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When Is a Documentary?: Documentary as a Mode of Reception

by Dirk Eitzen

Documentaries—or whatever their directors care to call them—are just not my favorite kind of movie watching. The fact is I don't trust the little bastards. I don't trust the motives of those who think they are superior to fiction films. I don't trust their claim to have cornered the market on the truth. I don't trust their inordinately high, and entirely undeserved, status of bourgeois respectability.¹

—Marcel Ophuls

Ophuls's ongoing career as a maker of serious documentaries belies his claim to mistrust the form. Nonetheless, Ophuls's declaration gets to the heart of what defines documentaries ("or whatever their directors care to call them"). All documentaries—whether they are deemed, in the end, to be reliable or not—revolve around questions of trust. A documentary is any motion picture that is susceptible to the question "Might it be lying?"

It has been nearly seven decades since John Grierson first applied the term "documentary" to movies. Still, the definition of the term remains a vexed and controversial issue, not just among film theorists but also among people who make and watch documentaries. Definitions of genres like the western and film noir are in the last analysis fairly academic—of more concern to film scholars than to non-professional viewers. In contrast, as is apparent from the storms of controversy that rage around "fact-based" fiction films like *JFK* (1991) and *Malcolm X* (1992), the distinction between "fact" and "fiction" is a vital and important one to popular movie audiences. It is also probably indispensable in making sense of many kinds of everyday discourse, from dinner-table conversation to TV commercials. It is certainly crucial in the reception of discourses that are commonly regarded to be forms of nonfiction, including documentary.

The question I wish to address in this article is, What difference does it make? How does it matter to the recipients of a discourse, in practical terms, whether the discourse is considered to be fiction or nonfiction? Although I will focus chiefly on documentary here—that is, on *movies* that are supposed to be nonfiction²—this question pertains to other forms of nonfiction as well, such as history and journalism.

Documentary has been variously defined through the years as "a dramatized presentation of man's relation to his institutional life," as "film with a message," as "the communication, not of imagined things, but of real things only," and as films

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which give up control of the events being filmed.³ The most famous definition, and still one of the most serviceable, is John Grierson's, "the creative treatment of actuality."⁴ None of these definitions is completely satisfactory. The first excludes character studies and city symphonies, the second *includes* allegorical fiction films like Spike Lee's *School Daze* (1988), the third begs the difficult question of what part of a complex documentary like Fred Wiseman's *High School* (1968) is "real" and what part "imagined," and so on.

The toughest problem for common-sense definitions of documentary, like Grierson's "the creative treatment of actuality," is determining just what constitutes "actuality." Every representation of reality is no more than a fiction in the sense that it is an artificial construct, a highly contrived and selective view of the world, produced for some purpose and therefore unavoidably reflecting a given subjectivity or point of view. Even our "brute" perceptions of the world are inescapably tainted by our beliefs, assumptions, goals, and desires. So, even if there is a concrete, material reality upon which our existence depends (something very few actually doubt) we can only apprehend it through mental representations that at best resemble reality and that are in large part socially created. Some film theorists have responded to this dilemma by claiming that documentary is actually no more than a kind of fiction that is constituted to cover over or "disavow" its own fictionality.⁵

This definition of documentary, though correctly controverting a kind of naive realism, fails to account for the practical, everyday differences between fiction and nonfiction—differences that we experience as real and that can have real consequences for how we get along in the world, even though they may be in a sense imaginary. One could use the same line of reasoning to show, for example, that visual perception is no more than a kind of fiction that just *seems* particularly real. In theory, my perception of a baseball flying at my head may be no more than an imaginary construct—a fiction, if you will. Nevertheless, if it does not cause me to duck, I am liable to get quite a lump. Documentary has some of the same practical implications.

A neat definition of documentary on the basis of something like textual features or authorial intentions has proved very tricky. I suggest that, in fact, it is impossible. It is impossible because the boundaries of documentary are fuzzy and variable in viewers' experience and in everyday discourse. It is possible to define "duck-billed platypus" by saying that the term refers to a finite and distinct empirical category. That is not so with documentary. If you asked most people whether the reenactment of a kidnapping on the TV tabloid *A Current Affair* is a documentary or not, the answer would not be a neat yes or no but something along the lines of "Well . . ." And whether or not a semifictional film like Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1978) is a documentary depends upon how you look at it. It would be quite feasible to set up rigorous analytical distinctions by fiat, as genre theorists are wont to do, but to the extent that those would draw rigid boundaries on one side or the other of *A Current Affair* and *Daughter Rite*, as they would be bound to do, they would fail to describe the category "documentary" in the way

we ordinarily conceive and experience it. That is what counts if we wish to understand and explain actual, ordinary discourses (like how a reenactment in *A Current Affair* actually works on viewers in a particular situation).

The best way to define documentary, therefore, may be to say simply that it is whatever people commonly mean by the term. That is what Andrew Tudor wrote of genres twenty years ago. "*Genre*," he wrote, "is what we collectively believe it to be."⁶ What saves this argument from circularity, as Tudor pointed out, is that how people use genre terms and what they mean by them is pretty strictly delimited by culture. *Daughter Rite* might or might not be called a documentary, depending upon how one makes sense of it. On the other hand, it would appear practically absurd in ordinary circumstances to call *Rocky* (1976) a documentary. Conventions change, of course. In its time, *On the Waterfront* (1954) was called a documentary. Today, it takes a real stretch to think of it as one.

This definition begs the real question, of course. Saying that documentaries are whatever people commonly take them to be tells us nothing at all about what, specifically, people commonly *do* take them to be. That is the crucial question.

Representing Reality. In his recent book, *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols weighs in with a new definition of documentary. The adequacy of a definition, he claims, has less to do with how well it corresponds to common usage, as Tudor suggests, than with how well it "locates and addresses important [theoretical] questions."⁷ The theoretical questions that Nichols wishes to locate and address have to do primarily with how power circulates in documentary discourses. That is certainly an important question. Still, it is but one aspect of how documentaries function as discourse. Moreover, Nichols appears to recognize that one cannot adequately address the question of how power circulates in a discourse without first understanding how the discourse is perceived and interpreted by its recipients. Accordingly, he begins by offering his view of how documentaries are conventionally understood.

Conventions circulate and they are negotiated and nailed down, Nichols says, in three discursive arenas or sites: a community of practitioners with its institutional supports, a corpus of texts, and a constituency of viewers. Since these three things are inextricably bound together, the distinction between them is purely analytical, but it seems a useful one. For documentary discourses, the community of practitioners consists of people who make or engage in the circulation of documentary films. Its institutional supports include funders like the National Endowment for the Arts, distributors like PBS, professional associations, documentary film festivals, and so on. The corpus of texts includes everything that is commonly considered to be a documentary. Although Nichols does not say this, it seems logical that some texts, like *Daughter Rite* and episodes of *A Current Affair*, might belong to this corpus only marginally or provisionally. The constituency of viewers includes, in its broadest sense, everyone who occasionally watches documentaries. The defining characteristic of this constituency, however, is certain kinds of knowledge about what constitutes a documentary and about how to make sense of one

in conventionally accepted ways. The constituency of viewers, it might be added, has its own institutional supports, like newspaper criticism, the educational establishment, and, once again, distributors like PBS which determine how a film is labeled and the context in which it is seen.⁸

The key factor that defines the community of practitioners, Nichols maintains, is “a common, self-chosen mandate to represent the historical world rather than imaginary ones.” The corpus of texts is defined by an “informing logic” that involves “a representation, case, or argument about the historical world.” The constituency of viewers is defined by two common assumptions: first, that “the images we see (and many of the sounds we hear) had their origin in the historical world” and, second, that documentaries do not merely portray the historical world but make some sort of “argument” about it.⁹ The definitive factor in every case is “the historical world.” Whether you are looking at why documentaries are made, how they are put together, or how they are interpreted, what conventionally defines them, Nichols suggests, is their relationship to “the historical world.” Specifically, he claims, they make “arguments” about it.

Notice the similarity between this definition of documentary and Grierson’s, “the creative treatment of actuality.” For “the creative treatment of,” Nichols substitutes “an argument about”; for “actuality,” he substitutes “historical reality.” Like Grierson’s definition, Nichols’s might seem to beg the difficult question of just what constitutes “actuality” or “historical reality.” Actually, Nichols goes on to discuss this at some length.

The historical world, Nichols suggests, is not just something that we imagine, even though we can have no perception of it that is not mediated by our imagination of it. The historical world is something that lies outside and beneath all our representations of it. It is a “brute reality” in which “objects collide, actions occur, [and] forces take their toll.”¹⁰ Documentary is therefore not the representation of an imaginary reality; it is an imaginative representation of an actual *historical* reality. This aligns Nichols’s definition of documentary more closely with the common-sense definition of Grierson than with those that suggest that documentary is no more than a kind of fiction that denies its fictional status. Of course, our perceptions of and ideas about historical (i.e., actual) reality can only be communicated to others in conventional ways. It is in working out these conventional practices that Nichols’s three arenas of discourse—the community of practitioners, the corpus of texts, and the constituency of viewers—come into play.

One can neatly sum up Nichols’s definition of documentary as *the use of conventional means to refer to, represent, or make claims about historical reality*. This seems a good starting point. There remains one problem, however. There are many *fiction* films that refer to, represent, or make claims about historical reality. Spike Lee’s *School Daze*, for example, portrays tensions in the student body of a fictional all-black college—tensions that include strong differences of opinion on the issue of whether the college should divest its holdings in companies that do business in South Africa. In 1987, when the film was made, this issue was certainly a historical reality on many college campuses. At the end of *School Daze*, the main

character rouses the whole campus early in the morning by ringing a bell and shouting "Wake up! Wake up!" His antagonist throughout the film, a cynical and exploitative frat boy, approaches and faces him, implausibly weeping. Both turn to look at the camera and, through the camera, at the audience. "Please, wake up," the main character says, and an alarm clock rings. This scene telegraphs to most viewers that the film has a point to make—an "argument," if you will—and that point clearly has to do, in part, with the historical reality of South African apartheid. By Nichols's definition, *School Daze* would appear to be a documentary. Obviously, though, most viewers do not think of it as one.

Nichols tries to solve this problem by saying that fiction films that refer to or represent reality do so "metaphorically." Neorealism, for example, "presents a world *like* the historical world and asks that we view it, and experience the viewing of it, *like* the viewing, and experience, of history itself."¹¹ This explanation does nothing to illuminate the ending of *School Daze*, however, which points to historical reality without resembling it in the least and without explicitly comparing it to anything else.

Compare this to the beginning of Wiseman's *High School* (1968), in which the ugly brick facade of Philadelphia's Northeast High is shot from a passing car in a way that makes it look like a factory. The sequence ends with a lingering shot of the back of a delivery truck that says "Penn Maid Products." All the while on the soundtrack, presumably from the car radio, Otis Redding sings "sitting on the dock of the bay, wasting time. . . ." If the reference to reality in *School Daze* is a metaphor and the reference to reality in this sequence is not, Nichols fails to make clear how and why this is so.

Carl Plantinga calls on the philosophy of art of Nicholas Wolterstorff to suggest a more illuminating way to distinguish between the way in which allegorical fiction films like *School Daze* refer to reality and the way that documentaries like *High School* do.¹² Wolterstorff suggests that all representational works, including both documentaries and fiction films, "project a world." This world is an imaginary one since, being the product of a work of art, it is the expression of someone's imagination (even though it may be his or her imagination of reality). Like the world of everyday experience, it can consist of things, events, people, causes and effects, categories, general laws, and so forth. In a given projected world, any or all of these things can be lumped together under the term "a state of affairs." A representational work of art, then, can be said to project certain states of affairs. This argument is so far fairly uncontroversial, even though the terminology is novel.

Wolterstorff claims that a world or state of affairs can be projected with various "stances." A storyteller typically takes a "fictive" stance. "To take up the fictive stance toward some state of affairs is not to *assert* that the state of affairs is true, is not to *ask* whether it is true, is not to *request* that it be made true, is not to *wish* that it were true. It is simply to invite us to consider a state of affairs."¹³ The purpose is simply to show or describe a world, to *present* it, not to make claims about it. In contrast, an "assertive" stance toward some state of affairs does make claims about it. It claims, specifically, that a certain state of affairs is or was so. Plantinga

suggests that just such a stance—an “assertive” stance—distinguishes documentaries from fiction films. Like fiction films, he says, documentaries present a world for our consideration. Unlike fiction films, they make claims about it.

Here there is a possible point of dispute. An “assertive stance” cannot be put into a text by the producer, once for all time. It is not something that is built into texts at all. For example, there is nothing about the form or style of the opening sequence of *High School* that sets it apart from similar-looking sequences in low-budget fiction films. In fact, the selfsame sequence could in principle be used to begin a work of fiction. So, rather than saying that a documentary makes assertions, we need to say that a documentary is *perceived* to make assertions. Whether or not a text is perceived to make assertions is partly a matter of conventions (e.g., whether the text looks like a documentary is supposed to look) and partly a matter of the discursive context (e.g., how the distributor labels and describes the program). This is how Plantinga sidesteps the intentionalist implications of Wolterstorff’s theory.

Let us return to the problem of how to distinguish an allegorical fiction film, like *School Daze*, from a documentary, like *High School*. An assertive stance is not the exclusive domain of documentaries. Fiction can also take an assertive stance toward the states of affairs it projects, as Plantinga points out. Jesus’s parables and Aesop’s fables are two of the examples he gives. These imply or state outright that they have a point to make—an argument or “moral” that has some bearing on reality. But there is a difference between such assertions, Plantinga claims, and the kind of assertions that characterize documentaries. When fiction makes assertions about reality, it proposes an analogy or similarity between a projected state of affairs and the real world. In contrast, a documentary asserts that a projected state of affairs is *true* in the real world. Fiction can make assertions of similarity, but documentaries make assertions of *truth*. Or, as Plantinga puts it, fictional films may assert or imply broad artistic truths. “Documentary films may also assert broad, artistic truths, but they in addition assert that the particular states of affairs represented actually occurred.”¹⁴

The “Wake up! Wake up!” at the end of *School Daze* is at the same time a call to action in the historical world and an assertion that states of affairs portrayed earlier in the film are similar to states of affairs in the historical world. But it is not a truth claim. *High School* makes some of the same kind of claims, such as the implied claim that Northeast High is *like* a factory. But unlike *School Daze*, *High School* also makes specific truth claims: that the Penn Maid truck was not “planted” in the scene but really happened to be driving by; that the Otis Redding song actually played on the radio at some point during the filming, etc.¹⁵ It is these latter claims—things in the film that, on the basis of convention, are perceived to be *truth* claims—that make *High School* a documentary, according to Plantinga.

Who Cares about Truth Claims? Plantinga’s distinction between documentary and allegorical fiction nicely clears up what Nichols probably means by saying that fiction refers to reality metaphorically. Plantinga’s claim that documentaries make

truth claims also corresponds closely to Nichols's claim that documentaries make "arguments" about historical reality. I am not persuaded, however, that people really make sense of documentaries in the way that Plantinga and Nichols imply, at least not all of the time. People do not always appear to interpret documentaries as "arguments." In fact, they sometimes appear to be indifferent or even completely oblivious to any truth claims the documentaries may be making. (This is precisely why some theorists regard traditional documentaries to be especially insidious in advancing ideologies.)

Consider an example: the final scene of the first episode of Ken Burns's *The Civil War* (1991). This scene quotes at length from a sentimental love letter from a soldier named Sullivan Ballou to his wife, Sarah, written just before the soldier's death at the Battle of Bull Run:

If I do not return, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I loved you, nor that when my last breath escapes me on the battlefield, it will whisper your name. . . . Oh Sarah, if the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen around those they love, I shall always be with you. . . . Always, always. And when the soft breeze fans your cheek, it shall be my breath, or the cool air, your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by.

During this reading, a melancholy tune, "Ashokan Farewell," plays on fiddle and guitar in the background. The image track shows a series of portraits of soldiers with their wives. On a couple of these, the camera lingers on the touching hands of the couple before tilting up to reveal their faces. Following these portraits is a group of present-day shots of Civil War cannons, framed in silhouette against a red sunset. As the narrator reads, "And when the soft breeze fans your cheek, it shall be my breath," a chain dangling from one of the cannons waves slowly back and forth against the crimson sky.

This scene generated a flood of responses—many times more than any other moment in the eleven-hour series.¹⁶ Why this scene, in particular? It has nothing to do with the "arguments" or "truth claims" made in the scene, since those are ordinary and trivial. The scene does make and imply truth claims, to be sure, such as "there was an actual person named Sullivan Ballou who died at the First Battle of Bull Run" and "this is an authentic letter." But these are not what viewers pay attention to. What they remark about the scene is how moving and poignant it is, how it stirs up their sentiments, how it reminds them of their own loved ones, how it makes them weep.

This scene seems to depend for its effects on something besides "argument." It seems to rely on melodrama, on sentiment, on the emotional resonance that Sullivan Ballou's letter has for viewers. One might say that instead of stressing the syntagmatic connections between elements—the horizontal links: sequence, logic, cause and effect, and so forth—this scene emphasizes the paradigmatic dimension, piling meaning upon meaning to create a kind of emotional depth. In this scene, which many viewers held to be exemplary of what made the whole series interesting and special as a documentary, this rhetorical operation seems to be far more crucial and certainly quite different from what Nichols calls argument.

There is no doubt that the scene does have a certain persuasive force. There are many ways in which it successfully manipulates viewer responses and can be perceived to advance hidden agendas. For example, the melancholy music seems designed to wring emotions from viewers. The sentimental letter, the romantic portraits, and the arty shots of cannons in the sunset all tend to romanticize war. The notion of noble sacrifice implicit in this scene seems intended to stir nationalistic sentiments, as well. All of these features might be said to work in quasi-argumentational fashion. Still, attention to these quasi-argumentational features is nothing like the typical response reflected in reviews and letters to the producer. The typical response is evidently not to approach the text as a rhetorical construct (as film scholars are wont to do) but to see it as something else entirely.

However one might wish to construe the term *argument*—as a series of explicit propositions, as an implicit stance, as the assertion of historicity, etc.—it appears that viewers do not, in general, interpret the love-letter scene as an argument. The typical reading is closer to that of melodramatic fiction. It seems to involve imaginary involvement or “identification” with the soldier anticipating his death or with the wife reading this letter from her late husband. It prompts thoughts about viewers’ own dear ones or, occasionally, reflections on the heroism of soldiers or the tragedy of war. Viewers who respond to this scene in such a fashion do not appear to look for or examine or even particularly care about the truth claims or arguments it may make.¹⁷

On the other hand, viewers seem to *assume* that the scene is telling the truth, even though they do not pay attention to its particular truth claims. This assumption is precisely what makes it possible for viewers to ignore the truth claims. It is what makes it possible for them to focus on the melodrama in the scene rather than on its historical arguments. The assumption that the film is telling the truth also serves to validate their emotional responses to the scene. If the letter were presumed to be a fake, its emotional impact would no doubt be considerably diminished. In fact, a small controversy did arise when it was discovered that the letter quoted in the scene is actually just one of several differently worded “copies” of a letter for which no original could be found.¹⁸

So, I hypothesize that the assumption that documentaries in general “tell the truth” (or are supposed to) precedes and lies beneath the interpretation of particular documentaries, *even though people may make sense of a documentary in altogether different terms*—as melodrama, for example. In any event, it seems clear that viewers do not ordinarily regard the love-letter scene from *The Civil War* as a kind of argument and they do not ordinarily look for or attend to its truth claims.

It is therefore not quite accurate to suggest, as Nichols and Plantinga do, that documentaries are films that are perceived to make arguments or truth claims about historical reality, because they are not—at least not all of the time. It is more correct to say that documentaries are *presumed* to be truthful, even though considerations about the veracity of particular assertions may play little role in how viewers actually make sense of them.

A neater way to say this might be that a documentary is any film, video, or TV program that could, in principle, be perceived to lie. I suggest that this is more than a handy heuristic for the purposes of analysis; it actually conforms to the heuristic that people carry around in their heads. It does not produce a nice, neat, sharply defined set of texts but a fuzzy-edged, somewhat flexible one like the mental category “documentary” that we actually go by. Is the reenactment of a kidnapping on *A Current Affair* a documentary? That depends. It does not depend on whether it makes assertions or arguments. It does not depend upon whether or not it actually “tells the truth.” It depends on whether it is perceived in such a way that it makes sense to ask, “*Might* it be lying?” I propose that the applicability of this question, “*Might* it be lying?” is what distinguishes documentaries, and nonfiction in general, from fiction.

No Lies. If this definition seems familiar, it is no doubt because Umberto Eco defines a sign in almost the same terms. A sign, he writes, is “in principle . . . everything which can be used in order to lie.”¹⁹ This is an intriguing definition of a sign but I think a mistaken one. After all, a stop sign, the Greek letter π , and a white T-bird convertible are all signs, yet it is extremely difficult to imagine scenarios in which any of these might be said to lie. How can a stop sign be used to lie, for example? A statement *about* a stop sign can lie, like “this sign means go.” But if you tell someone that a stop sign means go and then use the sign to signal them to go, you have not actually used it to lie. You may have lied *about* the stop sign, but you have not lied *with* it. A stop sign cannot lie because a stop sign does not claim to tell the truth. It just is.

The same thing applies to pictures. A painting is not true or false, it just is. The painting might be accompanied by a false caption; it might be an imaginative rendering or even a forgery. Still, the painting itself can hardly be said to lie because a painting itself does not claim to tell the truth. Semiotician Sol Worth makes this point quite convincingly in a delightful essay called “Pictures Can’t Say Ain’t.”²⁰

Worth points out that, unlike words, pictures cannot negate. With words, you can say, “This is not a . . .” or “It is not the case that. . .” But try to make a picture that says, for instance, “This is not a dog” or “It is not the case that this is my spouse.” The only way to do it is by embellishing the picture with words or with conventional graphic symbols. As Worth says, “There is no pictorial means that a painter has of indicating that a color, a shape, or an object is something, or anything, else. All that pictures can show is what *is*—on the picture surface.”²¹

Consider one of Worth’s examples. Imagine that I superimpose a photograph of a senator who claims not to know a certain gangster onto a photograph of that gangster dining with his cronies so that it looks as though the senator is toasting the gangster. What I have produced is a fake, not a lie. Granted, I can lie with the picture. If I send it around to the newspapers, implying that it is genuine, I am using the picture to lie. But the picture itself does not lie. It corresponds in all respects to what it would look like if the senator had, in fact, been there. What

would the senator say when confronted with the photograph? “That’s a lie!?” No. He would say, “That’s a *fake!*”—a fake that is being used to corroborate a lie. As Worth points out, “We say of verbal statements that they are ‘not true’ or are ‘false,’ or even are ‘full of baloney.’ We rarely if ever, in ethnographic fact, talk that way about pictures.”²²

It is no more than a social convention—a custom—that photographs are supposed to record historical actualities. In the early days of the movies, historical events were regularly restaged for the camera, usually transparently so. One example is an 1899 Vitagraph short, *Raising Old Glory over Morro Castle*, which depicts part of the actual ceremony in which Spain ceded its sovereignty over Cuba. The film shows an American flag going up in front of what is patently a painting of Morro Castle—and a very poor painting, at that.²³ Audiences apparently did not mind.

It is *not* just a social convention, however, that “pictures can’t say ain’t.” It is the nature of pictures. Even though a picture can depict what is not and never was, like a senator toasting a gangster he has never met, a picture has no means of expressing what it does not depict. So, as Worth says, “since pictures do not have the formal capability of expressing propositions of negation, it follows that pictures cannot be treated as meaningful on a dimension of truth and falsity. If pictures cannot depict the proposition that something is not so, or is not the case, it would hardly be reasonable to suggest that pictures are designed to depict only those things that *are* the case.”²⁴ What pictures depict is only what *is*, in the picture—even though that could very well be something imaginary, like the starship *Enterprise* zooming through the Milky Way, or something untrue, like an honest senator toasting a gangster. Pictures constitute a “reality” of their own. In the words of Wolterstorff, they “project a world.”

This is not to say, nor does Worth say, that pictures cannot be *used* to lie or *perceived* to lie. To the contrary. As I pointed out, if I distribute a composite photograph of a senator toasting a gangster whom he has actually never met, I am surely lying—by implication if not explicitly. The reason is that people in our culture are very familiar with the mechanical means by which photographs are created. Even though the technologies for producing “trick” or “fake” photographs are also becoming increasingly well known, these technologies can make it virtually impossible for even a sophisticated viewer to distinguish a fake photograph from an authentic one. Accordingly, it is usually considered to be unacceptable—a kind of lie—to mislead people by circulating a fake photograph without explicitly stating that it is fake. Recall the flap that *TV Guide* created some years ago by superimposing the dieting Oprah Winfrey’s head onto Ann-Margret’s body for its cover photo. Had scissors marks been evident, no one would have complained. The scandal in this case was that the fakery was too good to be obvious.²⁵ The presumption that photographically produced images “tell the truth” is a very powerful one in our society. Yet there is nothing in the images themselves that makes this so. Just consider how easily we put that presumption aside when we go to the movies.

The point is that what makes a photograph or any other picture “lie” is not something in a picture but something extrinsic to it. In the case of the Oprah/Ann-Margret photograph, this extrinsic factor was readers’ assumption (usually correct, but in this case mistaken) that photographs in journalistic publications are not contrived or faked. In another instance it might be a false caption or label—an express verbal statement that leads one to draw false conclusions, like “Oprah’s dramatic diet!”

It is not self-evident that what applies to pictures applies to *moving* pictures. Movies are, after all, full of words. Because they are full of words, they tend to carry labels with them in a way that photographs ordinarily do not. A movie can say, “This is a filmed record of actual events” or, for that matter, “The characters in this movie have no resemblance to actual people, living or dead.” Such statements are analogous to the caption of a photograph, and there is no question that they can “lie” or at least be false. But outside of credit sequences, such explicit metatextual labels are rare in fiction films, completely absent in *High School*, and unusual even in very wordy documentaries like Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series (1942–1945). For the most part, like pictures, movies—even “documentary” movies—are devoted simply to “projecting a world.” This applies to the bulk of their editing, to their movement, their dialogue, and their music. It applies even to express verbal propositions like, “A week before the Battle of Bull Run, Sullivan Ballou, a major in the Second Rhode Island Volunteers, wrote home to his wife in Smithfield.” Although viewers may assume this statement is a true one, there is nothing about its form that distinguishes it from fiction.

In short, Worth’s arguments about pictures apply to everything in movies that does not have the character of an express metatextual caption or label. What a movie typically does when it represents a space, action, or event is no different from what a photograph does when it depicts an object or scene. It “projects a world.”

The point here, again, is not that movies cannot, in effect, lie. There is no question that they can. The point is that when viewers perceive movies to lie (or, for that matter, to “tell the truth”), that perception is with few exceptions a product of the metatextual label or interpretive framework that they apply to the text, not a product of the form of the text per se.

Admittedly, the form of the text can prompt viewers to “frame” it in a particular way. (“Framing” is a term used by sociolinguists to describe the process of applying a metatextual label or interpretive framework to a discourse.)²⁶ For example, a jiggly camera, poor lighting, and bad sound suggest, “This is cinema *vérité*.” Still, there is nothing about the form of such footage that *demand*s that it be framed in a particular fashion. There is nothing in the form of *School Daze* that prevents viewers from framing it in a way that poses the question, “Might it be lying?” One might wonder, for example, whether Spike Lee *really* directed the film or whether it is *actually* Larry Fishburne in a particular scene or just a stand-in. Conversely, there is nothing about the form of *The Civil War* that requires viewers to pose the question, “Might it be lying?” One might as easily regard the

film as an engaging melodrama—a “story”—to which the question “Might it be lying?” does not or need not apply. A work of fiction might, on formal grounds, be virtually indistinguishable from *The Civil War*. Consider, for example, how *Citizen Kane* incorporates a take-off of *The March of Time* so studiously faithful that, outside of its fictional context, it might be mistaken for the genuine article.

So, it is not the representational or formal aspects of a movie that determine whether viewers “frame” it as a documentary but rather a combination of what viewers want and expect from a text and what they suppose or infer about it on the basis of situational cues and textual features. In other words, the question that distinguishes documentaries, “Might it be lying?” is one that is posed by *viewers*, not texts. In short, documentary must be seen, in the last analysis, not as a kind of text but as a kind of “reading.”

One movie demonstrates exceptionally well how true this is. It is a fake documentary entitled, appropriately enough, *No Lies* (Mitchell Block, 1973).²⁷ *No Lies* is a fiction film inasmuch as it is scripted and meticulously rehearsed and all the characters in the film are played by actors. It is, however, on the surface virtually indistinguishable from a cinema vérité documentary. The film portrays a filmmaker trying to record spontaneous events as they unfold and, as with all vérité films, we see these events through the filmmaker’s camera.

The filmmaker, supposedly a production student working on an assignment, is filming a woman friend in her apartment as she puts on makeup and gets ready to go out to a movie. The woman is understandably at somewhat of a loss for things to say. After a few minutes, she lets it drop that she was raped the previous evening. The filmmaker (who like any good documentarian is quick to exploit a moment of potential drama) proceeds to cajole, challenge, and cross-examine her to get her to elaborate on the incident. Despite the woman’s attempts to change the subject, the filmmaker badgers her about it relentlessly—saying, for example, that he doubts her story because she seems so cavalier about it—until she breaks down. Then, instead of apologizing, he justifies himself. He refuses to turn off the camera, despite her repeated entreaties, until she finally leaves the apartment.

The film scrupulously copies the look of a vérité documentary. The camera is handheld and the camerawork is a bit awkward, the rooms are unevenly lit, there is no nondiegetic sound, and the film consists of what appears to be a single unbroken long take. There are actually a couple of seams where the filmmakers stop the camera to change magazines, but they are so well hidden that you do not see them unless you look for them carefully. The acting in the film is impeccable—as naturally self-conscious (or self-consciously natural) as a “real” vérité performance. The only conspicuous indication that this film is not really a documentary is the credit sequence, at the end of the film, which identifies the characters in the film as actors.

So many things about this film label it a documentary—from the title, to comments made by the characters, to the rigorous adherence to documentary conventions—that viewers tend to overlook or ignore the contradictory end credits. When they are told that the film is, indeed, a fiction film—scripted, rehearsed,

and acted out—their reading of the film undergoes a remarkable transformation. The film produces dramatically different kinds of response when viewers see it as a fiction film than when they regard it as a documentary. And since it is the self-same footage, it cannot be the form or style or “content” of the film that determines which of the two ways it is read.

When people first watch *No Lies*, without having been told beforehand that it is a fake documentary or a fiction film, they become visibly disturbed at the distress to which the filmmaker is subjecting the woman. They report feeling very sorry for the woman and extremely angry at the filmmaker in the film, whom they assume to be the creative agent of the film, as well. When they are persuaded that the film is, indeed, a fiction, much of their anger is displaced from the filmmaker in the film to the filmmaker *behind* the film. Since the filmmaker in the film is just an actor playing a role, it is no longer appropriate to be angry at him for being cruel to the woman. One can still be angry at his *character*, of course, but the target of the anger has shifted. Even though the anger is still genuine, it is now directed at a person who is regarded as imaginary, rather than at one who is supposed to be real. Besides that anger, though, viewers now feel angry at having been duped. Worth calls this “media rage”;²⁸ it is like the anger people felt at being taken in by the Oprah/Ann-Margret photograph. This anger is directed at the perpetrator of the hoax—in the case of *No Lies*, the person who orchestrated the film.

Viewers’ anger at having been deceived shows that they must have initially supposed the film to be making certain truth claims. They must have attributed to the film the implicit claim that “things in this film really are what they seem”—a claim that is rarely if ever attributed to fiction. If *No Lies* were a genuine documentary rather than a fake one, the question of whether it is lying might never arise in viewers’ minds. Still, you can see how, in principle, it might. The assumed claim that “things in this film really are what they seem” opens the film up to questions like, Is the woman making up this incident (as the filmmaker in the film suggests more than once)? Are there important aspects of this story that the film does not show? And (although this seems unimaginable on first viewing) could the woman in the movie be merely playing a part?

Once viewers know that *No Lies* is a fiction film, a very different set of questions takes hold. The question “Might it be lying?” still pertains to how the film is labeled, but it no longer applies to the world projected in the film. If the woman is an actress, it is completely irrelevant to the story whether or not she was raped in reality. The account she gives of being raped is a fiction, not a lie; a portrayal, not a truth claim.

Viewers might still ask whether the portrayal is true in a general sense. Does the woman’s account represent the experiences of rape victims in general? Is verité documentary filmmaking *in fact* a kind of rape? Is the relatively trivial experience of being tricked by a film *really* at all like the life-shattering experience of rape? Still, questions like these about the general truth of the depiction are of a different order than the question “Is it lying?” The difference is that *No Lies*

does not *claim* to represent the experiences of rape victims in general. It portrays a specific instance of rape and leaves generalizations to the viewers. It does not *claim* that verité documentary is like rape. It sets up an obvious comparison but lets viewers draw their own conclusions.

Because *No Lies* does not make express claims about general truths, it makes no sense to ask whether it might be lying about those general truths. If the woman's account of being raped were completely atypical and were to lead viewers to draw false conclusions about rape in general, that still could not ordinarily be considered a lie or falsehood because, again, what the film represents is a single instance, not a generality. The film gives no express instructions about what conclusions viewers should draw from the one instance it depicts. Because the film cannot be said to lie at this level, it is not a documentary at this level, according to the definition I have proposed.

But there is another level at which the film remains a documentary. Even when viewers know that *No Lies* is a fiction, they retain a very strong sense that it makes untrue claims. It is not just a novel fiction film; it is a *fake* documentary. It lies about what it is. It assigns itself a false label. So even though the question "Might it be lying?" no longer applies to what is represented in the film, it still obviously applies with regard to the question "What kind of film is this?" On this plane, *No Lies* is still a documentary, even though it portrays an entirely fictional scenario. It is a fiction film about rape, but it is a documentary about documentaries. I suggest that this, in fact, corresponds to the way most viewers interpret the film.

According to most definitions of documentary, *No Lies* must either be a documentary or not be one. This simply does not conform to the way people experience the film. In terms of how viewers actually make sense of it, it would be more accurate to say that *No Lies* is *first* a documentary and then *both* a documentary and not one. At first viewing (for people who do not know the film's secret), *No Lies* is labeled as a documentary, perceived as a documentary, and interpreted as a documentary. For all intents and purposes, it *is* a documentary. Once viewers realize how the film was made, it is read on two different planes: as a fiction film about rape, on one level, and, on another level, as a fake documentary—a film that makes certain truth claims that it paradoxically reveals to be false.

The example of *No Lies* shows how the same film can be "framed" either as documentary or as fiction and how different the resulting readings will be. It also shows how the definition that I have proposed for documentaries—namely, any film that could, in principle, be said to lie—applies to an extraordinarily difficult instance: a well-faked documentary that first hides and then reveals its sleight of hand. Finally, I think it shows that the question we really ought to ask is not what but *when* is a documentary?

When Is a Documentary? Documentaries are characterized by a particular interpretive "frame," I have argued, in which it makes sense to ask, "Might the text

be lying?" The question remains, When or under what circumstances does this frame apply? How do people know when it is appropriate to frame a movie as a documentary?

I have already alluded to two kinds of *situational cues* that are especially important in signaling viewers to frame a movie as a documentary. The first consists of explicit verbal labels, like explanatory title sequences and program notes in *TV Guide*. The second consists of any of a host of things in or around a text that trigger viewers' "knowledge" about the real world and about discourses aimed at illuminating it, like recognizably "authentic" film footage of a historic figure like John F. Kennedy and the wobbly camera that says, "This is cinema vérité." Besides these situational cues, viewers' aims and interests obviously play a role in determining what kind of frame they apply to a discourse. For instance, despite all of the things that ordinarily mark *School Daze* as a fiction film, it is quite easy for anyone who is interested in, say, Larry Fishburne's development as an actor to regard it as a "document."

What I characterize here as situational cues, Noël Carroll has previously called "indexes." "Producers, writers, directors, distributors, and exhibitors index their films as nonfiction . . .," he writes. "We don't characteristically go to films about which we must guess whether they are fiction or nonfiction. They are generally indexed one way or the other."²⁹ Plantinga picks up and elaborates on this idea. He writes that because a film is indexed publicly, how it is indexed becomes a "property or element of the text within its socio-cultural milieu" and not merely the product of a spectator's inferences.³⁰ He argues, in effect, that even if documentary is a kind of "reading," as I have proposed, it is so firmly attached to particular texts in any given interpretive community that there is nothing to be gained by defining it as a kind of reading. Moreover, Plantinga maintains, even though a spectator must decide how a film is indexed, because it is culture that indexes films, a spectator is capable of being mistaken. So, if you were to interpret *High School* as a fiction film or *School Daze* as a documentary, your interpretation would be "wrong," plain and simple.³¹

Not wrong, I would reply, just unusual and unconventional. After all, *School Daze* is, indeed, a documentary of Larry Fishburne's acting style around 1987. And it is possible to watch *High School* as an interesting, quasi-fictional commentary on high schools in general (in much the same way that *School Daze* is a commentary on colleges), without much worrying about how accurately it depicts the particulars of Northeast High.

Plantinga suggests that all one needs to do to adequately define documentary is determine which texts are indexed as documentary within a given sociocultural milieu, and then one has a de facto definition. One has specified the common usage of the term, just as good dictionary definitions are supposed to do. In fact, Plantinga claims, one has specified precisely what we collectively believe documentaries to be.

Although this might seem to be a sensible and straightforward way to pin down what we collectively believe documentaries to be, I would argue that it has

three fatal flaws. First, as I pointed out at the start of this essay, determining which texts are indexed as documentary in our culture and which are not is not merely tricky, it is impossible. Texts like *Daughter Rite* and *No Lies*, and even well-known and popular texts like *JFK* and episodes of *A Current Affair*, are not neatly indexed in one way or the other. They are ambiguously indexed or indexed in a way that allows them to be read as either documentary or fiction or intermittently as one then the other. Plantinga suggests using a “weighted global average” to determine whether texts like these should be called documentaries.³² But, at this point, the problem of definition has become largely an academic exercise. Moreover, it is an exercise that can lead one to trivialize the complexity of marginal, ambiguous, and mixed texts.

Second, Plantinga’s approach to definition ignores the extent to which people apply frames like “documentary” in variable ways, depending upon their changing aims and interests. People have considerable choice in how to interpret or “frame” any discourse. It is easy, as I have pointed out, to regard *School Daze* as a documentary of sorts if one asks questions of the text that invite such a stance. Conversely, it is quite possible to “read” *The Civil War* as though the whole text were make-believe, if one is so inclined.

Finally, Plantinga’s approach writes off certain unconventional readings and unusual applications of texts as “wrong.” Aside from the political implications of doing this, it is obviously not a very practical approach to the problem of how people really do make sense of documentaries. If one’s primary concern is to determine which texts belong in the canon of documentary and which do not, then it may be necessary to discard idiosyncratic readings. If, on the other hand, one wishes to establish the particular ways in which people see documentaries as special and distinct, it is important not to discount unusual or ambivalent “readings.” This is especially so because, as *No Lies* amply demonstrates, the label documentary is not necessarily attached to texts in any fixed way. Nor is it attached to every element in a text. The ending of *Schindler’s List* (1993), for example, is clearly set apart as something different from the rest of the film—something special: “documentary.” So, if one wishes to analyze documentaries as an actual form of discourse rather than as an abstract category of text, the real problem is not how to categorize whole texts but how people make sense of those particular moments and elements of films that they frame as documentary—*whenever* that may be.

Nevertheless, Plantinga and Carroll are quite correct in pointing out that there is a high degree of agreement among viewers of movies in our culture about when the label documentary applies and when it does not or, to put it differently, about when viewers are supposed to frame a film as nonfiction. The reason is that in almost every movie-viewing situation, there is a plethora of conventional cues that signal how the discourse is supposed to be framed. Texts generally come to us “indexed” in one way or another, even though viewers always have the option to ignore a text’s “indexing” and to appropriate it in some other fashion.

It would be interesting to explore further the question of just what kind of situational cues tend to “index” a text as a documentary in our culture. In fact,

there are already a great many excellent studies of the conventional forms and techniques of documentaries that, in effect, do just that. But the question that has been neglected, and the one to which I have been devoting my attention here, is the question of what it is that distinguishes or characterizes the frame that people bring to texts that they regard as documentaries. This is something different from what “indexes” a discourse as documentary in the first place, even though the “frame” and the “indexes” tend to be attached to the same texts.

Some texts are almost invariably framed in a way that precludes asking true or false questions about them. In ordinary circumstances, it almost never makes sense to ask of a Georgia O’Keeffe painting of a skull on a rose whether it is true or false. Magritte’s painting of a pipe with the caption “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” whimsically makes this same point. The same thing also applies to the illustrations in story books and to romance novels. In addition, it almost invariably applies to fiction films—even fiction films with an obvious “message” or “moral” like *School Daze*.

The ending of *School Daze* obviously *refers* to the historical reality of apartheid in South Africa. It *asserts* certain things, too, such as a similarity between college cliquishness and racial prejudice. It even makes an *argument*—that we all have prejudices that we need to wake up to. It nevertheless makes no sense to say that the scene might be lying. *School Daze* is also full of wildly implausible events, like a musical dance number in which two factions of coeds act out a confrontation over hair styles. Still, no matter how fantastic and far-fetched a scene like this might seem, it would again be inappropriate to suggest that it might be lying. Because of the way *School Daze* is framed (under ordinary circumstances) the question “Might it be lying?” just does not pertain.

The world portrayed in Wiseman’s *High School* is no less imaginary than the world portrayed in *School Daze*. It is a highly selective and constructed account of particular situations and events. In many respects, viewers treat *High School* just like a fiction film, even though it is clearly “indexed” as a documentary. This extends even to many of those conventional functions of the text that Nichols claims characterize documentaries. So, for example, *High School* can be taken to *refer* to actual authoritarian teaching practices, to *assert* that Northeast High is like a factory, and to *argue* that what is true of Northeast High is true of high schools in general. Still, these are generally taken to represent a point of view, just like the point of view represented in *School Daze* that college cliquishness is in some respects like apartheid. The question “Might the film be lying?” does not really apply to such claims. Even if someone “knows” on the basis of personal experience that Northeast High is not at all like a factory, he or she would not ordinarily say that *High School* is lying by implying otherwise, just that it is wrong. On this level—the level that has to do with the imputed “point” or “moral” of the film—*High School* is read in the same way as the last scene of *School Daze*. That is evidently not what distinguishes it as a documentary.

But there is another level at which the question “Might it be lying?” clearly does apply to *High School*. Because of how the film is “indexed,” viewers generally

assume that the representations made in the film are *really* what they seem to be. They assume, for example, that the building shown in the opening sequence is really Northeast High and not some factory down the street. They assume that the Penn Maid Products truck in the scene just happens to have been there and was not planted there by Wiseman to make a point. Assumptions like these make the question “Might it be lying?” very relevant. Such assumptions are absolutely central to how one interprets *High School*. That is what makes *High School* a documentary. It is true that one might make similar assumptions with regard to *School Daze*. One might assume, for instance, that the actor in a particular scene is really Larry Fishburne and not a stand-in. Still, in contrast to *High School*, such assumptions ordinarily have no bearing on how viewers interpret *School Daze*.

I have tried to show that the question “Might it be lying?” is the key to figuring out whether and when a film is perceived as a documentary.³³ I do not mean to suggest that this is the only question worth considering. On the contrary. Once we have established that people regard and make sense of *High School* as a documentary, there are all kinds of other questions about it that are worth considering. It is worth considering how viewers might also read the film as an allegory or as melodrama. It is worth considering how fictional techniques work in the film to “project a world” and how this projected world promotes certain inferences and generalizations about the historical world. It is worth considering how the film marshals “evidence” to develop an argument and persuade viewers of its claims. And it is certainly worth considering how power circulates through such a discourse—how it can work to naturalize or lend authority to particular points of view. “Might it be lying?” is by no means the only question we need to ask if we want to understand how documentaries work. I suggest, however, that it is the only question we need to ask to determine whether, or *when*, a film is working like a documentary.

One could still maintain that “to work like” a documentary and to *be* a documentary are two different things. There are, after all, films that we call fiction, like *JFK*, that are widely supposed to make truth claims, and films that we call documentaries, like Robert Flaherty’s *Louisiana Story* (1950), that unfold just like fiction. Still, as I have argued throughout this essay, there is no such thing as a text that is intrinsically and necessarily a documentary. It is a particular kind of reading frame that makes a text a documentary. In other words, a documentary is what people are accustomed to make of it, no more and no less. What they are accustomed to make of it, I have tried to demonstrate, is a film or video or television program that they *presume* to make truth claims. When *JFK* is watched in this way, I maintain that it in effect becomes a documentary. When *Louisiana Story* is not, it in effect becomes a fiction film.

One might also point out that this does not give us a fixed and determinate body of texts to classify as documentaries. That does not matter. The interesting and important problem is not how to absolutely define what is actually a rather indefinite body of texts but, rather, to discover how people make sense of a particular kind of discourse that they experience as special and discrete—namely,

documentary discourse. Still, as I have allowed, this does describe a group of texts that is conventionally fairly stable. The situations in which *School Daze* is actually read as a documentary or *High School* as a fiction film are extremely rare. It is also unusual that we are genuinely puzzled or confused about whether to read a particular text as documentary or as fiction. As Carroll points out, we most often know even before seeing a text how it is “indexed.” Even with texts in those monstrous borderline categories of “docudrama” and “infotainment,” which include programs like *A Current Affair* and the enormously successful miniseries *Roots* (1977), the aspects of the texts to which documentary standards apply are very well staked out by convention. Really puzzling films like *Daughter Rite* and *No Lies* are the exceptions that prove the rule.

Notes

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1. “Closely Watched Trains,” *American Film*, November 1985, 19.
2. Richard Meran Barsam maintains, “All documentaries are nonfiction films, but not all nonfiction films are documentaries,” excluding from the category of documentary such things as the evening news. I accept this definition, which accords with common parlance, but I would also extend the arguments I make in this chapter to the evening news, docudramas, and even the “factual” component of “fact-based” fiction films—in short, to any kind of motion picture that viewers regard as, in some sense, nonfictional. Barsam’s quote is from his *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1973), 1.
3. Raymond Spottiswoode, *A Grammar of the Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 284; Barsam, *Nonfiction Film*, 4; William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), xi; Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory & Practice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 216.
4. John Grierson, “The First Principles of Documentary,” in Forsythe Hardy, ed., *Grierson on Documentary* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), 147.
5. William Guynn makes this claim in his recent book *A Cinema of Nonfiction* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990), 17ff. Related arguments against the distinction between fiction and nonfiction are laid out in Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 29–41.
6. Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 139.
7. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 12.
8. I would argue that, in fact, the constituency of viewers *subsumes* the community of practitioners and *defines* the corpus of texts. It defines the corpus of texts since in the case of documentaries (as distinct from the case of duck-billed platypuses) it is precisely the discourse knowledge of viewers that constitutes the category, not qualities intrinsic to the things themselves. Nichols seems to concur with this view (cf. *ibid.*, 24). The constituency of viewers subsumes the community of practitioners, as well, because

- every practitioner is no more than a “reader” herself (or himself). Even though she (or he) may produce a text, she cannot dictate how people will respond to, interpret, and make use of it. All she can do is use her own discourse knowledge to anticipate others’ responses and form her text accordingly.
9. Quotes from *ibid.*, 14, 18, 25, respectively.
 10. *Ibid.*, 110.
 11. *Ibid.*, 170.
 12. Carl Plantinga, “A Theory of Representation in the Documentary Film,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1989, 25–40. The works of Wolterstorff that Plantinga uses most extensively are *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) and *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
 13. Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, 134, quoted in Plantinga, “A Theory of Representation,” 28.
 14. Personal correspondence, dated 27 August 1992.
 15. In fact, the Otis Redding song probably did not play on the radio during the filming. Wiseman says he heard the song every morning during the shoot while driving to the school, which is how he defends adding it during postproduction. Nonetheless, Wiseman’s insistent and exclusive use of what *appears* to be diegetic sound throughout *High School*, including the trick in this scene of making the music sound as though it emanates from the car radio, acts as an implicit truth *claim*. This is also apparent from Wiseman’s later justification of his use of the tune as true to the *experience* of filming, even if not absolutely true to the facts. See Alan Rosenthal’s interview with Wiseman in Rosenthal’s anthology, *The New Documentary in Action: A Casebook in Film Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 73.
 16. This scene is mentioned in fully a third of the reviews of the series; it provoked dozens of inquiries to the sponsoring public television station, according to “Echoes of a Union Major’s Farewell,” *Insight/Washington Times*, November 5, 1990, in *Newsbank FTV* (a microform newspaper clippings collection on the topic of film and television) 128 (1990): G8; and it was mentioned or asked about in 15 percent of an informal sample of 450 of the letters received by the producer surveyed by University of Massachusetts historian David Glassberg, reported at the National Council of Public History annual meeting at Toledo, Ohio, May 1991.
 17. This analysis accords with Michael Renov’s recent argument that documentaries are as much discourses of “desire”—like fiction films—as logical or expository discourses. There is, however, nothing in the four “modalities of desire” Renov describes (to reveal, to persuade, to analyze, and to express) that seems to quite match the impulse I detect in responses to the love-letter scene in *The Civil War*. See “Toward a Poetics of Documentary” in Renov’s anthology, *Theorizing Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12–36.
 18. “129 Years in His Grave, Civil War Major Sullivan Ballou Touches America’s Heart as He Once Touched His Beloved Sarah’s,” *People Weekly*, October 15, 1990, 67.
 19. This is part of Eco’s famous definition of semiotics: “Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be *taken* as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands in for it. Thus *semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie*. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used ‘to tell’ at all. I think that the definition of a ‘theory of the lie’ should be taken as a pretty comprehensive program for a general semiotics.” In *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 7, emphasis in original.

20. In Sol Worth, *Studying Visual Communication* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 162–184.
21. *Ibid.*, 174.
22. *Ibid.*
23. A still from the film along with a description of the celebration it depicts from the *New York Tribune* are reprinted in *Before Hollywood* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1986), 95.
24. Worth, *Studying Visual Communication*, 179.
25. I suspect that part of the pleasure that readers get from journals like the *National Enquirer*—which habitually prints “photographs” of prominent politicians shaking hands with extraterrestrials, 300-pound infants, and the like—lies in trying to figure out whether and how these photographs (and the equally unlikely prose “reports” that accompany them) are faked. This use of photographs flouts the conventions of “serious” journalism but in a way that flaunts its own insouciance. The Oprah/Ann-Margret photograph might have seemed appropriate to people in such a context but not, evidently, on the cover of *TV Guide*.
26. For a definition and an insightful analysis of the way “framing” applies to many different kinds of ordinary discourse, see Erving Goffman’s well-known book, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).
27. *No Lies* is a notorious film but probably not a particularly widely seen one, so it is worth mentioning an illuminating review of the film that describes it in more depth than I can here: Vivian Sobchack, “*No Lies*: Direct Cinema as Rape,” in Rosenthal, ed., *New Challenges for Documentary*, 332–341. *No Lies* is distributed by Direct Cinema Ltd.
28. Worth, *Studying Visual Communication*, 177.
29. Noël Carroll, “From Real to Reel: Entangled in the Nonfiction Film,” *Philosophic Exchange* 14 (1983): 24.
30. Plantinga, “A Theory of Representation,” 32.
31. *Ibid.*, 33. Plantinga’s examples are *Rear Window* and *The Battle of San Pietro*.
32. *Ibid.*, 39. This does some injustice to Plantinga’s argument by oversimplifying it. Plantinga actually argues that this is how *viewers* categorize documentaries. Even if this is to some extent correct, viewers clearly tolerate some ambiguity in assigning such labels which tends to vanish when ambiguous labels are assigned in an absolute way.
33. There is one other alternative theory that deserves to be mentioned, at least in passing. Roger Odin maintains, as I do and for similar reasons, that what distinguishes documentary is a particular mode of reception. He calls this mode of reception (following the French propensity to invent new jargon) a “documentarizing reading.” The essential criterion of such a reading, Odin argues, is “the construction by the reader of an Enunciator which is presupposed to be real.” Odin’s notion of an Enunciator is extremely broad and somewhat idiosyncratic. It is not necessarily a person or people; it is anything that is supposed to be responsible for some aspect of the film. For example, Monument Valley may be deemed one Enunciator of a western to the extent it is supposed to impress itself on the film in a significant way. In the same way, society, historical events, the camera, an institution, or a narrator are all potential Enunciators in a documentarizing reading. There are two considerations that distinguish a documentarizing reading, according to Odin. The first is that the reader must attend to an Enunciator of the film and regard it as significant. The second is that the reader must consider this Enunciator to be “real.” If one watches *School Daze* as a story that (in classical Hollywood fashion) “tells itself,” one is not attributing particular significance to any particular Enunciator and therefore one is not reading it as a documentary. If one regards the movie as the story of a particular fictional character, that character may be seen as the Enunciator, but inasmuch as it is supposed to be an

imaginary or “unreal” character, one is again not reading the movie as a documentary. But if one watches the movie as an expression of Spike Lee’s directorial style, a particular Enunciator (Lee, in this case) is “presupposed” to be both relevant and “real,” and therefore the movie *is* being read as a documentary. Although I agree with Odin’s approach, I find two problems with the way he characterizes the documentary mode of reception. First, he puts too much emphasis on the supposedly “real” origins of documentary elements. Dramatizations and illustrations can be and often are read as documentary moments, irrespective of their “unreal” origins. Radio documentaries, for example, quite often use no original sound whatsoever. Viewers do not necessarily suppose that they do. Still, there is no question that they are regarded as documentaries. Second, a reader can suppose the author of a motion picture to be relevant and real and still regard the movie as a fiction. Modernist fiction films, self-reflexive comedies, experimental films, and some kinds of animation all invite such a reading. When we watch *8½*, for example, we tend to explain the weird plot twists, the odd characters, and the dreamlike sequences by reference to the author, Fellini—a “presumed real Enunciator,” to be sure. Still, that does not necessarily mean we are reading the film as a documentary. We do not regard it as a “record” of Fellini’s intent but rather as a fiction film that is deliberately somewhat obscure. Odin’s essay, “Film documentaire, lecture documentarisante,” appears in *Cinémas et Réalités* (CIEREC, Université de Saint-Etienne) (1984): 263–278.