

H-Net Reviews

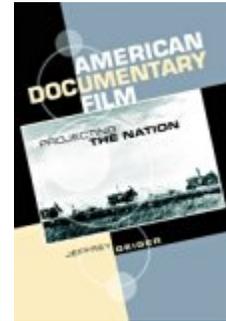
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeffrey Geiger. *American Documentary Film: Projecting the Nation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. xi + 275 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-2147-7; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7486-2148-4.

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Published on H-Nationalism (April, 2013)

Commissioned by Paul Quigley



As Jeffrey Geiger makes clear early on in his new book, *American Documentary Film*, there has long been an implicit assumption that somehow documentary in the United States serves to contest or in some way project an alternative vision of the nation, its ideas, and its philosophical form. That form usually takes the shape of “Hollywood” being seen as consensual, codified, and conservative (ironic considering how often the right-wingers in the United States see the film community as overtly liberal), while documentary is radical, reformist, and even revolutionary. One thing is certain, as the introduction makes clear: documentary does not simply articulate a picture of America, it actively shapes the building of that picture; it does in fact “imagine ... beyond its immediate framework,” as Geiger so eloquently puts it (p. 5).

And that is a theme running through much of this superb book: the story of documentary film in America is not just a story of America itself, but a tale of competing themes and ideology, of mythology indeed. As such, Geiger is at pains to point out that documentary therefore conforms to Bill Nichols’s interpretation of it being fictional; it is part of a line of film that moves along a linear, situated form, and has an understanding of degrees or inclinations of structure and strategy for the medium of film as a whole. This is important considering how often the form has been regarded as operating on a different plane. Indeed documentary’s penchant for difference has seen it held up as the antidote to “mainstream” American film, an alternative and different beast, a cerebral, aesthetic experience that “Hollywood” cinema cannot hope to emulate, the argument goes. Geiger explores how this binary separation has never been easily maintained though, no better demonstrated than in the nar-

rative arcs of films like *The Chair* and *Crisis*, both made in the early 1960s by Drew Associates. Here, the tenterhooks storylines about a death row prisoner and the political battle for desegregation in the South merge Hollywood tension with more than an occasional sense of set-piece staging. But, like a definition of America itself, Geiger explores the notion that through films such as these the country and the documentary are in fact perfect for each other, reflecting as they do “social and historical accretions” rather than operating as clearly “fixed entities” (p. 16). And the book’s journey starts with the “impulse” of early cinema back at the turn of the century, back before the twentieth century became the American century.

Ranging from the influence of the Chicago Exposition of 1893 to the extraordinary visual images capturing the twenty-first-century conflict in Iraq, Geiger’s eight chapter agenda—with case study films attached to each—therefore covers a plethora of tradition in the documentary format. Back in 1893, Chicago’s attraction was in creating a sort of reality for the visiting public in its displays and ephemera, complementing these with a reality of a different kind in the early screenings of short films by Eadweard Muybridge and the like. Thus right from the start, an inquisitive thirst for knowledge of the world, together with a rise in tourism and travel, furnished American documentary with a *modus operandi* every bit the equal of the movie camera’s aesthetic potential, as Geiger astutely points out in his second chapter. And the tremendous strength of this book overall is in the way Geiger mounts documentary within a frame of reference that elucidates these cultural evolutions alongside the popular reaction to film. Robert Flaherty’s work

is centered within the tumult of cultural relativism; the “war films” of Frank Capra, Robert Riskin, and William Wyler redefine the social formations pushing the idea of representational fact to its very limits in the 1940s; while the postmodern approach of Nick Broomfield in the 1980s and 1990s chips away at the edges of object and subject, distance and involvement, manipulation and consolidation of audience engagement.

Arguably the chapter on “direct” cinema or cinema vérité is the most interesting and probing. Geiger not unnaturally questions the validity of the fly-on-the-wall approach when one is in the presence of forces of political power that simply obstruct the natural realism of the genre. Nevertheless whether this was conscious subterfuge that undermined the form is a matter that remains up for debate. Geiger’s assessment of possibly Drew Associates’ most famous film, *Primary* (1960), is instructive in this regard. Did it tell us anything about political candidates on the stump? Possibly not; and maybe the John F. Kennedy aura especially railroaded the film’s intent. But as cameraman D. A. Pennebaker remarked years later, it was also a simple case of showmanship. Kennedy, like Bob Dylan whom Pennebaker later filmed for *Don’t Look Back* (1967), just instinctively knew where the camera was and when it was on. Realism was hard, observed Pennebaker, when the subject was always putting on a show.

And talking of show, by the time we get to the book’s summary it is not surprising that Geiger is inevitably drawn to Michael Moore, and more generally to the host of documentary assessments concerning the Iraqi conflict. As he puts it, in an era where the filmmaker is almost obliged to acknowledge the “ironic limitations and fabrications on offer” in their movies, Moore has been portrayed as a cast-iron case study set in ironic self-juxtaposition to his themes and subjects (p. 219). But Geiger does more than simply rehearse the arguments about, in particular, the legitimacy of a film like *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). He posits the notion that truth, objectification, and reality have themselves become contested terrain in the modern era and that Moore is one who is interested in exploring the limits of these facets through

an almost surrealist cinematic technique in his films. *Fahrenheit*, not unlike Moore’s approach in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Sicko* (2007), presents reality in a dreamlike state at times (the opening fireworks and commentary sequence in the former film set to Jeff Gibbs’s haunting score, for instance) allied to a sense of the absurd mixed with performativity, a performance that is applied to his subject—principally George W. Bush—as well as Moore himself as star, narrator, and interviewer.

Geiger is also clear to pull apart the domestic contextualization of the “war on terror” during the 2000s with representations from the frontline where battleground realism and the ever-increasing amounts of combat/operational footage present an alternative dilemma: desensitization to war, to death, and to humanity more generally. As Geiger concludes, it is not just the proliferation of the “direct” film as a form of documentary that, through the likes of YouTube, has transcended conventional practice in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It is the process of being able to *watch* a crisis or tragedy like the 2004 tsunami unfold in a wholly new viewing environment that is important, and that, in the form presented, does not equip any of us to “know” how it feels, what it means, or how we should react to such events (p. 204). Meaning in all that we watch is thus an ever more tenuous concept in the destabilized, access-all-areas world in which we live.

Not only is this a particularly poignant conclusion to reach, but it also shows how illuminating, compulsive, and elegant the approach is throughout Geiger’s book. Following in the path of Nichols, Erik Barnouw, and Richard Barsam, this work builds on their legacy and expands documentary consideration out into the public sphere. Geiger gives due space to his subjects and preaches proper film analysis and deconstruction without ever being preachy. He delivers sections and chapters that bear repeated reading and interpretation every time one returns to them, and achieves comprehensive coverage without ever having to curtail critical conversation. This is nothing less than a tremendous achievement therefore and the new benchmark in concise appreciation of American documentary film history.

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Citation: Ian Scott. Review of Geiger, Jeffrey, *American Documentary Film: Projecting the Nation*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.

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