

Speaking Truths With Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary

by Bill Nichols

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When Bill Nichols, film theoretician, professor, author, and critic comes out with a new book, we sit up and take notice. Widely regarded as a trailblazer in the study of documentary film, it is entirely fitting that we consider this work within these pages. His ten previously published books form a comprehensive and engaging exploration of the genre. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, published in 1991 by Indiana University Press, is perhaps Nichols' most widely referenced book by practicing filmmakers. The best selling *Introduction to Documentary*, second edition 2010, has become a staple text used in college film studies programs. His *modes of representation* are useful in helping instructors describe to students what they are seeing.

He has written hundreds of essays and film reviews but his on-going teaching (he has been a professor of cinema at San Francisco State since 1987 and is currently at the University of Colorado, Boulder) as well as his consulting work with filmmakers and the up-to-date blog on his web site (<https://billnichols.net/>) demonstrates his active engagement with the ever evolving cultural milieu we live in.

The *Encyclopedia of International Film* entry that discusses his work states, "...Nichols is arguably the most significant documentary scholar in the world. Given his pioneering role in international academic inquiry, it is unlikely that this judgment will ever need revision" (Vol. 2, p. 997). While this statement about his place in the annals of documentary may be true, it is Bill Nichols himself who recognizes the importance that revision plays in the release of this new book, *Speaking Truths With Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary*. This volume brings together a selection of eighteen previously published essays over more than forty years but they were not written in stone, for as Nichols states in the preface "The field has changed, and I have as well." He admits, "I've made no attempt to preserve the essays in their original form. I've taken liberties." Those "liberties" reflect an awareness not only of simple grammatical flaws that existed in the work, but Nichols also reconsidered conceptual meanings, up-dates required when the inevitable advances of time and technology demanded it. The ultimate goal of producing a book of greater value to the field has been achieved because of Nichols' recognition of the necessity to reflect and revise.

The story that emerges from these pages, on one level, begins and ends in the same place. In 1972 Bill Nichols submitted his master's thesis on *Newsreel*, the New York and San Francisco based leftist leaning filmmaking group that covered the anti-Vietnam War movement, racism, civil unrest and produced one of the first feminist documentaries. (This thesis is still available on his website <https://billnichols.net/ma-thesis/> which speaks to its importance at the threshold of his career.) At the time, Nichols entertained thoughts of becoming a screenwriter, and his motivations were rooted in his political sympathies rather than visual analysis. It was those same sociological, leftist leaning inclinations that drew his attention to fiction film, when he focused on the concept of the "outsider" in works such as *Easy Rider*. However, it was the visual

representation of meaning that gradually preoccupied him and drew his attention to the avant-garde and filmmakers like Antonioni, Goddard, Truffaut, Fellini and Bergman.

In Part I of this book, *Documentary Meets the Neighbors: The Avant-Garde and Fiction Film*, while packed with historical referents, it also resonates with an immediacy that helps us to understand the hyperactive media environment we find ourselves in today. Pithy statements such as “Much can be documented, but most documents are not documentaries” can be viewed in an historical context of early cinema when we were infatuated with, and believed in the truth or “authenticity” of the image simply because it existed. It also is an accurate critique of the more recent reality TV phenomena. Here Nichols introduces the importance of narrative. It is “narrative” that “imbues time with historical meaning. Narrative allows documentary to endow occurrences with the significance of historical events.”

There is a fluidity in his writing that gently forces us to see the “blurred boundaries” (also the title of Nichols’ 1994 book, a study of the “indeterminacies between historical and fictional representation”) the overlapping influences between all forms of visual expression. In reading these essays brought together for the first time, one is often struck by how much is illuminated, not only within the boundaries of documentary film but far beyond them into the historical, political, social and cultural world that provides the fertile ground where ideas take root.

Part II, *The Audio in Audiovisual*, tackles what is often the weak link in documentary, the thing usually left till last by the novice filmmaker, the sound track. It is in this chapter that Nichols most often acknowledges one of his favorite documentaries, Errol Morris’ *The Thin Blue Line*. Although released in 1988, “it is in many ways the voice of documentary today.” He goes on to say, “Morris, in particular with his landmark film...expertly and powerfully coupled the anthropological and surreal impulses of early documentary with the rise of the sync interview in the 1960’s to extraordinary effect.”

In Part III, *Beyond “Just the Facts”: Evidence, Interpretation and Social Context* Nichols’ writing transcended the academic and for this reader became transformative, a form of therapeutic knowledge. In the section on *The Terrorist Event*, he contextualized 9/11 in a way that made the inconceivable, knowable, providing a vehicle to understand what shaped our experience of this event, a process that may never end.

A natural follow-up to 9/11 is the section that analyzes the Tim Herrington, Sebastian Junger, 2010 film, *Restrepo, A Case of Inadvertent Evidence*. “Identified as ‘nonpolitical’ because unlike *Why We Fight* (Eugene Jarecki, 2005) *Iraq for Sale* (Robert Greenwald, 2006), or *Taxi to the Dark Side* (Alex Gibney, 2007) it claims no political position, casts no moral judgment, and advocates no specific course of action.” Just in the simple act of showing we see compelling evidence of the “sheer folly of it all.”

In *Further Reflections, Notes on Trauma* Nichols returns to Errol Morris in an open letter that takes a very different position than the one he previously took in *The Thin Blue Line*. Subtitled *Feelings of Revulsion and the Limits of Academic Discourse* make undeniably clear the scathing opinion Nichols brings to discussing *Standard Operating Procedure* Morris’s 2008 film about the torture that occurred at Abu Ghraib. For 8 pages Nichols delineated why he found this film so revolting. At one point he tells Morris “I feel violated. I feel I am being shown terrible crimes against humanity and getting nothing back that helps me address the issues these images raise.” He goes on to discuss Joshua Oppenheimer’s much admired and awarded 2012 film *The Act of Killing*

performing a compare/contrast as to why this film dealing with wartime atrocities works and why *Standard Operating Procedure* fails.

In Part 5, the last section of the book, Nichols returns to the question of the political, the motivating factor that in 1972 initially drew his attention to documentary. The first essay here looks at San Francisco Newsreel, the internal structure of this filmmaking collective and the films they produced. The last section deals with *The Political Documentary and the Question of Impact*. This last brief, but powerful chapter is a meditation on where we find ourselves today, the state of the documentary and of democracy itself. While Nichols acknowledges the “numerous, often terrific documentaries of recent years on the Iraq War, the Bush White House, the corporation as a psychopathic entity, the environment as an unfolding disaster, the global economy as sign of the end of the nation-state and the rise of transnational corporate hegemony, the terrors of a so-called war on terror, and the horrors of ethnic conflict and genocidal cleansings...” but questions whether they are “as powerful an antidote as one might think? I often wonder.” He goes on to outline his doubts about the ability of documentary films, singularly or collectively to make the kind of “impact” that ignites the ground swell of reform activity we experienced in the 1960’s. Part of the problem he attributes to the term “impact” and it’s assessment which has become ubiquitous in the funding world of documentary film. Rather than finding themselves trapped by the confines of the “social impact metrics movement” Nichols encourages all of us who have some say in the making of film to “treasure and fund genuinely political documentaries that rely on the art and craft of filmmaking to move us in those mysterious, unfathomable ways great works always do.” This is the kind of “impact” that is immeasurable.