy of Third World Newsreel.

sensuous struggle, images exhilarating to politicized viewers, who would interpret them as action against a common enemy, an enemy that assumes a variety of guises—a racist state, capitalist management, a bigoted group.

These images of sensuous struggle might be understood as functioning generically in such documentaries and semidocumentaries as *In the Year of the Pig* (1969), *Word Is Out* (1977), *The Battle of Chile* (1979), *Berkeley in the Sixties* (1990), the Film and Photo League’s *Bonus March* (1932), Newsreel’s *Columbia Revolt* (1968), Black Audio Collective’s *Handsworth Songs* (1986), Sankofa’s *Territories* (1988), and New Day’s *Union Maids* (1976) and *Seeing Red* (1984). The makers have chosen to show these images because, of course, they represent historical events, they stand for actuality. But the makers also use images of bodies in struggle *because they want audiences to carry on that same struggle*, even if carrying it on means fighting back in physical ways that exceed restrained public demonstrations of protest. The whole rationale behind documenting political battles on film, as opposed to producing written records, is to make struggle visceral, to go beyond the abstractly intellectual to produce a bodily swelling. Perhaps the most easily understood example of the bodily effects I am talking about are the effects produced by popular music, often rhythmically reinforced through editing patterns, or what Eisenstein calls the “emotive

vibration" in montage.²⁷ The point of using Woody Guthrie (*Union Maids*) and Joan Baez (*Territories*) singing traditional solidarity ballads on documentary sound tracks is to reach audiences at the juncture of the physiological and the psychological and to use musical associations to "produce" (to use Williams's term again) not just affiliation but action. Although new studies of the music track in film have given us a more comprehensive approach to the question of image and affect, we are only just beginning to think about music and the rhetoric of documentary (for more on which see Neil Lerner's essay on Virgil Thomson's score for *The River* in chapter 5 of this collection).²⁸

What I am calling *political mimicry* has to do with the production of affect in and through the conventionalized imagery of struggle: bloodied bodies, marching throngs, angry police. But clearly such imagery will have no resonance without politics, the politics that has been theorized as consciousness, in Marxism as class consciousness, the prototype for politicized consciousness in antiracist and feminist as well as gay and lesbian struggles. The dilemma here is that whereas we would never want to suggest that the process of developing class consciousness is involuntary or imitative, we need to concede that in the thrall of group song, in the heat of battle, in bodily strain and physical resistance, certainly, there could sometimes be an aspect of the involuntary, an aspect that "kicks in" on top of politicized consciousness.

The reason for using films instead of leaflets and pamphlets in the context of organizing is that films often make their appeal through the senses to the senses, circumventing the intellect. The reason for using the documentary to advance political goals is that its aesthetic of similarity establishes a continuity between the world of the screen and the world of the audience, where the ideal viewer is poised to intervene in the world that so closely resembles the one represented on screen. Yes, this is like saying that documentary depends upon the success of this famous illusion, and perhaps in this new period of reconsideration we can rethink the politics of illusionism. Further, documentary realism stands as stirring testimony or evidence of what has gone before. Its evidentiary status makes its appeal in the form of what I have called the "pathos of fact": this happened; people died for this cause; others are suffering; many took to the streets; this innocent victim can be saved if only something is done.²⁹ Probably this concept of documentary pathos is illustrated most easily with reference to films such as Christine Choy and Renee Tajima's *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988), Isaac Julien's *Who Killed Colin Roach?* (1983), or Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), films that document cases of social injustice that they then use as an argument for justice in the future. In such films, aesthetic

realism works to align the viewer emotionally with a struggle that continues beyond the frame and into his or her real historical present. But isn't any consideration of pathos in the documentary, then, always on the verge of turning into a defense of realism? Much of the challenge of the new work on documentary has to do with finding a way to be both a champion of the critique of realism and a defender of the uses of realism. What I am asking for is the kind of political case for using realism that women's movement documentary makers have never made in defense of their own work, a situation that Alexandra Juhasz notes and moves to rectify in her essay in this collection (see chapter 10). To date, however, there is still no adequately theorized defense of the use of documentary realism in the politically committed film.

It is precisely because of the legacy of the problem of realism—more specifically, because of the general concern about the automatic ideological complicity of the aesthetic—that I want to start instead with the concept of mimesis, to see whether it can be rehabilitated for a theory of media activism. What I want to account for is the fact that radical filmmakers have historically used mimesis not only in the interests of consciousness change but also in the service of making activists more active—of making them more like the moving bodies on the screen. But mimesis has its discredited side in mimicry, a side that carries connotations of naive realism, mindless imitation, mechanical copying, and even animality. This phenomenon is like what Todd Boyd calls "monkey see, monkey do," which, after the final scenes of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, might be called the "Mookie effect."³⁰ Certainly the media concern that urban youth would imitate the character Mookie's act of arson or start a riot that looked just like the brawl that breaks out at the end of the film suggests the potential problem with a theory of mimesis that could conceivably play into right-wing fears about the "effects of violence," the alleged consequences of images that appear on the screen.

Sympathetic Magic

In his *Mimesis and Alterity*, anthropologist Michael Taussig begins to recover the concept of mimesis and to restore its reputation as a "way of knowing," a project that is not likely to meet with automatic success.³¹ Any argument for mimesis as a form of knowledge will meet with resistance in the First World, especially because the concept has long been associated with not-knowing, or "only imitating," reproducing without adding anything, and learning by means of the body without the engagement of the

mind. However, as Taussig argues, that mimesis is a body-first way of knowing should be to its credit and not its detriment. There are things that the body “knows” that the mind does not, he would say. Still, our Enlightenment assumptions make us dubious. According to Taussig, what is best understood in South American indigenous culture as “sympathetic magic” has a legacy of interacting with the world that privileges nature over culture. Where the implications for media theory arise, however, is in the way sympathetic magic confers special powers on the image or copy, powers that come to have their influence over the real-world original. As Taussig puts it, the representation takes on the “power of the represented”—it is empowered by that which it represents.³² Long associated in the First World with primitivism, mimesis would seem to have little to do with modern mechanical technologies, but Taussig insists on a carryover, even a “rebirth” of the ancient powers. The ritual practice in which an effigy has powers over the natural world is revisited in the miraculous reconstitutive powers of mimetic technologies. From the point of view of documentary film, however, the power that has the most resonance is the power of sympathetic magic to “manipulate reality by means of its image.”³³ Eisenstein, as I have noted, was drawn to this very possibility of primitive mimesis, which he saw as nothing more than the use of imagery to achieve “mastery” over the physical world, a magical power based on one form echoing another rather than on repetitions of detail.³⁴

A contemporary version of sympathetic magic would have to do with the power to produce compelling similarities—in one’s body (through imitation) as well as through mimetic machines. It is really that the mimetic powers of the body are extended to the machine, which we already knew had a prosthetic function. Thus we need to think of recording and displaying machines as storing, recalling, and retrieving images or functioning rather like the body of a gifted mime. Not surprisingly, sympathetic magic acknowledges that screen images and “life” images will eternally mimic one another. But most important for radical documentary, a notion of sympathetic magic allows us to deal with the wish that images could change the world, that bodies on the screen could have their concrete connection with bodies in social space, whether those screen bodies are seen as performing the ideal or enacting the taboo. Finally, the notion of the world and the wide screen as having a “sympathetic” relationship, the one with the other, takes us out of the realm of any mechanical, behavioral connection and into the realm of unpredictability, opening up the possibility of miraculous transformation.³⁵

The mimetic faculty has its production as well as its reception side. On the production side is the capacity for minority groups and cultures to

“image back,” to represent their own faces and bodies—the faces and bodies of peasants, of indigenous peoples, of racial Others, of working women—and to show them against a backdrop of the historical conflicts within which they lost or triumphed. To represent mimetically the brutalities historically perpetrated against ordinary people in the name of profit in an attempt to change conditions is to “manipulate reality by means of its image,” to use imitation to influence present and future events magically. ✱ Certainly such a use of mimesis describes radical theater. But motion pictures and video have an even greater capacity to manipulate mimetically. Here there is a going beyond the mimetic powers of the body to engage the projective powers of mimetic technologies, but also a utilization of the machines of repetition, which have the capacity to throw up their imitations again and again and again. One might ask if these powers are not available to all producers who would seek to influence by means of mechanical and electronic technologies, including television advertisers, network newscasters, and Hollywood moguls. The difference is just this: the documentary film that uses realism for political ends has a special power over the world of which it is a copy because it *derives its power from that same world*. (The copy derives its power from the original.) The radical film derives its power (magically) from the political events that it depicts. What I am proposing is another way of formulating the power of documentary “truth” claims, a way that helps us around the problems of indexicality and overinvestment in “the real,” issues discussed elsewhere in this collection.

If this is the production side, what is the reception side of the mimetic faculty? Here we come back to the question of what film realism “makes the body do.” Can the motion picture apparatus produce “revolutionary effects” on the bodies of viewers just like that? And is it the rousing film or is it the *world* of the film that makes viewers want to do something—to shout, to kick, to scream—to loot? Yes, I said “to loot,” because this would seem to raise the question of the things that the Rodney King video footage “made” sympathetic bodies do in retaliation against the police brutality witnessed by the video camera, represented on the tape. For our purposes, let’s consider the way that the footage of the Los Angeles police beating Rodney King was reused in *The Nation Erupts*, a videotape produced by the collective Not Channel Zero and broadcast via Deep Dish TV’s cable satellite soon after the April 29, 1992, trial verdict and consequent riots. The work of Not Channel Zero, as Deirdre Boyle tells us, is part of an important return to guerrilla video tactics, a move in which the 1960s video portapak is superseded by the 1980s camcorder. And furthermore, Boyle claims the Rodney King amateur footage as part of this same tradition,

illustrating as it does “video’s potential to be a tool, a weapon, a witness in the hands of ordinary people.”³⁶ Here, also, the Rodney King footage is an example par excellence of the powers of mimesis, a use of the documentary image elevated to the status of icon by virtue of its connection to an original event. The representation acquires the power of the represented—so much so that it seems that it is the representation that *makes* people do things. It seems that the footage of police brutally beating a black man *made* disaffected African Americans and Asians in South-Central Los Angeles riot and loot, when it was actually the *world* of the footage—the world within which police conduct humiliating strip searches on young black men—that *made* people riot.

Not Channel Zero’s tape acknowledges the mimetic power of the Rodney King imagery by reusing the original beating footage along with video imagery of the riots, news coverage, and interviews with black residents of the South-Central Los Angeles community. And it is this use of documentary imagery that attempts to change reality “by means of its image.” Similar imagery characterizes Matthew McDaniels’s *Birth of a Nation: 4*29*1992*, a video documentary on the riots shot from within the community.³⁷ In both instances, the loose montage structure is perhaps less aesthetically potent than the featured documentary footage, and it is as though the videomakers are deferring to the power of the images themselves—images of burning buildings and families looting grocery and dry goods stores. These documentary sections are important because something happened before the camera, and what happened invests the tapes with their ritual significance. Using the documentary footage of the Los Angeles riots to “image back,” these guerrilla videomakers are also using the mimetic potentialities of the footage as a means of extending the community of resisters. In such cases, to say, “This happened” is to also say, “This happened because this was done to us. We will do this again if it happens to us again and it will look just like this.” In other words, committed documentary may invoke Frantz Fanon’s “colonial mirror.”³⁸ Looking at insurrection through the colonial mirror, we are face-to-face with the question of revolutionary violence, but Fanon’s theorization gives us as a structure of crimes answering crimes, a historical pattern not of random retaliation but of eerie repetitions and symmetrical returns. In Fanon, the black man’s violence is in answer to the violence that originates with the white settler.

Thus the question of “images of violence” always needs to be politically interrogated. We must ask, Whose violence? There is a way in which the videotapes produced by African Americans and Latinos in the aftermath of the L.A. riots of 1992 answer the conservative fear of the “effects”



From *Birth of a Nation: 4/29/92*.

of violence in the media, always a deathly fear of mimesis. It is as though these makers are saying, “Images *do* incite acts of violence, and we want these images to do just that.” Not surprisingly, the question of revolutionary violence has had an uneasy position in documentary studies, perhaps because of a certain queasiness about acts of violence. But we can’t very well advocate media activism and decry screen “violence” in the same breath. The great tradition of social change documentary has been a commitment to representing injustice, to showing without flinching how some groups have treated other groups—to show beating, screaming, and shooting with full knowledge that Others somewhere will fight back, perhaps as a consequence of having seen these images. It is, of course, also a question of how far from the protected middle-class screening room this struggle will take place. At a conference panel discussion about the Rodney King tape soon after the events of April 1992, Michele Wallace remarked that there is always something disturbing to her about the way white people talk about violence. Mainstream violence discourse is unable to imagine revolutionary situations within which brutal reprisals are necessary. Its reduction of all acts to a generic violence denies the specificity of people’s struggles and cancels the validity of their claims.

And finally, because white violence discourse understands all violent acts as irrational, it is unable to comprehend the rationality of social outbreak, particularly outbreak that is the product of an accumulation of oppressive conditions. Fanon goes so far as to stress the function of violence in the social education of colonized peoples. For the theorist of African revolution, violence is an exercise in political analysis: “Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and

gives the key to them.”³⁹ Here, violence is theorized as a discourse and a strategy, but also a kind of bodily analysis whereby the people come to grasp the situation through action. This action then becomes a pattern that gives itself to be read on a large scale. As some commentators on the Los Angeles riot pointed out, for instance, the looting and burning in the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict could be seen not only as the speech of the voiceless but as an “immanent critique” of mainstream politics.⁴⁰

Historically, moving pictures and television have been submitted to a similar criticism—seen as mindless and unable to deliver political analysis and critique. Part of the challenge for a committed documentary like Not Channel Zero’s *The Nation Erupts*, then, is to “image back” in such a way that the structure of the colonial mirror itself becomes visible. In the case of the Los Angeles riot, that historically significant urban uprising was not produced by the seen but by the unseen—the unseen silent depression and its economic stranglehold on a community. *The Nation Erupts* attempts to represent this complex mirror by means of a combination of signs very much in the style of Godard, interrupting the documentary fragments with didactic intertitles: “Looting is the natural response to the society of abundance.” On “NCZ’s Top 11 Reasons to Loot or Riot,” number one is “Racism,” while lower down on the list is “If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em”—a parody of David Letterman, part of a mix of styles and tones that ranges from the dead serious to the humorous. Not Channel Zero even includes in-depth political lessons, connecting the 1992 L.A. riots to revolutionary moments in U.S. history by means of graphics over the images: 1863, Irish Draft Riot; 1917, East St. Louis; 1919, Chicago; 1935, Harlem Riot; 1943, Detroit Riot; 1963, Watts; 1967, Newark and Detroit; 1973, Wounded Knee. In other words, the analytic limitations of mimesis are a creative opportunity, a challenge to fill out the history of people’s oppression *on top of* the immediate realism of the video footage.

But given political activism as a goal of the Not Channel Zero collective, what are the elements in the tape that could conceivably move audiences to *do something*? As I have been arguing, it may take more than a highly charged image to produce the desired bodily swelling, a physiological response as well as the enlargement of the body politic, the ranks. Not Channel Zero supplements the images of burning, looting, marching, and speaking out with a multilayered track including the politicized sound of Ice-T’s “Cop Killer,” Public Enemy’s “Hazy Shade Criminal,” and John Coltrane’s “My Favorite Things.” Again, I want to call attention to what has been unacknowledged about the work of many film- and videomakers who have produced intentionally incendiary documentary art. What has been unacknowledged is the use of elements on either the image track or

the sound track that make a visceral impact, that may have a strong connotative resonance for particular communities.

Here, the use of black popular music in *The Nation Erupts* affirms existing music communities, assuming an overlap between rap music fans and politically disaffected African Americans. But the crucial question to ask about Not Channel Zero’s work is whether it owes more to MTV than to the documentary tradition we have been examining. This is an extremely significant question for us as we undertake the reinvention of documentary film and video, for it is only by virtue of the use of documentary footage and its ambitious political goals that *The Nation Erupts* can be made to fit into this discussion of documentary tradition. New guerrilla video needs to be put higher on the agenda for future discussions of the political aesthetics of documentary.

What is it about the use of realism as a device that makes an impact on politicized audiences? First, although we would want to concede the pathos of the indexical (the “tragically, *this happened*” effect), it is important to remember that in the radical film the documentary image seldom appears entirely “naked,” that is, entirely without aesthetic supplements. Certainly the conventionalized imagery of the radical documentary draws deeply on a mimetic aesthetic—sync sound images of workers marching, historical footage of peoples’ struggles (with “real person” voice-overs), illustrated narration of the struggle, and music cues referencing the period. And it is where documentary has been subjected to aesthetic supplements that it exceeds what Bill Nichols calls the “discourses of sobriety,” which seem to me to always describe the Griersonians.⁴¹

This is to say that although such films as *Union Maids* may have a cautious Griersonian “problem moment” structure, they can also make visceral appeals that work to rouse audiences despite this didactic structure. An even better example would be George Stoney’s recent *Uprising of ’34*, which goes beyond other films in this tradition (*With Babies and Banners*, 1977; *The Wobblies*, 1979; *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*, 1980) in its creative uses of mimesis. Stoney supplements the sober discourses of traditional documentary with sections best described as a kind of celebratory mimesis in a film recollecting a failed strike among cotton workers in the American South during the Depression. The film opens with the kind of tour de force cutting one has seldom seen in the classical documentary, constrained as it has been by codes of cinematic transparency. What a thrill for Leftists old and new—a film with a radical political message and visceral pleasure to boot!

There are moments in *Uprising of ’34* that could be understood as having the potential to produce political mimesis, by which I mean a use of

mimesis that assumes a mimetic faculty on the part of its audience—the ability to “body back,” to carry on the same struggle. Clearly, the decision of filmmakers to make and exhibitors to screen a documentary is a decision to use an image copy of the world to influence that world. But where the documentary project most resembles the sympathetic magic that Taussig describes is in its intent that the mimetic image will have its influence upon historical events in the world, upon the world of which it is a copy. And here is where the Griersonian pioneers may turn in their graves—this idea of documentary as having the capacity to produce political mimesis assumes a faculty on the part of its audience that is only narrowly analytic. It assumes a capacity to respond to and to engage in sensuous struggle, in the visceral pleasure of political mimesis.

Conclusion

I have raised many more questions than I have answered in this essay—testimony, perhaps, to the overwhelming need for more theoretical work on the question of activism and aesthetics. The generational, class, and race differences between the ideal audiences of *The Nation Erupts* and *Uprising of '34*, to give only one example, present a challenge for any theorization of political struggle. What is the difference between the romanticization of violence in U.S. labor history and the romanticization of violence in the contemporary urban scene? Why are acts of violence videotaped and photographed for the historical record? Is violence a key indicator of political consciousness because of its spectacular aspect? Are there other visible signs of struggle and solidarity as important but less spectacular? Significantly missing from this preliminary consideration is a discussion of the viewing subject who has the potential to exercise the mimetic faculty. Manthia Diawara, in his discussion of the images of conflict between West Indian youth and British police in Isaac Julien's *Territories*, offers a starting point for considering the continuity between bodies on the screen and bodies in the street. Drawing on Frantz Fanon, Diawara urges an understanding of violence as having the capacity to “suture” or “bind” together the future subjects of a new nation: “There we have it: violence is a system or a machine, or, yet, a narrative, of which the individual desires to be a part in order to participate in the (re)construction of the nation.”⁴² But although the West Indian subjects on the street may be sutured together by their collective resistance to the police, what is the cause that binds together the spectators of the film about that resistance? What is the significance, if any, of the reception of political documentaries in the absence of a struggle?

NOTES

- Thanks to Miriam von Lier for the tape of *Borinage*, and to Brian Winston and Michael Renov for crucial historical input. Cornelius Moore, Ada Griffin, Tom Waugh, and George Stoney gave great answers in response to my poll.
1. Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations* (London: British Film Institute, 1995). The other work that has served as the standard text for several decades has been Eric Barnouw's *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).
 2. See Winston, *Claiming the Real*, chap. 3.
 3. *Ibid.*, 61–62.
 4. *Ibid.*, 256 n. 42.
 5. Thomas Waugh, “Why Documentary Filmmakers Keep Trying to Change the World, or Why People Changing the World Keep Making Documentaries,” in *“Show Us Life”: Toward a History and Aesthetics of Committed Documentary*, ed. Thomas Waugh, (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1984), xi–xxvii.
 6. *Ibid.*, xiii.
 7. Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 256.
 8. *Ibid.*, 37. For more on the international reception of *Potemkin*, see Kristin Thompson, “Eisenstein's Early Films Abroad,” in *Eisenstein Rediscovered*, ed. Ian Christie and Richard Taylor (London: Routledge, 1993).
 9. Quoted in Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 60. This is not to say that Grierson was not influenced by Soviet formal style. Winston describes how the producer came to know *Potemkin* in detail when he prepared the titles for U.S. distribution (48).
 10. For histories of the Film and Photo League and Nykino Films, see Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States 1930–1942* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research, 1982); William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981). For the history of *Newsreel*, see Bill Nichols, “*Newsreel*”: *Documentary Filmmaking on the American Left* (Salem, N.H.: Ayer, 1980); Michael Renov, “Early *Newsreel*: The Construction of a Political Imaginary for the New Left,” *Afterimage* 14, no. 7 (1985): 12–15; Michael Renov, “*Newsreel*: Old and New—Towards an Historical Profile,” *Film Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1987): 20–33.
 11. Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I* (New York: International, 1969).
 12. It is also useful to remember that the Latin American revolutionary filmmakers, although solidly Marxist, were not necessarily followers of Eisenstein and the Soviet school of filmmaking, and it is well-known that the Latin American point of aesthetic reference was Italian Neorealism. Godard, however, was influential to a degree. See Tomas Gutierrez Alea, “Beyond the Reflection of Reality,” interview in *Cinema and Social Change in Latin America: Conversations with Filmmakers*, ed. Julianne Burton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).
 13. C. L. R. James, *Cultural Correspondence 2* (winter 1983): 21.
 14. Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International, 1970), 121.
 15. Sergei Eisenstein, “The Montage of Film Attractions,” in *Selected Works*, vol. 1, (1922–34), ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 49.
 16. See *ibid.*, 39, as well as Sergei Eisenstein, “The Montage of Attractions,” in *Selected Works*, vol. 1, (1922–34), ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 34.
 17. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1977) 105; Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” 121.
 18. Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, trans. Lee Hildreth, Constance Penley, and Andrew Ross (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 48. See also my discussion of pathos in Eisenstein in “The Melos in Marxist Theory,” in *The Hidden Foundation*, ed. David James and Rick Berg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
 19. The most comprehensive overview of developments can be found in Judith Mayne, *Cinema Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993). See also the influential “Spectatrix” issue of *Camera Obscura* 20–21 (1989), ed. Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane.
 20. For more on “reflexology” in Eisenstein, see Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*, 45–46.
 21. There is the case of the National Film Board of Canada cameraman who was shot by a suspicious mountaineer during a film shoot in the Appalachians in the 1960s. Hostile shooting at the crew on the site of the picket line is recorded on film in *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, and also recorded on film is the death of the cameraman in *The Battle of Chile* whose camera still runs after he has fallen.
 22. Quoted in Renov, “Early *Newsreel*,” 14.
 23. For an extremely provocative theorization of the “film's body,” see Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 219–48. It is not, however, the body of the film that I am dealing with; rather, it is the representation of bodies

- that in documentary stand in for real historical people.
24. Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (summer 1991): 4; this essay has been reprinted in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
 25. To a degree, this is the subject of Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).
 26. Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), chap. 6.
 27. Sergei Eisenstein, "Methods of Montage," in *Film Form*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), 80.
 28. Good starting places for the consideration of music and documentary affect would be Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Rick Altman, ed., *Sound Theory, Sound Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Michael Chion, *Audio-Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
 29. Jane M. Gaines, "The Romance of Social Change: Documentary and the American South," paper delivered at Visible Evidence II, University of Southern California, August 1994.
 30. Todd Boyd, "Put Some Brothers on the Wall: Rap, Rock, and the Visual Empowerment of African American Culture," in *Multicultural Media in the Classroom*, ed. Diane Carson and Lester Friedman (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).
 31. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993). The reference to resemblance and similitude as a "way of knowing" in the sixteenth century is found in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1973).
 32. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, xviii.
 33. *Ibid.*, 57.
 34. Sergei Eisenstein, "Imitation as Mastery," in *Eisenstein Rediscovered*, ed. Ian Christie and Richard Taylor (London: Routledge, 1993), 66-71; see also Mikhail Yampolsky, "The Essential Bone Structure: Mimesis in Eisenstein," also in *Eisenstein Rediscovered*, 177-88.
 35. Taussig admits that there is some mysticism in this, but here he has been influenced as well by Walter Benjamin's curious mysticism. The relevant text is "The Mimetic Faculty," in *Illuminations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985).
 36. Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 206.
 37. Matthew McDaniels started his videotape while, like other Angelenos, he watched the televised verdicts in the trial of the police officers accused of beating Rodney King. To the images he shot off the television screen, he added the footage he shot in the streets, and later on he "looted" a new Super VHS camera, which noticeably helped the image quality. See Dream Hampton, "Birth of a Nation," *Vibe*, October 1993.
 38. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), 13.
 39. *Ibid.*, 148.
 40. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "The Los Angeles 'Race Riot' and Contemporary U.S. Politics," in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (London: Routledge, 1993).
 41. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
 42. Manthia Diawara, "Black British Cinema: Spectatorship and Identity Formation in Territories." *Public Culture* 3, no. 2 (fall 1990): 41-42.

NEIL LERNER

[5] *Damming Virgil Thomson's Music for The River*

Most analytic discussions surrounding film privilege the eye; questions concerning the role of the ear and its effects on shaping perceptions are traditionally ignored. Despite, and even because of, its marginalized status, music mediates and manipulates any cinematic discourses where it is present. Although it has become a topos in film music literature to lament the dearth of film music scholarship,¹ studies integrating a close reading of a film and its accompanying musical sound track remain quite rare. Textbooks, anthologies, and course syllabi all do little more than acknowledge music's presence, the more sophisticated ones perhaps systematizing it as either diegetic or nondiegetic, but almost never do they delve into the kinds of musical issues addressed by musicologists or music theorists, questions that, because of the nature of the filmic text, play absolutely crucial roles in the way a film is read. It is all the more striking, then, that in documentary film studies, a field committed to uncovering hidden or obscured agendas and ideologies, music is almost categorically muted, even when it plays a significant part in determining a film's rhetorical effectiveness (at least in the documentary's early history).

In writing about his first film, Pare Lorentz calls *The Plow That Broke the Plains* a "documentary musical picture," and the same designation seems equally appropriate for his next film, *The River*, released in 1937 and again with the support of the Roosevelt administration.² Both films featured landmark musical scores by the American modernist composer Virgil Thomson; both are exceptional and remarkable examples of how music can be closely coordinated within a film. Thomson found his second collaboration with Lorentz to be a more difficult assignment than writing the music for *The Plow*: "Floods, though murderous to land and houses, are not at all dramatic to observe. A film explaining how they come about and how they can be controlled by dams demands a far more complex