CHAPTER 1

What Is Documentary?

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

Documentary . . . pertaining to, consisting of, or derived from documents. —a 1967 definition

During the controversy over the 1971 television documentary "The Selling of the Pentagon," a troubled viewer wrote *Harper's Magazine* to ask: "What is a 'documentary'? Is it an honest and reasonably objective report or is it a case for the prosecution? Most viewers, I guess, think the former." The viewer himself thought the former, but in fact it could be either. For the "documentary" in "documentary film" or "documentary journalism" or "television documentary," though of recent vintage, is a complex, even contradictory, word. Like "document," from which it derives, it has *two* meanings, only one of which is in the dictionary. These meanings are not mutually exclusive: a film or article that is a document in one sense may be a document in the other; nevertheless, the meanings are distinct and usefully separated.[1]

The first, the dictionary meaning, we use when we speak of "documentary proof" and "legal documents," of "documentary history" and "historical documents." This "documentary" has been defined as "presenting facts objectively and without edito-

rializing and inserting fictional matter, as in a book, newspaper account or film." As for "document," its first meaning is even plainer. Saunders Redding said that he would call his 1951 autobiography "a 'document' except that the word has overtones of something official, vested and final," and his book, on the contrary, was "personal." Impersonal documents we have always with us—Social Security cards, newspapers, bills: "written or printed paper bearing the original, official, or legal form of something, and which can be used to furnish decisive evidence or information." In 1938 Benjamin Glassberg, a Chicago relief administrator, allowed parts of the journal he kept on the job to be published "as an objective document . . . useful to others" in the trade. Documents of this sort give information about public events and social conditions.[2]

There is, however, a second kind of document and, thus, of documentary. Elizabeth Janeway recently reviewed Winthrop Sargeant's account of his fight with mental illness, *In Spite of Myself: A Personal Memoir*, and called it a "courageous exploration of his own soul by an intelligent man who is aware of his emotional flaws. It is a document from a private battlefield which is relevant to many other struggles." This "document" is an abbreviation of a phrase still used but especially frequent in the thirties, "human document." * John Crowe Ransom, writing in the mid-thirties, compared Wallace Stevens' "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" with Allen Tate's "Death of Little Boys" and said that although the first poem's technique was superb, he personally preferred the second because it "is a human document, with a contagious fury about it. . . . The deaths of little boys are more exciting than the sea surfaces." ** Thirty years ago Marquis

* Judith Crist praised a 1970 film "as a social study, a human document and a fascinating and absorbing entertainment." As human document, it captured "a sense of small people sharing the universal burden of existence."

** The adjective "human" recurs throughout thirties literature as a synonym for emotional or touching or heartfelt. A critic praised Virgil Thomson's score to *The River* because it borrowed folk melodies and hence was "full of the emotional content inherent in anything essentially human." The documentary photographer Arthur Rothstein gave tips to amateurs on how to capture on film "the human aspects of an otherwise unemotional [social] problem." This use of the word is significant; it suggests that despite the elaborate intellectuality of some Marxist sympathizers, most Americans in the thirties felt the essential human faculty wasn't reason. Popular wisdom at the time, as Dale Carnegie expressed it in *How To Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), was that men were not "creatures of logic" but "creatures of emotion." The artist George Biddle estimated in 1939 that the human being was 98 parts feeling and 2 parts mind.

* One writer who made a book about his home town in the late thirties, Herman Clarence Nixon, not only took as his source such "human documents" as clippings from the village paper, but went so far as to proclaim, "I myself am a document."

Childs confessed in print that he envied playwrights fifty years hence who would

> inevitably draw on this family [the Franklin Roosevelts] for the raw material of drama to compare with the Lincoln story. Take, for example, Eleanor Roosevelt's autobiography. That is an extraordinary human document. If it does not tell all, it tells nearly all with a frankness and a sincerity such as few personal narratives ever attain.[3]

A document, when human, is the opposite of the official kind; it is not objective but thoroughly personal.* Far from being dispassionate, it may be "a document that is shattering in its impact and infinitely moving," as Arthur Knight said of a 1971 film. Even when temperate, a human document carries and communicates feeling, the raw material of drama. Such a document gives some information that would be found in an impersonal document. One learns, for example, when Mrs. Roosevelt married, the names of her offspring, the work she did. Indeed, a human document may be read as a historical document is—for the facts it gives about public events and social customs. Malcolm Cowley read Harry Crosby's suicide diary this way and praised it as "a valuable record of behavior and a great source document for the manners of the age that was ours" in the 1920s. But to read a human document thus overlooks what is unique and primary: the glimpse it offers of an inner existence, a private self.[4]

One who considers a certain work a human document identifies with the self it reveals; otherwise, he would not call it human. Marquis Childs knew that Mrs. Roosevelt was telling *nearly* all only because he knew himself. Yet insofar as Mrs. Roosevelt revealed what is common and constant in man, it was no wonder that Childs empathized—most readers would be drawn to. Her story was ennobling:

> It is the story of the ugly duckling who at last came into the life of a swan and yet remembered what it was like to be an ugly duckling. For all the ugly ducklings of this world Eleanor Roosevelt will fight with a fury that grows out of the secret roots of her own experience.

It was ennobling, but one would read it as avidly were it base. For the perennial truths of man's spirit and existence, the subject of a human document, are by no means all ennobling; and it is those truths a reader wants, for better or worse.[5]

How does a document convey spirit? How does it reveal the secret roots of experience? Childs' tone tells us: through sensibility. We understand a historical document intellectually, but we understand a human document emotionally. In the second kind of document, as in documentary and the thirties' documentary movement as a whole, feeling comes first.

Documentary: The Primacy of Feeling

Recent historians have all but acknowledged this. In his *History of Photography* (1964), Beaumont Newhall stated that the importance of documentary photographs "lies in their power not only to inform us, but to move us." Warren Susman, in his excellent article "The Thirties" (1970), affirmed that "the whole idea of documentary—not with words alone but with sight and sound—makes it possible to see, know, and feel the details of life, to feel oneself part of some other's experience." Susman didn't say that documentary trades chiefly in emotion, but he implied as much:

one knows another's life because one feels it; one is informed—one sees—through one's feelings. The practitioners of the documentary genre in the thirties realized, if dimly, the same thing: emotion counted more than fact.[6]

Among the first to come to this conclusion was John Grierson, the British film producer who named documentary—and then repented of the name he chose. He chose it thinking he was dealing with documents of the first sort, in which facts, not feelings, were paramount. A trained sociologist, he had come to America in 1924 to study the effect of mass media on public opinion. At the time, he later recalled,

> Many of us . . . (particularly in the United States) were impressed by the pessimism that had settled on Liberal theory. We noted the conclusions of such men as Walter Lippmann, that because the citizen, under modern conditions, could not know everything about everything all the time, democratic citizenship was therefore impossible.

Grierson became interested in the factual film as a means of conveying "the information necessary to organized and harmonious living." He called such film "documentary," first using the word in a 1926 New York *Sun* review of Robert Flaherty's *Moana*, which, he said, "being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth, has documentary value." He may have chosen the word because the French then used *documentaire* to mean travelogue. It seems more likely, however, that, writing with characteristic haste, he took the entire phrase "documentary value," perhaps without realizing it, from the lips of his fellow sociologists. In either case, he used "documentary" in its dictionary sense of a presentation of facts without fictional matter.

Grierson detested the "false excitements" of Hollywood's fictions, so it is easy to understand why, in advocating films based on life, he would play up the impassivity of their "public observation." He described a sequence from *Drifters*, his 1929 film about the British herring industry:

> I ran in detail of furnace and engine-room for image of force, and seas over a headland for image of the open. I took the ships out and cast the nets in detail: as to the rope over the cradle, the boy below, the men on deck against the sea; as to the rhythm of the heaving, the run on the rollers, the knotted haul of each float and net; as to the day and approaching night; as to the monotony of long labour.

But even in his words one hears that the monotony is too energetic to be monotonous. The information, though prosaic, is charged with feeling. As Grierson said, a documentary's subject must always be "the blazing fact of the matter"; but the fact is important because it is shown to blaze. None was too humble. He later praised Basil Wright's *Cargo from Jamaica* because it "conveyed emotion in a thousand variations on a theme so simple as the portage of bananas." He felt that documentary accomplished "a unique achievement when, in *Big Money*, it made a fine, exciting story of the Account-General's Department of the [British] Post Office—surely, on the face of it, one of the dullest subjects on earth." Here, we notice, the achievement belongs to the genre: *it* made the exciting story, not Alberto Cavalcanti, the film's maker. If the facts blaze, the form itself started the fire.

By the mid-thirties Grierson had decided that perhaps it did. Perhaps communication of the kind needed to make a better world wasn't chiefly informational, as Lippmann thought; maybe it wasn't even rational. Instead, Grierson favored an approach he called "dramatic," by which he plainly meant "emotional."

> The way of information will not serve; it is too discursive. And the way of rational explanation will not serve, because it misses the corporate life we are dealing with. The new language of apprehension which must communicate the corporate nature of community life must in fact be something more in the nature of a dramatic language than a rational one. . . . The quintessence will be more important than the aggregate.

Since all the facts could not be given, he believed that education would turn to a "shorthand method" that dramatized the human

consequences of a few facts. This method was of course documentary—a word Grierson now found "a clumsy description" of what he wanted, but the word he and the world were stuck with. For by that time it had achieved a life of its own.[7]

In 1938 Edward Steichen remarked that "one of the favored words . . . today is 'documentary.' " Then, without saying he was going to, he set about defining the word. Ostensibly he was writing a review of the work of the Farm Security Administration's Photography Unit run by Roy Stryker. He said that Stryker had put his photographers—Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Carl Mydans, Marion Post, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn—to work photographing "piles of this, stacks of that, yards of this, miles of that, boxes, bales, and timber." The FSA photographers were compiling a "picture record of rural America," tens of thousands of images of the implements and methods of farm labor at the time. But, Steichen added, while the photographers

> were busily engaged in producing this kind of "tweedle dum" and "tweedle dee" document, they also found time to produce a series of the most remarkable human documents that were ever rendered in pictures. . . . These documents told stories and told them with such simple and blunt directness that they made many a citizen wince. . . . Have a look into the faces of the men and the women in these pages. Listen to the story they tell and they will leave with you a feeling of a living experience you won't forget.

For Steichen also, then, there were two sorts of documents: one gave factual information; one gave human, made citizens wince, conveyed the feeling of lived experience.[8]

The essence of documentary is not information, as Grierson first thought. If it were, the classics of documentary cinema would be tweedle-dum "industrials," the worker-education films turned out by the hundreds. The essence, rather, is the same power to move that Grierson had all along sought in Hollywood's films; in them, he early wrote, "I look to register what actually moves: what hits the spectator at the midriff: what yanks him up

by the hair of the head or the plain bootstraps to the plane of decent seeing." For he believed that emotion, properly felt and understood, *does* engender decent seeing; *is* intelligence.[9]

Such a view, commonplace among artists from Sophocles to Tolstoy, has yet to gain philosophical standing, and perhaps never can. As intellectual a man as Henry Adams has spoken for it, though. Because he believed that one must "learn to feel," Adams spends *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* "trying only to feel Gothic art." He seeks emotion not as a means to rational comprehension but for its own sake; understanding is, he says, "not a fact but a feeling." He argues that learning to feel intelligently is authentic education. Intelligent feelings have little to do with intellect per se: any peasant woman in the medieval church knew more than Adams ever could because she was inside the religious experience. Intellect is a thing inferior, trivial: "one loses temper in reasoning about what can only be felt"; Adams teasingly suggests that he would cultivate ignorance "if only ignorance would help us to feel what we cannot understand." His greatest sorrow comes when he considers that perhaps, unlike artists, "the rest of us cannot feel; we can only study." [10]

Those who practice documentary tend to be skeptical of the intellect and the abstractions through which it works. Like artists, they believe that a fact to be true and important must be felt.

The Two Documents and How They Work

There are two kinds of documents, or two tendencies within the documentary genre. The first, the more common, gives information to the intellect. The second informs the emotions.

If we were to ask for proof that each existed, our question itself would prove the first kind. For it assumes that intellectual verification of some sort is possible. It asks for concrete examples, for documentation. It seeks what one social scientist has called "the ultimate in evidence": a fact or a firsthand impression; the reference to an objective authority or the personal observation; a footnote or "Now I know a fellow. . . ." But let us notice how such documentation works. Say two people dispute when something happened. One says, June. The other, July. The first insists. The second says, prove it. The first offers documentary evidence: a citation from an almanac for the last week in June; a direct reference to a body of information open to all inquirers and of generally accepted validity. Their dispute may have been quite emotional; each may want passionately to be right. But the facts are simply there to be rationally understood. Emotions in no way affect their value, documentary value, as information. Only intellect is needed to weigh this value.[11]

To prove that there are documents of the second sort, documents the understanding of which requires the emotions, one does not need to turn to the work of Shakespeare or Beethoven or Van Gogh. Any newspaper, magazine, or TV news program will do, for all are larded with them. "There are events," W. H. Auden has written, "which arouse such simple and obvious emotions that an AP cable or a photograph in *Life* magazine are enough and poetic comment is impossible." Such cables and photographs are human documents and belong to the documentary genre. Consider the following from the *New York Times:*

DOGS KILL BROTHERS, 4 AND 3,
AS FATHER'S HELP IS FUTILE

Lynchburg, Va., Dec. 17 [1967] (AP)—

A pack of dogs attacked and killed two young brothers today in Madison Heights, about a mile and a half north of this west Virginia city, the police said.

The police said the dogs, four German Shepherds from a nearby home, attacked the children while their father flailed at the animals with a rake.

Two of the dogs were shot to death by the state and Amherst County police. The other two were impounded on the property on their owner, the police said.

The victims were identified as Eugene H. Goodman Jr., 4 years old, and Kenneth Goodman, 3, children of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene H. Goodman of Rt. 1, Madison Heights.

> Mr. Goodman and his wife were hospitalized in acute shock at Lynchburg General Hospital.

Not only is *poetic* comment impossible, any human comment is.[12]

This is how documentary—of both kinds—works. It defies comment; it imposes its meaning. It confronts us, the audience, with empirical evidence of such nature as to render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous. All emphasis is on the evidence; the facts themselves speak: the date was at the end of June; the Goodman boys are horribly dead, their family broken.

Documentary is the presentation or representation of actual fact in a way that makes it credible and vivid to people at the time. Since all emphasis is on the fact, its validity must be unquestionable as possible ("Truth," Roy Stryker said, "is the objective of the documentary attitude"). Since just the fact matters, it can be transmitted in any plausible medium. John Grierson realized that "the documentary idea is not basically a film idea at all" and that the documentary movement of the thirties might have occurred in media other than film. The heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content. The theater historian Mordecai Gorelik observed that the documentary plays of the thirties owed whatever strength they had to the "undisputed newspaper accounts and public statements" upon which they were based. The accounts were undisputed because they were indisputable. The actual facts. The truth.[13]

One sees immediately the truth of a documented fact—the date was at the end of June—but may have trouble grasping the truth of a human document like that AP dispatch. It *is* difficult; as Auden said, there is nothing to say. One knows why such things get published, why in fact they are a mainstay of all journalism; it is because they are read. But why are they? Thoreau thought them a waste of time; he argued in *Walden* that

> if we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in winter—we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications?

Obviously many people don't feel as Thoreau claimed to; they care about fresh instances. No doubt part of the reason men read about present calamity is to find whether they can avoid future ones. There is a large subspecies of documentary, the exposé, which uses emotional reportage to persuade the audience to take action against men and evils that cause unnecessary suffering in the world. But the quoted dispatch isn't exposé: there was no one to blame for the little boys' death and no social lesson to be learned. The article gives no practical information to help with life, and yet is published and read. Why?[14]

Because it happened, one may answer. This would be the answer of the *New York Times*, journal of record. It is a devious answer. For according to this view an event is newsworthy not because it happened but because it *seldom* happens. On the day the young Goodmans were killed, a Sunday, more than one hundred Americans died in car accidents, some presumably as pointless and gory and heartrending as what happened in Madison Heights, Virginia. These accidents didn't make the *Times* because cars are always killing people, whereas dogs almost never do. The *Times* carried the dispatch in the journalistic conviction that the record of a day is built of rarities.

In fact, the Goodman story matters very little as an intellectual document, a paragraph in the public record. Its importance, insofar as it has any, is due to its special emotional value. This value is hard to put one's finger on in the dispatch quoted because the *Times*, as one would trust, played emotion down. It ran no photos; it buried the story deep in the extraneous dry pages of its second section. Nonetheless, the emotion is there and is why the story was read.[15]

By "emotion" one doesn't mean a ghoulish thrill, a *frisson* at the abominable. One probably does feel this, as well as a

wretched kind of relief that someone else has suffered and died. These unhappy emotions are accompanied by others one is less apt to deny: shock, pity, compassion. And rage; one wishes (pointlessly) that he had been there with shotgun and axe.* All these emotions, however, are part, become part, of a more general and wiser emotion that tries to learn from the experience. This, surely, the reader is always struggling to do: learn something that may help him. When an article has no information of intellectual use, he can sometimes still learn from it. It may provide him what the psychologist Ernest Dichter calls "a lesson in living." Dichter believes that because reality is unknowably complex, men seek clues to it in the life around them; most men, he argues, shun the equivocal (and profoundly lifelike) versions of reality given in the greatest art, preferring the simpler lessons of the mass media.[16]

A lesson in living, whether one has it firsthand or via Tolstoy or the crassest Hollywood film, is just that: an event that shows one what life is like; an epiphany that strips reality bare. The AP dispatch from Virginia may do this. It may impress a reader as a human document and suggest to him—for a moment or longer, faintly or stronger—that life is like this, that this is a reality he must face: dogs destroying children. The reader immediately rejects the idea; "that's not life," he says to himself, and he is relieved to be able to say it. He has faced up to the worst catastrophe December 17, 1967, brought forth—one perhaps hitherto unconceived, which is to say inconceivable.

This is the reason the human documents in the news are read:

* In his last letter to Father Flye, James Agee commented on a newspaper clipping his friend had sent him. The clipping from a Wichita paper told, in Flye's words, "how a group of men who owned racing dogs had been gathered on the outskirts of the city for practice running. They would collect cats (under the pretext of finding good homes for them) and then take them out to be chased by the ravenous dogs who would tear them to pieces and devour them." Agee said: "The clip you sent about dogs and cats is beyond comment: except my wish to be present, not with an A.S.P.C.A. badge, but with a machine gun." To which Father Flye added in a footnote: "I knew what Jim's feeling would be, as mine was; and he expressed it."

they offer safe exercise for the reader's feelings; they test—but gently—his emotional competence to live in the great world that day. Does he know the latest cause for outrage, alarm, pity, disgust, laughter, warm tears? Can he face up to it? And the answer is always yes. The reader cannot lose. It is a test he may refuse to take, but he cannot—short of madness—fail it. He can face up to human documents, to whatever they put before him, however it strain his emotions. He can face up to them as he cannot be sure he will always face up to his own life, because they treat of someone else's.

A final word about human documents. They do not have to deal with death or dismemberment, though such topics are unfailingly popular. Violence is just one of the staples of human-interest reportage. Two others are staggering coincidence (a man finds in a fish the wedding ring his wife lost twenty years before on their honeymoon) and extreme kindness or self-sacrifice (a man returns a purse with $1000 in it).* Each of these has a view of life in tow, both sentimental. The first would have us believe that everything is ruled by a providence that likes playing cheerful jokes; the second, that men, that we, are better—nobler—than we know ourselves to be. These sentimental fallacies or the easy nihilism of random violence (another sort of sentimentality) underlie most of the human documents the media put out.

By and large the emotions in these documents are as crude or, to use Auden's more charitable words, as simple and obvious as their philosophy. Worse, the emotions are inflated, exacerbated, by much of the press; the result tends, in the words of Ronald Berman, "not to discipline feeling but to express it with as much moral damage as possible." Not to inform feeling, but to ensure that it will be unformed, directionless, self-indulgent.[17]

* The sacrifice is heightened if the event involves violence (a sergeant saves his platoon by throwing himself on a grenade; a man drowns trying to rescue a drowning child). Here, however, it is the fine sentiment that is to move us more than the violence.