CHAPTER 2

Social Documentary

General Citaiton: Stott, William. Documentary Expressions And Thirties America. Chicago, University of Chicago, 1973.

Some documents inform the intellect, some the emotions. Both sorts are too simple to analyze further. They are extreme tendencies within the documentary genre and share just one characteristic, the one they must to belong to the genre at all: both report actual fact. Documents at the extremes—timetables, hard-news dispatches, almanacs, encyclopedias, industrial films, legal paper, on the one hand, and human-interest journalism, on the other—are most often rhetorically dull and, in the case of the human documents, philosophically puerile. There are, however, intermediate documents that try to combine the virtues of the extremes. These intermediate documents increase our knowledge of public facts, but sharpen it with feeling; put us in touch with the perennial human spirit, but show it struggling in a particular social context at a specific historical moment. They sensitize our intellect (or educate our emotions) about actual life. They are social documents, their use is social documentary, and they are the subject of the rest of this book.

In Luis Buñuel's documentary film *Land Without Bread* (1932), there is a sequence where the camera, having come from a dim and stinking hut, finds a child, a girl of perhaps seven, sitting in the sunny lane outside. She sits on a rock or a step, her feet bare, her body heavily clothed. The scene is the Hurdes region of Spain, whose people have dark hair and dark complexions. But this girl is fair; her hair looks russet. For an instant the viewer thinks that her life, too, is unusual—happier than those he has just been seeing. But then he notices the odd angle she holds her head at, as though her neck were broken; he sees her twisted face. The film's narrator says that one day "we," the people making the film, came upon a girl with a sore throat. Now a member of the film crew is holding her chin in his hand, and the camera, trembling slightly, peers into her mouth. And though the film is black and white, and pale with age, the viewer sees how inflamed that throat is. He sees it in the way the girl has to strain to open her mouth, in the way she tries to ease free of the hand. The narrator says that the girl had been in the street for several days, unable to eat, rejected by her family. But, he continues, we had no sulfa, we could do nothing for her, and three days later we heard she was dead. As he says this, the girl sits down again in the street, her head rocking slightly to and fro.[1]

This is social documentary. Morley Safer ad-libs excitedly into the microphone that there is no reason for the Marines to set these Vietnamese huts afire, while the viewer sees them doing it with flamethrowers and cigarette lighters. Other Marines, of another generation and war, strain endlessly in a still photograph to plant and raise a flagpole on Iwo Jima's highest mountain. Friends of Israel distribute on American campuses leaflets with atrocity photos of children killed when Palestinian terrorists blew up their school bus; the front page is a close-up of the driver's face: the flesh is mottled by fire and blood; the eyes are gray, exploded, and soft and lifeless as tar. "He was an Israeli bus driver. Every morning he drove village children to school . . . Until May 22nd. . . ." [2]

When people in the thirties spoke of documentary, they usually meant *social* documentary—and so do we today. Social documentary educates one's feelings as human documents do,

but with this difference. Human documents show man undergoing the perennial and unpreventable in experience, what happens to all men everywhere: death, work, chance, rapture, hurricane, and maddened dogs; as John Grierson said, the theme of such documents is "la condition humaine." Social documentary, on the other hand, shows man at grips with conditions neither permanent nor necessary, conditions of a certain time and place : racial discrimination, police brutality, unemployment, the Depression, the planned environment of the TVA, pollution, terrorism.* One might say briefly that a human document deals with natural phenomena, and social documentary with man-made.[3]

The line between the natural and the man-made is often unclear; people disagree in which category a given phenomenon belongs. Is crime caused by human vice, the inherent depravity of man; or is it caused by social injustice? Is war an act of God, or merely the result of foolish political systems? No definite answer is possible, and when one is given, it is for polemical reasons. Herbert Hoover spoke of the Depression as a natural phenomenon, unappeasable as drought, something that could only be endured; Franklin Roosevelt most often pictured it as man-made, correctable by social modification. Hoover asked God to grant the American people the self-reliance and steadfastness of Washington and his men at Valley Forge; Roosevelt asked his countrymen for war-time enthusiasm to lick the enemy. For Hoover, the crisis was sufferable but unalterable; ** for Roosevelt, just the opposite. Accepting the Democratic nomination in 1932, Roosevelt declared, "Our Republican leaders tell us economic laws—sacred, inviolable, unchangeable—that these laws cause

* In 1970 the *New York Times* advertised its book *Great Songs of the Sixties* as "a social document you can play on the piano." This document reprinted popular music reflecting "America's generational, technological and racial crisis" in the 1960s. The music, according to the ad, "not only sings of change; it has somehow made changes happen!"

** A Hoover sympathizer, Dwight Morrow of J. P. Morgan and Company, said in 1931: "I think the best way to get rid of business cycles would be to prove that they are inevitable."

panics which no one could prevent. . . . We must lay hold of the fact that economic laws are not made by nature. They are made by human beings." Roosevelt's argument had the sympathy of most Americans. "The people of the United States have not failed," he said in his first inaugural address—and the people generally agreed. The fault lay not in themselves, human and irremediable, but rather in a social order men had made and might improve.[4]

Social documentary encourages social improvement. Its mildest goal is the "public education" Walter Lippmann sought. Usually its purpose is not so altruistic and indefinite; it has an axe to grind. It works through the emotions of the members of its audience to shape their attitude toward certain public facts. It wanted to move them to help those in Spain's neglected hinterland; to ask themselves just what, and whom, they thought they were defending in Vietnam; to redouble their efforts to crush Imperial Japan; to support Israel against the barbarous Arabs. It is that maligned thing, propaganda. The photographer Arthur Siegel suggests that Lewis Hine "defined very simply the documentary attitude when he said, 'I wanted to show the things that had to be corrected. I wanted to show the things that had to be appreciated.' " The definition is a good one, and the things to be corrected—always more telling than the others—are the staple of social documentary.[5]

In such documentary, as Grierson conceded, "there is hardly any avoiding [the] accusation of propaganda." There is not because social documentary deals with conditions that can be changed by human initiative. "We got the food, we got the clothing, we got the man power, we got the brains," says a Texan at the end of one of John Dos Passos' eyewitness reports on the unemployed in 1932; the Texan concludes: "There must be some remedy." *The Grapes of Wrath* is documentary in that, as Granville Hicks observed in the mid-sixties, "the situation it portrays is remediable, and was largely remedied, in part because of Steinbeck's novel." [6]

Many people would now acknowledge that a work of social documentary, whether or not they agree with its message, is, or originally was, propaganda. They might not like the word—Alexander Kendrick thinks that it will never be a polite word in America—but they wouldn't condemn out of hand everything to which it was applied. Most people in the thirties did. An accusation of propaganda then was deadly censure; then, as Edward Steichen wrote, "indignant condemnation ran high [at] the idea of propaganda." In 1937 Charles A. Beard, Paul Douglas, and Robert Lynd formed the Institute for Propaganda Analysis which sent out "Propaganda Analysis: A Monthly Letter To Help the Intelligent Citizen Detect and Analyze Propaganda" of all colors, from all sources. The propaganda detected was uniformly deplored and discounted. In thirties America this sort of propaganda against propaganda enjoyed wide popularity for at least two reasons. First, the Fascists and the Soviets had given propaganda a bad name by praising it and by exploiting it in gross and deceptive forms. Second, many Americans felt that propaganda had tricked the nation into a loathsome, pointless world war. In 1933 Malcolm Cowley put the popular case against propaganda thus: "Propaganda is false and misleading and was used to sell us Liberty Bonds during the War and to make us believe that Germans roasted little Belgian babies on the tips of their bayonets over a slow fire." Franklin Roosevelt defined propaganda the same way. During the 1936 campaign, he criticized employers who put political handbills in their workers' pay envelopes, but was even angrier at the untruths the handbills spread about Social Security: "Every message in a pay envelope . . . *is* a command to vote according to the will of the employer. But this propaganda [about Social Security] is worse—it is deceit." The notion that propaganda was deceit grew so ingrained that Archibald MacLeish in 1940 could call the film *The Grapes of Wrath* and Joris Ivens' documentary *The Spanish Earth*

> no more "propaganda pictures" than the most illusory of the Hollywood contraptions which conceal the actualities of a tragic and endangered generation behind forests of pretty legs and acres of gaudy faces. If anything, the legs and gaudy faces are the more surely and more precisely "propaganda" . . .

—i.e., that which misleads.[7]

Some propaganda did mislead: the German and Italian Fascists boasted that their propaganda was built of big lies. But there was honest propaganda, too: *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Spanish Earth* are examples, as is what this book treats. Today we recognize the truth advanced by a handful of social scientists —chiefly Harold Lasswell and Leonard Doob—in the 1920s and 1930s: almost all social utterances involve propaganda because almost all seek to influence opinion. At the very least we now admit that some propagandas are less reprehensible than others. We understand that propaganda has a "double face." There is black propaganda, put forward by a covert source, using vilification and lies to spread dissention among the group it addresses. There is white propaganda, put forward from an overt source, using actual fact to educate its audience. And there are all shades of gray between (the pamphlet with the dead Israeli bus driver had no attribution and distorted the Palestinian cause; it was gray propaganda). Few people in the thirties made these distinctions; then propaganda per se was evil.[8]

Lewis Mumford argued at the time that the American people's indiscriminate hostility to all propaganda betrayed "a pathological resistance to rational persuasion" of any sort. He suggested that when analysts of propaganda (he named Beard specifically) condemned not only everything deceptive but everything "self-interested," they "themselves put over one of the biggest propaganda frauds of our time. . . . Such analysts held in effect that the mere desire to persuade is a sufficient ground for rejecting a statement: hence any unwelcome truth could be dismissed out of hand as 'propaganda.'" For just this reason *The River* and *The Plow That Broke the Plains* were stripped of the honorific "documentary." Pare Lorentz had made the films for the government; the films showed the wisdom of the government agricultural pol-

icy; thus they were widely condemned as "propaganda." A film distributor who refused to handle *The River* said that had it been made by a private company "it would be a documentary film. When the government makes it, it automatically becomes a propaganda picture." [9]

If propaganda in the thirties was too readily despised by its legion of enemies, it was also too esteemed by its few friends, who were intellectuals and artists. The radicals who believed in agitprop, and some moderates who favored documentary, claimed that propaganda, because it helped change society, was the highest form of expression, was art.* The communist editor Joseph North wrote in 1935 that great reporters, like Egon Erwin Kisch and John L. Spivak, whose work provided "an analysis and an experience, culminating in an implicit course of action," were "artists in the fullest sense of the term." Norman Cousins and Malcolm Cowley hailed the appearance of *You Have Seen Their Faces* in 1937 and agreed that the book belonged to a new art. In 1940 Lorentz declared that Dorothea Lange's photographs and John Steinbeck's fiction had done more for the Okies than all the politicians in the country, and claimed that this was "proof that good art is good propaganda." As Murray Kempton has observed, art versus propaganda provided the thirties' favorite aesthetic debate, the usual resolution of which was to blur the two together. Most artists of the time accepted the communist dictum that "Art Is a Weapon!" and many intellectuals, like Cowley himself, went so far as to assert that Kant's "eternal opposition" of art and propaganda, like a whole series of similar oppositions—form against matter, poetry against science, contemplation against action—could safely be swept aside.[10]

Such a confounding of art and propaganda now seems as simplistic as a prejudice against *all* propaganda. Those who comment on the 1930s generally agree that much of the period's literature and thought exhibits this kind of sentimentality and intellectual softness. The social critic Robert Warshow wrote in 1947 that the "organized mass disingenuousness" of the thirties' intelligentsia, their pretense that good propaganda was good art, lowered "the whole level of thought and discussion, the level of culture itself," to the point where *The Grapes of Wrath* appeared a great novel and John LaTouche's "Ballad for Americans" an inspired song. The critics and aestheticians most influential since the thirties have defined art and propaganda in such a way that the values of each are again understood as separate, even opposite, with all prestige pertaining to the former.[11]

Nonetheless, there is no point scanting the fact that the documentary literature characteristic of the thirties was propaganda, not art. Though the people of the time hated the idea of propaganda, propaganda was in fact their common mode of expression. This propaganda was timely then and, the timely being timely for a little while only, it no longer is: thirties social documentary in general is now as dead as the sermons of the Social Gospel. The few exceptions, the works still live and pertinent, are those that transcend the documentary genre. The most remarkable of these is *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and in discussing this book later, we will notice how Agee and Evans "corrected" documentary, transformed a strategy of social polemic, of propaganda, into something—"call it art if you must," sneered Agee—capable of permanent revelations of the spirit.[12]

* The Nazis were the leading exponents of this idea. Goebbels, Hitler's chief of propaganda, taught those entering his service that "propaganda is an art, and the propagandist is an artist as much as the painter, sculptor, or writer."