BOOK REVIEWS:


The contemporary academic monster that we call theory shares one quality with documentary film: no one is quite sure how to define it. Both theory and documentary describe texts whose fuzzy boundaries constantly threaten the disciplinary taxonomies we apparently need to circumscribe our intellectual activities. As it happens, these two are antithetically defined: theory seems bent inward towards abstraction, documentary outward, as Bill Nichols says, towards the "magnitude" and "full dimensionality of the world." But while the study of cinema, as Hollis Frampton grumbled of all post-Enlightenment inquiry, has conjured "hundred-legged theories of practically everything," it has so far largely ignored documentary. Those who decry the dearth of documentary film theory charge that biases in the discipline towards aesthetics (or the narrative film commodity) have prevented documentary from getting its due.

Now, two of documentary's most able defenders, Bill Nichols and Michael Renov, have nobly stepped into the breach. Along with such recent events as the establishment of an annual cinema studies conference on documentary, Visible Evidence, these books are well timed to provide some guidance through the maze of increasingly complex and publicly visible non-fiction film and video emerging in theatrical release, broadcast news, "reality" programming, and specialized cable channels.

Attention to non-fiction film in cinema studies is long overdue. Its urgency should have been grasped after the post-'68 politicization of cinema studies, when concern with the ideological effects of illusionism became the bedrock of what we now call contemporary film theory. But, as Nichols correctly observed in his groundbreaking 1981 book Ideology and the Image.

It is odd that so much theoretical attention should go to those areas where the film itself (narrative and now experimental film) at least calls attention to the fact to it being an illusion and so very little to documentary where the challenge of meeting this illusionism head on is greatest.

Nichols's new study, Representing Reality, is an improvement on Ideology and the Image. It is also, without question, the most important book on
documentary film yet published. The improvement is easy to describe: instead of the schematic spectator politics of Ideology and the Image, the new book offers a full and varied analysis of documentary form. One must admire the degree Nichols is able to use the critical tools, but resist the logic of, "the semiotic and poststructural universe." That logic, he observes, leads to that dismissal of "the relationship between a sign and its referent" which makes of so much theory "the discursive 'prison-house.'" Nichols recognizes that that logic takes us to a radical skepticism which so divorces the documentary image from reality that it wholly dismantles the politics of image intervention.

So, instead, while Nichols comprehensively accounts for the formal and discursive qualities of documentary film ("what qualities of cinema underpin it, what institutional structures sustain it, what rhetorical operations inform it, what interpretive perspectives encompass it"), he simultaneously insists that "the linkage between documentary and the historical world is the most distinctive feature of this tradition."

Representing Reality is cast in a dense and allusive writing style that everywhere offers evidence of Nichols's command of disciplines as diverse as classical rhetoric, hard science, legal ethics, and political theory. This eclecticism is justly demanded of the critic writing on documentary, given the multiplicity of documentary content. This demand also makes Nichols's book, at its best, a vertiginously speculative investigation into the richness and complexity of documentary film. Nevertheless, though wide-ranging, his approach is consistent with Nichols's polemical wish to jumpstart documentary theory. A consequence, however, is that the book sometimes feels scattered, and only inconsistently convincing in its application of theory to criticism. Teachers of documentary will find Nichols's updated taxonomy, "Documentary Modes of Representation," useful as they also will his extended discussion of the intersection of narrative and rhetorical tropes. However, Nichols's writing is, in my experience, indigestible by most undergraduates and the book will require considerable pedagogical mediation to work in a classroom. These problems, however, are best seen as a challenge to the field to follow up a remarkable vanguard study.

Instead of trying to synthesize, as Nichols does, the essays Michael Renov has assembled to make Theorizing Documentary indicate the rewards of approaching documentary through variable topoi arising in those disciplines that intersect with documentary content. Using the tools of historiography, Philip Rosen demonstrates the importance of returning to Grierson's understanding of the significance modern technologies of indexical documentation and mass distributibility hold when they are mobilized for public education.

Two of the most impressive essays in the book draw on interdisciplinary discursive paradigms to make important interventions into documentary film history. In the first, Paul Arthur isolates three historical moments of American documentary and, charting their relation to shifts in American liberalism, he furnishes a model of how one might relate film style to politics in a non-reductive manner. In the second, Brian Winston attacks the scientistic rationalizations behind claims for documentary objectivity (buttressed with, count 'em, 100 footnotes) via an unimincing assault on the specious rhetoric of direct cinema and cinema vérité.

Ana M. López and Bill Horrigan have written refreshingly informative critical essays and mobilize discourses of nationalism and postmodernism. López's essay treats the Brazilian television essay America and activist cultural studies and public policy research, Horrigan's elaborates an "appreciation" of AIDS documentary.

Other essays also invoke useful paradigms, though they are in themselves less impressive contributions. These include, disappointingly enough, Renov's own writing. Trinh T. Minh-ha takes on the colonialism inherent in anthropology and ethnography; Renov explores narrative, poetics, and psychoanalysis; Susan Scheibler deploys psychoanalysis in pursuit of that obsessive and elusive object of documentary representation, death. All these essays, however, get caught in that master discourse that so often serves as the secret foundation of the "prison-house" Nichols seeks to avoid: epistemology. In jousting at the windmill of Truth, all fall into a discursive circularity whose rewards can be limited to radical skepticism, faux-Derridean language play, or paradox. For example, Trinh's critique of ethnography targets a discipline that deserves it. But her attack would better serve its serious political purpose with a more precise historical investigation than with homilies like

Truth and meaning: the two are likely to be equated with one another. Yet what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than a meaning.

Scheibler's essay raises a crucial issue: the role of desire (for knowledge, for certainty, for power) in our "drive to documentary." But her rehearsal of Lacanian theories of suture and spectatorship seem even less convincingly applied to documentary than they do when applied to fantasy-driven narrative cinema. However, interestingly enough, it is the range of approaches to documentary showcased in Renov's book that, in its strengths and weaknesses, points to salutary future directions in documentary film theory.


There is no doubt of the need for scripts of Canadian films to be edited, annotated and published or that these things seldom occur. While both of these books are welcome under the circumstances, they represent extremes of quality in preparation and production. Judging from the inept and defensive introduction and preface by the two editors, *Best Canadian Screenplays* is intended mainly for the student screenwriter. It is a fat and quite expensive volume with big print and poor binding. A few hours working with the book, and it begins to fall apart. This is a shame and suggests that students will find it a frustrating purchase.

Whether these are the five best Canadian screenplays is, to say the least, questionable—and co-editor Douglas Bowie rightly qualifies it as "five of our best." Two of scripts represent classical works, *Goin' Down the Road* (by Don Shebib) and *Mon Oncle Antoine* (by Claude Jutras). The other three are newer and likely ephemeral—at least one doubts *My American Cousin* (by Sandy Wilson) is any more likely a work for the ages than, say, *Why Shoot the Teacher, Jesus of Montreal* (by Denys Arcand) is, as a script, not nearly so intricate or sophistication as its predecessor in Arcand's oeuvre, *The Decline of the American Empire*. The Grey Fox similarly suffers from comparison with, say, *The Far Shore*, even on Fox's light-headed lyrical terms.

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**NOTES**


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Critics or researchers will welcome this volume of scripts but they will find the volume's lack of apparatus disappointing. There are no credits, dates of the scripts' preparation or dates of production. The screen writers each offer a brief introduction, but of limited, anecdotal interest. Although there is indication of script material which was cut in editing, it is unclear whether the texts were derived from final shooting script or a print of the final film. (I suspect the former.) Frankly, we are grown used to such courtesies, for example, in the University of Wisconsin film script series, which has set the standard for this sort of thing.

At the other extreme, Coach House's production of *Speaking Parts* surpasses these standards. It is almost luxurious and could happily be mistaken for a better sort of art gallery catalogue devoted to its writer and director, Atom Egoyan. In addition to the script, there is an introductory essay by Ron Burnett of McGill University, an Egoyan interview with Marc Glassman, a short and revealing essay by the director, and a well prepared filmography.

Read this book and several issues come to mind. The first is the necessity of its elaboration, which is a bit saddening. Egoyan is widely praised as the leading English-Canadian director of his generation but no critic has come forward with a cogent account of why he is to be so highly evaluated. The writing on Egoyan is just "clippings" and, for a director of his intellectual and artistic ambition, this must be galling. For those of us who ambivalently admire the idea of Atom Egoyan projected by his publicity—but have never been able to see that idea realized on the screen—the wait for someone to show us what we have been missing, through insensitivity, seems peculiarly long, even inexplicably so now that his films, and *Speaking Parts*, especially, have become classroom fixtures. If Egoyan is today's exemplum of experimentalism in Canadian feature-film cinema, the least question (though it is also a most polysemous question) we might like to have answered is "What does Atom Egoyan mean?"

In this respect, appreciation of this volume must be limited to the ceremominal. Egoyan's interview with Glassman and Burnett's introductory essay are no help in answering our question. The interview strays away from *Speaking Parts* chatters comfortably within the director's familiar press profile, and then slips into promoting his "breakthrough" (but to what?) new film *Calendar*. For that sort of thing we have suitably perishable magazines and newspapers.

Burnett's essay is amazingly facile, even for ceremonial purposes. It is almost the sort of thing a film professor squeezes out if he isn't sure what to say and reaches for some readymade assertions of aesthetic importance. These, as usual lately, pertain to themes of disassociated...