

with politics, and with considerations of gender, and that it not accept the opposition between high art (high theory) and mass culture (low theory). These are essentially the same concerns as *Studies in Entertainment*, but in a less finely tuned form.

MacCabe's own essay, "Defining Popular Culture" contents itself with expanding on these three themes. Yet it also contains the curious claim that semiotic and psychoanalytic critical approaches, admittedly successful in discussing classic Hollywood cinema and much European and American avant-garde film, are not useful in analysing new Hollywood films or any form of television. MacCabe doesn't offer a reason for this proclamation regarding the decline of semiotics. This, however, isn't important because it probably would be no less absurd than his explanation regarding the so-called failure of psychoanalysis:

Could the problem be one of register: that within the still confines of the seminar room or weekend school any text [he cites elsewhere Young Mr. Lincoln and Touch of Evil] can be made to deliver up its sexual meanings, but that in the noisier ambiance of the classroom or the first year lecture theatre, the lecturer suddenly appears perverse as he or she gamely struggles to explicate the dilemmas of castration; the dialectic of having and being suddenly reduced to the pathetic ramblings of a sex-obsessed adult.

It would seem that MacCabe dismisses two critical practices central to cultural studies (and used with great success in *Studies in Entertainment*) because undergrads might think that they're silly.

The weakness of MacCabe's own writing, both in its structure and thought, leads to the suspicion that it is ineffective editing which is responsible for many of the flaws within *High Theory/Low Culture*. Also, one of the most irritating experiences when reading the text is to have one's eye movement stopped on almost every other page by the proliferation of typographical errors.

Another crossover contributor to the text, along with Gillian Skirrow, is Tania Modleski.

In "Feminity [sic] as Mas[s]querade: A Feminist Approach to Mass Culture" she examines the orthodox position of the literary historian, in which mass culture is condemned as a "feminised" culture. She then assesses the works of Manuel Puig, author of *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, and theoretician Jean Baudrillard. Both these authors affirm mass culture for its resemblance to the feminine. Modleski reminds us that the feminine has been alternately denigrated and exalted, and that this latest development must be examined with caution.

Modleski's essay is in the middleground of academic excellence within the collection. Laura Mulvey stands out as the strongest writer with her article "Melodrama In and Out of the Home." Moving easily among critics such as Thomas Elsaesser and Walter Benjamin, she describes the history of the Hollywood melodrama, typified by the films of Douglas Sirk, and how "women's films" developed as a reinstatement of the domestic within films in order to compete with the new form of home entertainment, television.

Elsewhere, in "Hearing Secret Harmonies," Simon Frith starts a paper on the 'issues of experience' in capitalism, moves on to a discussion of "the Barry Manilow problem" and vacillates between wondering how a musical score relates to images in a film, and how music has itself become culturally encoded with emotional values. Frith writes within a semiotic discourse, which he himself apparently does not recognize, for if he had, he might have had an argument somewhere. Not surprisingly, Frith gives social-ism sole credit for blurring the distinction between the public and private spheres without acknowledging more obvious feminist contributions on that score.

Other contributors to *High Theory/Low Culture* are: Laura Kipnis, "Refunctioing reconsidered: towards a left popular culture"; Douglas Gomery, "The Popularity of Filmgoing in the U.S."; Jane Feuer, "Narrative Form in American Network Television"; Andrew Tolso, "Popular Culture: Practice and Institution"; and John

Caughie, "Popular Culture: Notes and Revisions".

High Theory/Low Culture is an indication of the potentially exciting work which can be produced within popular cultural studies. It offers pieces of criticism, historical description, and theory on film, television, and music, as well as a questioning of how popular culture might be defined and taught. *Studies in Entertainment*, however, realizes much more successfully *High Theory/Low Culture*'s aspirations.

Peggy Hill.

**"Show Us Life" :
Toward a History and
Aesthetics of the
Committed
Documentary** . ed.
Thomas Waugh. Scarecrow
Press, Inc. 1984.

Within film theory, which has become increasingly esoteric over the last decade through massive infusions of semiotics, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and narratology, "committed documentary" continues to remain conspicuously "other". Categorically condemned for its alleged naive belief in "objectivity" - in the possibility of an unmediated representation of "reality" - documentary has been exempted from canonical film theory, which finds more tantalizing grist for its mill in disrobing Hollywood narrative and its avant-garde rejoinders. The result has been that, with a few notable exceptions, specific frameworks for analysing documentary have been glaringly few and far between.

The reasons for this absence are complex and overdetermined by the institutionalization of film studies within the academy, with its tendency to theoreticis. If documentary remains unspoken it is because it doesn't fit, proves resistant to analysis by the post-structuralist/psychoanalytic machine. Which is why endeavours to fit documentary into this critical paradigm, such as Christian Metz's argument that *all* film is fiction "from the beginning," can only reduce the specificity of documentary address. The difference repre-

sented by radical documentary practice is that it is characterized by its intentional production of subjects for concrete and referential causes: anti-imperialist, feminist, socialist, lesbian and gay liberation, etc. And despite the obvious mediation of documentary "reality" by cinematic codes and conventions, what is distinctive about our response as spectators stems from our extra-textual knowledge - that those bodies being gunned down, that woman speaking about her experience are *not* fictional constructs but "real" historic events and individuals. To ignore the specificity of this address can only contribute to a dangerous theoreticism and a widening chasm between theory and those consituencies, who all too often appear in film theory as discursive abstracts.

The real task then would not be to submerge documentary analysis into a critical puree nor to leave it entirely exempt from the kinds of considerations developed by contemporary film theory concerning the relation between textual operations and the process of subjectivity and desire. What we could propose is an exchange of questions, a theoretical and political intercourse between radical documentary and film theory. And it just might be on that terrain that a revolutionary subject could be thought.

Tom Waugh's *"Show Us Life" : Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* goes a long way to addressing some of these divisions within film theory. Waugh in fact sees the anthology as intervening to resolve the gap between "the new methodologies developed in the seventies" by film theory and political film criticism "still dominated by *ad hoc* critical principles, outdated conceptual models, and the all-too-frequent substitution of ideological fervor or indignation for solid analysis." The book's project of modernizing political film criticism, however, involves not only the incorporation of new conceptual frameworks but a critical favouring of particular types of political documentary. From Vertov through to Joris Ivens and the new left, Third World and feminist experiments of the sixties and seventies, the films analysed all move beyond an alleged "objectivity" and

classical structure of observation. "Each one," writes Waugh, "endeavours to move beyond observation, and all of its inherent liabilities: humanist ambiguity, false objectivity, liberal empiricism, and the complicity of spectacle. They undertake rather to accede to the level of intervention..."

The anthology is arranged into three sections. Part I documents the achievements of the "pioneers": Vertov, the granddaddy of "committed documentary," Esther Shub, Joris Ivens, and the CP supported newsreel collectives of the 1930s. Part II examines contemporary political documentarists of the West and Part III provides an intriguing investigation of the departures of the Third World documentary, largely Latin American.

One of the strengths of this anthology lies in its insistence that specific documentary practices and movements can only be understood in light of the historical, social and institutional conditions of production and reception which determine the meaning and effectiveness of texts - something which psychoanalytic film criticism with its nearly exclusive focus on textual analysis and its too frequent theorization of the subject as abstract textual effect has a great deal to learn from. Waugh's own piece on Joris Iven's *The Spanish Earth*, with its detailed historical research and depth of insight into the relationship between Iven's film and documentary tradition, is particularly exemplary in this regard. Here, Waugh traces how the formal innovations in *The Spanish Earth*, its use of mise en scene, its experimentation with characterization and narrative vocabulary, evolved in response to the historical contingencies of war and revolution, popular front initiatives and the exigencies of production.

Nevertheless, one limitation of the collection has to do with the failure of many essays to move beyond contextual analysis to a theoretical consideration of specific textual operations and their effects - a failure that the historical section seems particularly prone to. While making a substantial contribution to the development of historical research into neglected areas and filmmakers, the writing in this section tends largely to be

descriptive and anecdotal, and falls somewhat short of the successful integration of new methodologies with documentary inquiry.

What makes it a compelling read, though, are the details recalled concerning the ingeniousness of political documentarists in situations where costs, availability of resources and state censorship made production an almost impossible undertaking. Bert Hogenkamp in his article on "Workers' Newsreels during the Twenties and Thirties," for example, recounts how workers' film societies in pre-Nazi Germany and Holland procured commercial newsreels which had passed the censor, re-edited these to "highlight class contradictions," and, after screening and discussions, edited them back to their original format to return to the distributor.

Russell Campbell's piece on "Radical Documentary in the United States, 1930-42" provides a fascinating insight into the integral role that radical documentarists played in communist party mobilizations during the thirties: documenting police violence at demonstrations; producing shorts for use in the organization of strikes, union drives, and unemployed marches; and organizing the extensive exhibition of Russian films during this period.

It is within the section on contemporaries that the debate concerning the theory and practice of political documentary heats up as prescriptive models fight it out as favoured prototypes of revolutionary cinema. For Julia Lesage and Barbara Halpern Martineau, the didactic "talking heads" approach of early feminist documentaries emerges as the favoured political strategy. Ann Kaplan concurs, arguing that the realist strategies of Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County* have to be evaluated, not in terms of any modern aesthetic, but in terms of their ability to "focus political issues" and to act "as a source of inspiration."

While the general tendency of the articles selected in this section is to defend populist and verite approaches (such as Chuck Kleinham's pragmatic political advice to documentarists), a certain 'modernist'

difference is marshalled in the pieces by Steven Neale, Julianna Burton, and Clare Johnston and Paul Willeman. For Johnston and Willeman, two of the more prominent arbiters of canonical film theory, agit prop cinema remains problematically immersed in a rationalist and pre-psychoanalytic conception of ideology and the subject/text relation which assumes that "individuals and groups participate in some mythical unity of consciousness." "The effect of such a form of realism," they argue, "is to convey the impression of a homogeneous world - a false sense of continuity and coherence reinforced by identification: the impression that truth can indeed be manifest out there in the visible world." Forwarding the Brechtian inspired film *The Nightcleaners* as "the most accomplished example of political cinema," Willeman and Johnston argue for a self-reflexive and non-instrumental approach to political cinema where particular textual strategies and the film's process of production and engagement of spectators are themselves constituted as the means of political intervention.

While Willeman and Johnston's intervention is of critical importance to any consideration of contemporary documentary, there is a disturbing tendency in their argument to fetishize certain cinematic techniques (such as the inclusion of black leader or stepprinting) as inherently revolutionary and to reify the spectator as a disembodied instance. Surely, however, the effect of any technique is utterly dependent on context, on the specific referential concerns articulated by the film itself, on particular social audiences who would read these specific techniques as material indications of textual transformation and not simply as "noise."

The debate is irresolvable. But, perhaps, the oppositional terms might be productively reconsidered, not simply as form versus content, or even by Godard's opposition between political films and making films politically, but in relation to differing theorizations of spectatorship, political transformation, and ideology. These issues are irresolvable within a metacommentary on documentary because - and this is the anthology's most forceful

point - political effectiveness is dependent on specific historical contexts, sites of reception, and the particular sexed, classed, raced, and committed audiences that cinema addresses.

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Cultures in Contention
Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier, eds. Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1985.

To a degree largely unrecognized in both mainstream art media and left journals, the contestative dimension of 1960s activist politics has been continued in the cultural sphere, leading to a revival of the political avant-garde art tradition often pronounced dead. Still, even for radical artists the development of theory and techniques appropriate to challenge manufactured consciousness has, according to Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier, all too often been carried out in the kind of isolation that encourages - and requires - reinventing the wheel. Their anthology, *Cultures in Contention*, expanded from the 1981 Art Politik conference in Seattle, is intended to overcome this isolation by stimulating critical and theoretical discussion among artists, activists and intellectuals and by providing some practical guides for countering "the vacuities and repressions of contemporary capitalist society."

The 24 largely original contributions range widely over the arts (from music to theatre), the media (from the radical hoax journalism of Gunter Walraff to free radio in Japan), and forms of community struggle (from mobilizations in the South Bronx against the film *Fort Apache, The Bronx*, to anti-urban renewal projects in the London Docklands). What they all have in common is a view of culture as situated in a space between the narrow definitions of high art and the global definitions of anthropology. They also share a willingness to take cultural interventions seriously because "cultural self-representation is inseparable



from political representation."

Developing the interventionist requires a consciousness than the mere content, of course. Form are involved realist artistic continues to be well as the con production an artist to audien to the last, in approaches tak tors vary wide

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