NARRATIVES AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS

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There is a growing interest in the role that narratives can play in the construction of individual and cultural identities, in part, because as Michael Graesser argues, "perhaps the easiest way to understand the mind of a culture is to understand its stories" (Graesser 2002:229). Narratives range from personal, oral stories told within families or communities to public narratives – the stories we read, hear, and see every day in books or periodicals, in the media, on television and films or presented by societal institutions. Narratives are an integral part of the dialogue we have with others that refines our personal sense of self, as well as our sense of the larger society in which we live (Schank 2002). The stories we tell and those that are told to us have great power: to inform, to mislead, to unite, to divide, to reinforce existing beliefs, to change opinion. As I work toward my degree in liberal studies, my focus has been on nonfiction visual narratives, with a concentration on documentary films. I am interested in exploring how to use the power of narratives to create nonfiction films that introduce others to both the beauty as well as the ugliness in our world – opening up new dialogues of discussion about how we define who we are and how we relate to others in the world around us.

When we examine our personal identity and how we fit into society, we often describe ourselves in terms of race, class, and gender. Yet, these concepts, which we accept as natural and real, are in fact constructed by the society in which we live (Bonnekessen Class Lectures, 7-8, 14 June 2003 and Price Class Lectures 15, 21-22 June 2003). One way in which these constructs come into being and are maintained is through the narratives that surround us. At any given time within a society, certain narratives can and have taken on a hegemonic power (Morris 1994). Yet as Ronald Jacobs argues, "despite the complicity of culture, power, and history, social actors and social groups are still able to use narratives effectively to challenge power and create social change (Jacobs 2002:212). If we can gain a better understanding of how narratives work to create personal and social identities, we can then work to change existing constructions and create new, more inclusive ways of looking at our multi-cultural society.

Even more than just written texts, visual narratives such as photojournalism and filmmaking have become a potent tool of communication within our modern society by integrating the oral or written word with visual images. After examining a multitude of ethnographic films illustrating "the history of anthropology's imagination of the Northwest Coast," Rosiland Morris concludes that such films "do tell us that a thing imaged has existed in the world, but the nature of that thing – its social and historical meaning – is implanted in the image through fantastically elaborate processes of rhetoric and narrative" (Morris 1994:175). In *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video, and Culture,* Sharon Sherman stresses that film often becomes more than just text. She notes that it is "the opening to a different perception, the filmmaker's communication with and visualization of humanity" (Sherman 1998:251). Films can be a powerful way to communicate and introduce others to unfamiliar people and concepts. This has led me to begin exploring the potential of visual nonfiction narratives to present new information and open new dialogues about a variety of long-standing socialized problems and beliefs, including issues of race, gender, and class.

Reconsidering the Social Constructs of Race, Class, and Gender

Within our culture, the socially-constructed concepts of race, class, and gender act together to shape our personal identities as well as our "appropriate" roles within society. From the time we become aware of the world around us, it is natural for us to notice both similarities and differences with others. Yet these commonly accepted statuses have been socially constructed to not only indicate similarities or differences, but also superiority or inferiority, and by extension, dominance or subordination. As Paula Rothenberg notes, "Race, class, and gender have been socially constructed in America as 'difference' in the form of hierarchy" (Rothenberg 2002:21. Jean Baker Miller makes the case that it is inevitable that the dominant group within a society will have the greatest influence in determining the overall outlook of a culture. One important result of this dominance is that the subordinates have little purpose in knowing themselves – knowledge of the dominants is what determines their lives (Miller 2002). Without valid knowledge that contradicts accepted beliefs – on the part of the dominants or the subordinates – this system becomes accepted as "normal," when in fact it is anything but.

As we begin to understand and accept that the concepts we have often thought of as "natural" are actually constructed by those with the power within a society, we start to realize the imprint these roles have on how people define themselves, how they relate to others within society, and what opportunities they are offered or denied in almost every aspect of their lives (Bonnekessen Class Lectures, 7-8, 14 June 2003 and Price Class Lectures 15, 21-22 June 2003). As Beverly Tatum argues, along with David Wellman, these socially constructed roles have led to "systems of advantages" based on the constructs of race, gender, or class. Tatum stresses that like all forms of oppression, racism, sexism, and class privilege are not only personal ideologies based on prejudices, but systems that involve cultural messages and institutional policies and practices, along with individual beliefs and actions (Tatum 1997).

If we hope to break the cycle of these unequal systems, it seems reasonable to examine how the social constructs that form them are created and perpetuated. Then perhaps we can begin to eliminate the false constructs under which we operate today by offering new, more inclusive narratives that emphasize not only the acceptance and celebration of diversity, but a celebration of the many more things – hopes, fears, dreams – that all humans have in common.

Narratives, Society, and Knowledge

I believe one way to examine how race, gender, and class are constructed is to explore how narratives, or stories, act to shape our world view and the connection we feel – or don't
feel – with others. The concept that narratives serve to "construct the social reality that constitutes the lived world of social actors" is a central focus of the essays in *Narrative and Social Control: Critical Perspectives* as an assortment of authors discuss topics such as racism, gender and war, organizational narratives and power. Editor Dennis K. Mumby notes the authors illustrate an integral link between the narrative and the social in which the narrative both "a) takes on meaning only in a social context and b) plays a role in the construction of that social context" (Mumby 1993:4-5). Schank and Berman also find that "in essence, our knowledge is constructed of stories in various forms" (Schank 2002:311).

This interest in the power of narratives to construct personal and social ideas is not new. In his study of life narratives and theories of self, Gary Gregg discusses how

during the 1930s and 1940s, work by the 'grandparents of personality psychology' had specific psychological aims, yet was also designed to enlighten others about the subjective consequences of assorted sociopolitical orders in the world. As they "focused on phenomena of racism, sexism, nationalism, economic inequality and political conflict," Gregg argues they saw that it is "by organizing the psychic processes shared by all humanity that macrosocial institutions differentiate human character so deeply and with such profound and often tragic consequences" (Gregg 1991:206). As noted before, this social differentiation – and the subsequent disenfranchisement created by the values ascribed to those differences by larger societal power structures – can have a grave, and often negative, impact on the individual and society.

It is virtually impossible to escape from the consequences of what we learn from the narratives in our lives. As John Steadman Rice notes, cultures have an intrinsically narrative character, stemming from the central characteristics of narrative itself. Three of these characteristics are: *description*, *explanation* (ordering life into at least a rudimentary cause-and-effect relationship), and *thematic unification* (Rice 2002:81). We use these characteristics without even thinking about them as we seek to bring order to our world. Narratives describe – how something or someone looks, how they behave, how things are similar or different. They also explain – why something happened, why it is significant, why one is subjectively deemed better than another. Finally, they bring together common themes – for example freedom, progress, or justice.

As such, narratives are present in every aspect of our lives, and they take many forms. We share stories with family, friends, acquaintances and from them we begin to learn about race, class, and gender expectations. We listen to stories about our work culture from the management of the companies we work for and we learn what its stated mission is. We learn the not-so-public mission of the company from the stories we hear at the water cooler. At church we hear the history of our religion and learn of its accepted practices – and we implicitly may learn of the unacceptability of other religions. In our educational system, we read and hear narratives that have been socially approved – by the school board or other institutional entities. We volunteer or join community and work-related organizations where we share narratives and experiences with others – many of which similar, some we aren't familiar with. We listen to speeches by those in government or positions of authority telling us their

perspective of what, why, and how issues fit together. We read novels, periodicals, newspapers. We listen to the radio. We watch television and go to the movies.

Everywhere we turn, we are exposed to narratives – some that we recognize and some that we don't. And every time we hear a narrative, we either accept it as truthful knowledge or dismiss it, often without question. If we sense that something doesn't follow our expectations, we examine it in light of all of the information we have gained from the narratives we have heard in our lives to this point, and we make a judgment on the new information's validity. There is a constant process of adjustment and negotiation within our minds about what is not only true, but acceptable, in our personal or community relationships and within our larger society. I believe that by creating new narratives – ones that bring people to a new information that makes them question long-held beliefs – we can build the possibility for opening up lines of communication within our world. It won't be without pain, because people rarely go searching for unsettling new information on their own. But it can be a start to open up people's awareness.

Narratives and Social Consciousness

After examining the narrative creation of personal and collective identities in social movements, Ronald Jacobs concludes that the narrative is so fundamental to the formation of identity that it is "an essential resource for social movements" (Jacobs 2002:222). We have seen that narratives are one of the most basic and inherent ways we gather the knowledge we use to make life decisions. And when we have new experiences or consider the stories of others outside the realm of our personal experience, we can find that our existing thoughts and beliefs are challenged. When we are presented with information that is unexpected, we can either choose to ignore the information and discount those uncomfortable "expectation failures" – or we can begin to rethink our current beliefs (Schank 2002).

It is normal to find that being faced with new narratives, especially those that question currently accepted wisdom, meets with resistance. To change our beliefs requires that the evidence that contradicts our expectations is powerful enough to convince us that there is truly something wrong with our existing beliefs (Schank 2002:309). And that isn't easy. To have any hope of changing people's minds about entrenched beliefs, they must be given as much valid information as possible –

especially information that they might not receive in their own personal worlds, or information that corrects misperceptions they have learned from society. And it must be presented in a way that allows them to process and work toward acceptance.

To that end, one urban educational community has experimented with using narratives to help young people deal with difficult issues. Colette Daiute discusses how a combination of reading, classroom discussions, and writing personal narratives worked to change the social consciousness of a group of twelve young, ethnically diverse and troubled children. Unlike many mainstream children, young people from multicultural backgrounds often face the challenge of "recognizing, mastering, and integrating scripts from the diverse ethnic, class, and educational cultures in which they live" (Daiute 2000:213). The youngsters took part in a yearlong program that brought the sensitive theme of racial and ethnic discrimination into their urban public classroom. The study used high-quality children's literature as a bridge between classroom discussions, peer group activities, and the children's own writing in response to hypothetical situations dealing with racism and intolerance.

The goal of the program was to teach the children how they had the power to create their own narratives to handle confrontations with others that were either unfamiliar or hostile toward them. In a project like this, where results are hard to quantify numerically, there is always a question of whether such cognitive and social work leads to action. However, Daiute argues that the stories the children wrote over the course of a year showed a transformation from anger and polarization to a willingness to talk things through (Daiute 2000:232). The transformation, while not quantifiable, gives us hope that youngsters can learn, with guided assistance, to create narratives that give them tools to address controversial issues in society and in their lives. I, too, believe that this idea of communication through narrative needs to be studied more in depth as a way to change people's attitudes and behaviors in their daily lives.

These children had been asked to deal with issues they faced in their personal lives, on the playgrounds and in their community. In many ways, it can be easier for us to understand and deal with things that are familiar. Unfortunately, it is impossible for us to have direct primary experiences with people and cultures outside of our own individual world – our family, school, workplace, community – and this lack of personal experience leaves gaps in our knowledge about others. To fill in those gaps,

much of the knowledge we have about public events in the world comes from outside of our direct experience. We rely to some degree every day on mediated experience to provide us information about what is happening in the world around us (Zelizer 1993:204). As Joseph E. Davis notes in his discussion of the power of stories to construct our self story, "interpersonal networks, moral communities, and public institutions, including, importantly, social movements, both sanction and supply such narratives" (Davis 2002:21).

Alternative Narratives, Alternative Choices

Davis states that most scholars of narrative, regardless of their theoretical persuasion, would agree with Donald Polkinghorne that narrative "is the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (Davis 2002:12). I believe that creating and disseminating new texts of information to audiences in the form of narratives gives us a potent tool in the difficult task of opening up dialogues about currently accepted views and beliefs. If we can give people new, powerful, and valid information to make decisions about themselves and others – even if that information is rejected initially – over time it may be possible to bring about communication and eventually maybe even changes in attitudes. To do so, we must also look beyond the content of the narratives to the context in which they are created and presented. We must present not only valid information, but it must be done in ways that engage and compel people to listen and hopefully to act.

People have always worked to create new narratives, but it is hard to change entrenched views, especially if you are not speaking from a position of power. Today it is becoming even more necessary for people who are both in and out of the mainstream to negotiate a variety of social identities. Throughout *Narratives for a New Belonging: Disaporic Cultural Fiction*, Bromley looks at the contemporary 'borderline' fictions and films created by migrants and marginalised groups and the role these narratives play in forming new identities. He argues that "migrant writing" is "not just a matter of finding a voice or articulating new models of cultural literacy in a counter-hegemonic fashion, but of understanding the specific social and historical conditions within which narrative forms are both produced and consumed" (Bromley 2000:120). By looking at the relationship of the storyteller to the world in which their stories are created, it becomes

possible to find points of commonality, which open up new boundaries of discussion and interaction.

Cultural stories evolve. Janice Radway understands the power of cultural narrative, and perhaps more significantly, the importance of moving beyond existing narratives of conformity and acceptance. She is concerned with how young girls make use of the narratives they encounter every day in movies, magazines, books, and music – narratives that inform and at the same time, create misperceptions about their gender identity. She suggests that "selves are intertwined *with* culture" and that all children gradually create a sense of self by "taking up particular languages, objects, gestures, and habits, those that are presented to them as they emerge always *within* and *through* culture" (Radway 2002:190). She goes on to argue, however, that girls might be better served if they were encouraged to take a "less subservient attitude toward texts and narratives" and "make new forms of their narrative gleanings." For Radway as a young girl, that meant portraying William Shakespeare himself in a sixth-grade Elizabethan pageant, rather than Juliet, even as others wondered at her choice. It important to present dissimilar, even contradictory narratives to allow girls to "fashion a more open-ended future for themselves both as individual and as members of a more just social community" (Radway 2002:202-03). We must present choices so people can realize that not only are there different ways to think, act, and behave – but also so that these different ways can find acceptance.

Narratives and the Audience

As Radway argues, as modern communication becomes more pervasive and immediate, audiences not only receive narrative information but they participate in its interpretation and make their own choices in how to process it. Audiences belong to different social groups, from dominant to marginal, and they interpret the same messages in very different ways (Crane 1992). In *Total Propaganda: From Mass Culture to Popular Culture*, Alex Edelstein acknowledges that the mass media have a great effect on consumer's construction of reality. However, he also argues that the media are no longer simply exclusive mouthpieces for messages of the elite. Instead, the media – and in particular new media like the Internet, talk radio and television, "reality" programs – are more accessible to and used by less powerful members of society (adolescents, ethnic minorities, and marginal members of society) to begin to create new realities that

better address their needs (Heintz-Knowles 1997:xiv). If we want to open up new dialogues, it is important to value the audience's current perspective and to ask them to interpret, discuss, process, and finally, act on information. They should not be expected to automatically accept new information blindly, but they should also be encouraged to feel a sense of responsibility to be open to new ways of looking at life – perhaps creating their own new narratives in kind.

Edelstein finds that popular films have a contradictory role to both speak "to" and "for" different generations. He felt he had observed a movement in the films of the early 90s toward a respect for the diversity of audiences and a willingness to deal with some of the broad social concerns of the 90s – "ambition, anger, apocalypse, conflict, death, diversity, the environment, gender, generosity, humanism, idealism, morality, politics, racism" among others. However, as marketing and profit considerations made Hollywood vulnerable to attack, films often retreated into the safety of mainstream or "oldprop" films again (Edelstein 1997:63). Edelstein points out the difficulty for Hollywood, whose profits are dependent upon mass sales of tickets, to deal with social issues. Money talks, and conflict is to be avoided at all costs.

As part of a national culture industry that is disseminated to a large, heterogeneous audience, media entertainment expresses values, attitudes, and experiences common to large numbers of people (Crane 1992). Popular films and entertainment cater to the masses. Nonfiction film and documentaries – much like the local urban arts and entertainment cultures Crane describes in *The Production of Culture* – are often targeted at more homogenous cultures whether in terms of age, social class, ethnic or racial background, or gender. Although feature films may implicitly address social issues, they are created to please large audiences – and to do so, it is difficult to take any position that might confuse or offend a big part of their potential audiences (Holtzman 2000:38). In addition, news stories focusing on social problems can rarely give the time to fully examine the various sides of the issues.

On the other hand, nonfiction films or documentaries seldom involve any kind of mass market expectation, but often exist because of a filmmaker's passion to bring something to light about the world and its inhabitants. After conducting a series of interviews with a variety of documentary filmmakers including Albert Maysles, D.A. Pennebaker, Ken Burns, Bruce Sinofsky, and Susan Fromke, Liz Stubbs concludes that "nonfiction filmmakers find their voices now in a hybrid of documentary styles that

continue to push the form and bring to the view worlds and truths and humanities we may not otherwise have known" (Stubbs 2002:2). Because they aren't expected to please the masses, nonfiction films are much more suited to exploring sensitive or more specialized social issues in depth.

Films and Social Constructs

Popular culture – prime time television, music, popular films – constantly presents us with indirect or mediated knowledge about our world couched in the form of narrative stories. These images can "either fill in the gaps of our learning, reinforce what we have already learned, or challenge previous learning" (Holtzman 2000:31). This pervasive influence carries responsibilities, acknowledged or not. The popular media can create and perpetuate stereotypes, even if it isn't intentional (Woodbury 1998). As viewers we can find ourselves, consciously or not, taking away different social concepts from films – among them, how men and women relate to each other, who has the power within our society, how different races are portrayed – or are excluded from the dialogue completely. Gregory Mantsios argues that a profit-minded media "plays a key role in defining our cultural tastes, helping us locate ourselves in history, establishing our national identity, and ascertaining the range of national and social possibilities" (Mantsios 2001:563-64). Today, film studies are moving from beyond merely reading the text of the narratives to being included in epistemological studies as well. A series of essays edited by Kevin L. Stoehr entitled *Film and Knowledge* "utilizes individual films in understanding more clearly the connections among personal identity, knowledge, self-knowledge, character development, and moral insight" (Stoehr 2002:10).

Films not only teach us about differences, they also show us – often implicitly – what is acceptable and what isn't as far as behavior and attitudes toward other people in our society. In examining the role of storytelling in the formation and maintenance of racism, Teun A. van Dijk concludes that "in addition to acts of individual and institutional discrimination, this system is especially reproduced through discourse and communication." A significant factor is that the stories are always told based on the relationship of white dominance to the "other" (van Dijk 1993:139). Not only is the filmmaking business dominated by white males, but it is also in the business of making money.

Hollywood films or prime-time TV movies, which do deal more often with social issues, are always made in the context of appealing to mass audiences, which affects how daring they might choose to be. The social issue is secondary, but too much controversy is to be avoided in case audiences might be lost. As Mark P. Orbe notes, "the invisible assumption that market success requires cultural blandness cripples the ability of U.S. media to provide viewers with more authentic images of the cultures of all Americans" (Orbe 1998:134). For nonfiction films or documentaries, on the other hand, a social issue – or some informational purpose – is often the essence for their creation. This can be both their strength and weakness.

Nonfiction (Documentary) Films

Although the term 'nonfiction' can apply to a wide array of films, most of us use the word 'documentary' to describe any film that isn't fictional – or about "made-up" characters or events – in nature. And when we think of a documentary film, we might envision images of dry, educational wildlife sagas or intellectual talking heads expounding on historical facts or social issues that we don't necessarily want to think about. That viewpoint is changing somewhat, however, thanks to filmmakers like Ken Burns and cable channels like Biography and the Discovery Channel. Even though he prefers creating more experiential films rather than the "illustrated lectures" of Ken Burns, documentary filmmaker Bruce Sinofsky credits Burns with getting mainstream America to watch documentaries (Sinofsky 2002).

What constitutes a documentary, or more broadly, a nonfiction film? There are many different interpretations and debates over the meaning of the words 'documentary' and 'nonfiction.' A central argument revolves around whether nonfiction films – because of the inherent nature of the medium – can present an objective view of reality. Robert Grierson, one of earliest practitioners of the art, defined documentary as "the creative treatment of reality" (Winston 1995:110). Robert Edmonds insists emphatically that "documentary is anthropology on film" – it is concerned with the reality of man's relationship to his work, his environment, and his society (Edmonds 1995:14-150). Trevor Ponech argues that a documentary is an effort by the filmmaker to manipulate and rely on the medium to describe 'situations' – "individuals having properties and standing in relations to another at various space-time locations" (Ponech 1999:74-80).

Stella Bruzzi's underlying thesis is that the documentary "as prescribed by advocates of observational realism is an unrealisable fantasy, that documentary will forever be circumscribed by the fact that it is a mode of representation and thus can never elide the distance between image and event." She is quick to point out that she isn't arguing nonfiction films have no validity, "merely that the nonfiction film is (and largely always has been) aware of the limitations of the audio-visual media" (Bruzzi 2000:180). This argument holds that there is a perpetual negotiation between the real event being filmed and its representation on film in which the two remain separate, but act together. This seems to me to be a reasonable synthesis of the "are documentaries objective?" argument. The inherent nature of filming something means that it is a representation and not reality. I believe that understanding this can allow the filmmaker to create a narrative view of reality that describes the world around us without fearing a lack of Truth, with a capital "T."

Michael Renov moves beyond this debate to find four tendencies in documentary that make up the "principles of construction, function, and effect specific to nonfiction film and video." One is to record, reveal, or preserve. Two is to persuade or promote. Three is to analyze or interrogate. And Four is to express (Renov 1993:21). No matter which of these tendencies is emphasized – and despite the fact the subject matter is a real event or situation as opposed to a fictional character or event – there is still a sense of story and order to all documentary films. For even though they may not present a story in the conventional narrative forms we might expect, nonfiction films do share a formation of meaning through "internal seqeunciation" (Renov 1993:75). Providing a compelling narrative structure to a nonfiction film can help the film be both informative and interesting enough to watch, listen to, think about, and discuss.

The Narrative in Nonfiction Films

Unlike fiction, the final narrative that holds a documentary together is often unknown when filming starts. Albert Maysles, along with his late brother, David, is celebrated as one of the pioneers of direct cinema – the American version of the French cinéma vérité style. The brothers are known for using handheld shots with little if any interview interaction as they allowed life to unfold before the camera, with no direction of the subjects and situations. Yet each film they created – from a Beatles' visit to the U.S. in 1964, to four door-to-door Bible salesmen, to a portrait of an eccentric mother

and daughter in their decaying East Hampton mansion – was at heart, a story. Unlike a highly scripted Hollywood movie, the Maysles rarely knew what the story would be when they began their project. Nevertheless, they were constantly searching for a story to bring their film together and give it its meaning and purpose (Maysles 2002). Without a story to follow, who would watch – and learn?

Thus, even when a film's purpose is to document an event or situation, a narrative element is always present that brings the audience into a closer experience of the film. The most compelling ethnographic films often shed light on contemporary issues by documenting events in their entirety – depicting a narrative event from beginning to end and following the interactions of participants as they unfold (Sherman 1999:165). As Sherman notes, once we learn about someone's lives through film, it becomes impossible to regard them as strangers. "Film is a unique way of 'meeting' individuals whose lifestyles may differ but who are nevertheless similar to us in their concerns and traditions, whatever they may be."

This chance to introduce people to other people or concepts that are unfamiliar to them is what interests me about nonfiction films. It can be an incredibly powerful way to begin educating people about how social constructs in our society are formed – and open dialogues about how they might be changed or dismantled. That hope applies whether the problem is racism, sexism, class privilege, religious tolerance – any issue where people have incomplete knowledge or misperceptions.

Nonfiction Films and Social Awareness

When we use the powerful medium of film to combine nonfiction material with a compelling narrative and striking visual images, we can create a more potent tool in the arsenal to address social problems facing us all. This belief in the power of film to promote social change is what attracts many documentary filmmakers to nonfiction films, directly or not. Alan Rosenthal conducted a number of interviews to build a series of case studies in *The Documentary Conscience.* In doing so, he found that although the filmmakers he spoke with worked in vastly different ways, "all believe that the function of the documentary is to clarify choices, interpret history, and promote human understanding" (Rosenthal 1980:1).

Bruce Sinofsky and Joe Berlinger echo that calling. The two have created numerous documentaries together, and in an interview with Cinéaste in March 1993,

Berlinger commented, "we see ourselves as storytellers using nonfiction source material. […] In a good narrative, be it fiction or nonfiction, hopefully while you're watching you have this 'ah-ha' experience and something is revealed about the human condition, some universal truth about life or something in your own life. That's the kind of truth we're after in being good storytellers" (Lucia 1993).

Liz Garbus doesn't believe she is interested exclusively in social issues as subjects, but feels what it really attracts her is "stories of people whose lives are in transition or in some kind of crisis and working toward resolution" (Garbus 2002:112), She finds many of her stories in the criminal justice system, a world where the powerless – the uneducated, the poor, a disproportionate number of minorities, especially black males – often find themselves at the mercy of the American system of justice. Garbus echoes Sherman's feelings about the satisfaction of educating others by documenting the world. "I think that if I can expose people to the humanity of segments of the population that they're never exposed to, then I've done a really good job" (Garbus 2002:113). Sounds good to me, too.

Nonfiction Films – Are People Paying Attention?

But are people paying attention? We can't ignore that nonfiction films, like all acts of communication, are embedded in a relationship between the content of the film, the audience, and the context in which it is presented. The explicit text of the narrative is interpreted based on the background world knowledge of the members of the culture viewing it (Graesser 2002). Thus, judging what effect – direct or indirect, or if any at all – a film has on an audience is difficult to quantify and is usually based upon empirical evidence. In addition, every documentary will have a different purpose in mind – to inform, to analyze, to persuade, to express – or perhaps a combination of goals. When the film is specifically created to present new information about problematic issues of race, class, gender – or any other social issue about which people hold entrenched and often sensitive opinions – it may be difficult to get them to speak about the film or acknowledge any uncomfortable new perspectives. It's also possible that the film's effect is cumulative – it will be put into the context of other knowledge, perhaps not known at this time but discovered later. This is obviously much harder to gauge.

Nevertheless, it is possible to make subjective judgments about whether a film touches an audience or not. Robert Ferguson considered two documentary films

covering time periods over 30 years apart, and finds that in these two cases television documentaries did move viewers to question their status as "viewers or 'spectators'" (Ferguson 1998:192). The first film, *Eye on the Prize*, was produced by Blackside Productions in 1987 and covered major civil rights struggles in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Ferguson argues that in the "chilling, matter-of-fact politeness" of one of the white members of a Citizen's Council, viewers found themselves watching the power of the "simple interview to represent the threat of deeply held racist views." These images were surrounded by relaxed and restrained shots of African-Americans such as Unita Blackwell, "speaking quietly about her love for the Mississippi Delta as a place for which she and other African Americans had given blood, sweat and tears. It is their home." The comparison of the dignity of the blacks along with the cold racism of the whites living close to each other in a Mississippi town was hard for viewers to ignore – yet it would be impossible to know that the film changed anyone's opinions on race. But it is possible to speculate that it made at least some people view their world in a slightly different way than before – in large part because of the narrative way in which the information was presented.

Ferguson found a more visceral reaction came from *LA Stories: From the Eye of the Storm*, in which ten inhabitants of Los Angeles were given video cameras for a year in 1992 and 1993. Ferguson focuses on Ennis Beley, a 12-year-old African boy who faces the camera alone in his room and says honestly and simply, "My name is Ennis, and I hope to live to the end of 92 and 93. And I hope to make it through these years cuz, you know, niggers killin' little people cuz they didn't do nothin', and I hope to live to 25 years or more. I hope I live 'til God says I gotta go right then." Direct. Unflinching. Until he moves to turn the camera off, and seems near to tears. As Ferguson notes, analyzing a response to this kind of filmmaking doesn't easily lend itself to textual analysis. Yet he argues that the force of this presentation – and later when Ennis speaks to the camera of his friend called Goofy who was shot dead right in front of him – "transcends the specificity of the mode of representation." The power of what is wrong with this picture doesn't depend on the violence itself, but on its aftermath (Ferguson 1998:192-96). The story is made more powerful, too, by the narrative link as the viewer follows Ennis through his struggle to survive another year. A beginning, a middle, and hopefully a happy ending.

Alone, without discussion and communication with others, no film can really have an impact. It is through sharing with others that we put our thoughts into perspective as we hear other opinions – confirming or refuting what we saw – and what we were or were not willing to accept. We make personal judgments and choices about what we believe or not, although it may not always seem it is our choice. What films can do is give us valid information. It's up to us to take that knowledge and put it together with all of the other information and knowledge we have gathered in our lives to come up with our own informed and reasoned judgments and choices – no matter how hard they are to make in the face of society's expectations.

Nonfiction Films in the Classroom – A Personal Reaction

This summer, over three weekends, I attended a class entitled "Diversity & You," which dealt with the concepts of race, class, and gender. The concepts were taught through a mixture of lectures and class discussions, supplemented with readings and viewing short films in class. The class was a mixture of ages, genders, and races, and we discussed the lectures and films both as a class and within smaller groups. I felt the discussions were reasonably open, but a little bit uncomfortable, with people perhaps wanting to say things, but not wanting to get into arguments or be seen as insensitive – a very normal reaction. Nevertheless, in informal conversations, most students agreed they had received new information that gave them a better insight into the issues of racism, sexism, and class privilege. Whether this translates into a change in attitude on anyone's part is a mystery.

Because of my interest in films, and nonfiction documentary films in particular, I was curious to know how the short films were received by the class. The films reiterated information from the lectures and readings and also presented new information. I created a survey (Appendix I) which I sent out to a few class members, although this wasn't done until after class was completed. I was curious to find out what information, if any, they had taken away from the films; if this information had caused them to change any previously-held beliefs or not; if the films had been valuable to them in any way or not; if the way in which the films were presented made any difference in their understanding or acceptance of the content; if they would have watched films on their own or would recommend them to others; and finally, if the context in which they were viewed (a class specifically dealing with diversity) had any influence on their opinion of

the films. The survey was not quantifiable in that there were no right or wrong answers, but it was to be a subjective way to gauge people's reactions to the films based upon their narrative answers.

I included only the five films from the final weekend, all of which dealt with race, in order to focus my discussion – and because I thought there might be better recall of the films. Three of the films covered were documentaries that dealt with broad issues about race, and two were news segments highlighting specific situations. As all of the films progressed, they presented information that began to contradict what might have been assumed or expected when the film began. The class discussed each of the films immediately after viewing.

Unfortunately, I didn't receive any responses to my survey requests, whether because people didn't have much of a response to the films – or more likely because they just don't like filling out surveys. From our in- and out-of-class discussions, I suspect it is the later, but as a result, I have had to draw more heavily on the research of others regarding narrative and documentary than I would have wanted. Nevertheless, I will present a few comments I noted during class, as well as a brief synopsis of my own reactions to the films. It will be impossible to draw any valid conclusions from this, but I think it does provide some insight into what might make a viewing a film – or the creation of new films – more effective.

Following are the five films with a brief synopsis:

- *A Question of Color*: Color consciousness in black society – making judgments based upon similarities or differences to concepts of "white" beauty
- *Ethnic Notions*: Black stereotypes in American popular culture – pervasive, false, demeaning
- *Shattering the Silences*: Diversity on university campuses – it's not easy, even in an educational environment, to teach others about your racial or ethnic heritage in a sea of white
- *True Colors*: ABC News: Two "testers," one black and one white – same everyday situations, yet very different reactions to each man, every single time
- *America in Black & White*: Nightline: A young black girl's death - traffic accident or racism? – what seems to be a simple accident has much deeper implications… after you know the whole story

I found the two news segments – *True Colors* and *A Sense of Black and White* – most compelling and upsetting. In both cases, although I didn't realize it until I began to write this analysis, I now think this was due to the more narrative format of the presentation. These two pieces contained a more traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle, and end. Within these stories, we followed specific characters on their journeys. We started at point A and ended up at point B – even though point B might not have been where we unexpected. I remember them the best, and I can and have related them back to others. Some people in class questioned the validity of the off-screen interviewer in *A Sense of Black and White*, but generally seemed to agree that what started out to most of us as a simple traffic accident became something quite different when new facts were presented. Without those facts, we would have come away with a quite different perspective of what had happened.

The other films also presented new information, yet I find them harder to describe, except in the broadest terms. They were each held together by a common theme – appearance and acceptance, stereotypes, struggles in the world of higher education – yet it seems harder to remember specifics, or exactly what we were to take away from the films. It isn't that the films didn't make an impression – I do remember being struck about the pervasiveness of worry about being closer to a "white" ideal of beauty, and I remember feeling uncomfortable about realizing that stories that I read as a child, like "Little Black Sambo," were racist.

I found that others in the class picked up on the specific types of stereotypes portrayed in *Ethnic Notions* better than I did. I was probably more concerned with just the sense of how insidious the stereotypes can be. In our class discussion, it was revealing that there seemed to be a difference in opinion over hairstyles between the white women and the African-American women. During discussions, African-Americans saw their hairstyle as meaningful to who they are as people, while the white women in class saw it more of as simply a matter of looking nice – not being judged by their hair as a person. The communication about issues raised in the films highlighted the differences in how we all view something as basic as our hairstyles.

Perhaps the last film on the difficulties facing minority teachers at universities was least compelling for a couple of reasons – it was the last film of the class and we were all tired, but even more so, it was a long film in terms of presenting too much

material. The stories could have been much more sharply drawn and might have been more effective.

Final Thoughts

Before taking this class, I had been interested in learning more about the role narratives play in our social development so that we can create compelling documentary films about various social issues facing us today. However, somewhat amazingly I think now, I hadn't yet considered the importance and value of testing to determine just what makes these kinds of films effective and valuable to others. As the class went along and I thought about a research study project – something I had never done before – I eventually came up with the idea of creating a survey to ask class members about the films we viewed and discussed in class in order to confirm or deny my expectation that documentary films can present narratives to audiences that open up new dialogues about social issues such as race, class, and gender.

Despite the dismal response to my survey, I do believe this is a valid way of testing what an audience takes away from a film. I hadn't considered the value of creating a survey to gauge responses before, but I am excited to begin thinking in terms of actually questioning and trying to analyze – however subjectively – people's reactions to a film, both immediately after viewing and also with a follow-up at a later period. If I were to do this again, I would obviously create the survey in advance and hand it out immediately after the final film was viewed. This would both give a better response in terms of numbers and in terms of recall.

In assessing the responses, although many of the answers would have to be viewed subjectively, some questions were phrased to require a more readable response. We should be able to get a sense of which films were most or least effective in creating some sense of awakening or discomfort – and possibly a willingness to at least consider alternative perspectives that weren't or wouldn't have been considered before viewing the film. In addition, it would be important to consider the context in which the films were viewed – in a class setting specifically directed at increasing awareness of the issues. Finally, I wonder about the cumulative effect of films that point out new perspectives. Will they eventually be tuned out, or will they eventually listened to in the context of new information? That would lend itself to some kind of follow-up survey, again something I hadn't considered before taking this class.

I think this quote by Rosenthal helps explain why I believe that, quantifiable or not, nonfiction films can be a valuable tool to deal with social issues in our world. In introducing *The Documentary Conscience,* Rosenthal notes that he had been asked "whether the crusading film maker accomplished anything besides salvaging his or her own conscience and influencing a small section of the open-minded who had seen the program at off-peak hours." (Rosenthal 1980:31) While he initially argued that even though it is difficult to correlate specific responses to specific films or television programs, television as a whole did have an impact during and after the Vietnam war on changing public opinions, however indirectly. Later, though, he came to see what I feel is the essence of documentary filmmaking – the filmmaker as "not only one who tries to bring about direct change, but as one who bears witness." There are stories that must be told, and film is a powerful way to tell them.

Thus, my hope would be that we can create and communicate new narratives through nonfiction films that have the chance to educate, enlighten, provoke. If we can do that, it just might be possible to have a positive impact on dismantling such social problems as racism, sexism, and class privilege. People must make up their own minds about what they choose to believe. Inspired filmmakers can create compelling narratives that give them the information they need to be sure they are making choices based on correct and complete information.

Appendix I
Survey

Documentary Films: Information and Persuasion

1. Gender: __Male   __ Female
2. Age: __18-25   __ 26-30   __ 31-35   __ 36-40   __41+
3. Income: __0-20,000   __20,001-30,000   __31,000-40,000   __40,001+
4. Race:
    __ White   __Black or African American   __American Indian or Alaska Native
    __Hispanic or Latino   __ Asian American   __Some other race
    __Two or more races
5. Had you seen any of the following films before viewing in class?   __Yes   __ No

    • *A Question of Color*: Color consciousness within black society
    • *Ethnic Notions*: Black stereotypes in American popular culture
    • *True Colors*: Two "testers," one black and one white
    • *America in Black &White*: A young black girl's death - traffic accident or racism?
    • *Shattering the Silences*: Diversity on university campuses

6. Which of the films do you remember the most? (It can be more than one.)
7. What do you recall about each film? Why?
8. Which of the films do you remember least? (It can be more than one.)
9. Can you explain why?
10. Did any of the films present you with new information or perspectives about race to consider? If so, which ones and what new information or perspective?
11. What was most effective about the films in terms of addressing race? (It could be the content itself or the context of how the information was presented.)
12. Were there things that bothered you about the films? (It could be the content itself or the context of how the information was presented.)
13. Did the films change any attitudes or beliefs about race that you might have held before you viewed the films? If so, what and how? If not, why not?
14. Would you recommend that others view these films? If so, which ones and why? If not, why not?
15. Would you have chosen to view any of these films on your own? If so, which ones? Why? If not, why not?
16. Did you feel viewing these films was valuable? Why or why not?
17. If you felt the films were valuable to you, would they have been as helpful if you had viewed them on your own, without the class discussions following? Why or why not?
18.   Is there anything else you would like to add about the films and how, or if, they had any affect or influence on your knowledge and understanding about race? (It could be things such as the content itself, or how the films were presented by their authors, or the context in which they were viewed.)

<p style="text-align:center">BIBLIOGRAPHY</p>

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