

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Brian Winston, British Film Institute. *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations*. London: British Film Institute, 1995. 301 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85170-463-0; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-85170-464-7.

Reviewed by Kenneth S. Nolley (Willamette College)
Published on H-Film (January, 1996)

We have, on this list, a particular, ongoing fascination with the problematic relationship between the cinematic image and life—life as we experience it as well as life as it has been experienced by others in the past. And we represent, so far as I can tell, a fertile (and occasionally volatile) combination of different orientations. Many of us are historians by training; some of us are film critics; a few of us were trained as literary critics, but have moved into film criticism; some of us are or have been filmmakers; some of us are philosophers. Most of us are academics, and some of us work as media professionals. This mix means that any discussion of the relationship between the image and life is sure to be fueled by the variety of our various perspectives.

For most of us, Brian Winston's new book should be a fascinating read. Winston sets out to reconsider the history and tradition of representational strategies in documentary—from the early days before Robert Flaherty, through its solidification into an established body of theory and practice under and after John Grierson and the subsequent challenges of verité and direct cinema, to the unnerving current question of whether the photographic image retains any significance as visible evidence whatsoever after the invention of Scitex and Harry—the digital technologies for manipulating photographic images. And he is particularly interested to reinsert ethical concerns into the consideration of the documentary tradition.

Much of Winston's analysis rides on his assertion that the documentary tradition has, from the beginning, been forced between the rocks of idealism and aestheticism. He argues that John Grierson was deeply influenced by the idealist philosophy he found at Glasgow University after WWI; he also traces a strong aestheticism in Grierson's thought which runs back to Ruskin. The first influence allows Grierson and the documentary tradition silently to shape and contextualize material, while the second encourages lack of engagement—

“impotent observation..., the virtually inescapable legacy of the realist documentary down to the present.”

By late in the book, having explored the some of the technological, scientific and legal influences on the post-Griersonian documentary, Winston concludes: “So as the factual film approaches its centenary a number of factors combine to make the ethical position of the documentarist vexed. There is the example of the amoral Victorian artist. There is a technology that positively encourages voyeurism and incorporeal trespass. There is a legal system more interested in property rights than in individuals. There is a political concept of free expression which privileges journalistic communication over other principles of social responsibility. Above all, there is the authority of science which documentarists claim because of their concern with the 'actual.’” All of these vexing challenges to ethical documentary, he would argue, stem from failed and compromised representational strategies.

Winston's conclusion is that if documentary is to be saved, reception is a much more promising field to plow than the field of representation—that a different representational strategy will never get the world up on screen without distortion, but that a different sort of contract between the filmmaker and the audience might allow the documentary to continue to try to talk seriously about actuality without perpetuating the disabling illusion that it has captured actuality on-screen.

Perhaps it is time to say here that Winston, as a long-time teacher of documentary production, approaches his history much more from the perspective of the filmmaker than the critic. This point of view is especially useful in the bulk of his discussion since it always treats the image on the screen as the end result of a set of practical, political, technical, and ethical choices. The ferment and richness he sees and explores is the richness that precedes the image and determines it. And Winston is especially good at tracing the political and ethical compromises that

result from the process.

At the same time, by focusing on the image as an end product rather than as a beginning, Winston tends to imply at times that the ongoing reception of the films he discusses may be as limited as their representational strategies. But the cinema verite movement, the direct cinema movement, the developing tradition of ethnographic filmmaking, and ongoing efforts at politically engaged filmmaking may not all be merely the series of failed strategies he portrays them to be, particularly if the reception of those films has been less simple, less completely determined by the representational strategy than he seems to assume. Perhaps there is more value in the documentary tradition, then, than Winston suggests.

That difference aside, Winston's book is a major addition to the critical conversation on documentary. Most of the important historical writing about documentary film, perhaps best typified by Erik Barnouw's *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (1974), preceded the theoretical discussion of recent years. Winston reminds one of the importance of reconsidering the history of the genre. His argument is unfailingly provocative, thoughtful and informed, and he manages several productive detours into related topics, particularly the development of an ideology of scientific inscription, and the history of evidence in the law. As a result, he has much to say of interest, not only about the history of documentary, but also about the troublingly complex relationship between the cinematic image and the world we inhabit.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Kenneth S. Nolley. Review of Winston, Brian; British Film Institute., *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations*. H-Film, H-Net Reviews. January, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=270>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.