

Evidence as Subject Matter

Several documentaries made in the last three decades take a similarly self-critical approach to the way evidence is used by nonfiction film and video makers, historians, reporters, and even lawyers. While their main subject might be external to the process of representation—racial disturbances, for example—the problems they examine often involve the authenticity of the evidential material itself. What types of evidence should be considered acceptable in a documentary film or video? What are the consequences of including or omitting a particular piece of evidence? And what interests do these choices serve? These questions are familiar to most, if not all, documentary makers, but we do not necessarily expect to see them included in the films themselves. When this happens, evidence becomes a documentary subject in its own right, a topic worthy of attention.

Several of these documentaries expose what they see as fraudulent or biased interpretations of evidential material. Some suggest that the management of information is a privilege of government and corporate public relations and are happy to counter the “official evidence” with independent judgments. Others acknowledge the impossibility of so-called objective reporting to get at anything close to the truth. It is not simply that documentary makers are driven by their own ideology; they often feel that the longer form gives them leeway to analyze, explain, and put things into contexts, helping to guide viewers through the tide of information.

Handsworth Songs (1986), a British documentary by the Black Audio Film Collective, exemplifies this approach to nonfiction filmmaking by contrasting different types of evidential material and interrogating the traditional goals of nonfictional representation. While the underlying theme in the film is the 1985 racial disturbances in Handsworth, Birmingham, *Handsworth Songs* also makes us think about the way the media handle information, what they do with existing evidence, and what consequences their choices may have. More interestingly, even though the film uses criticism of mainstream journalism as a structuring device, it does not merely present a new version of the racial disturbances. Rather, *Handsworth Songs* “challenge[s] the assumption that you can ever tell it like it is,” as director John Akomfrah put it (Fusco, “An Interview with Black Audio Film Collective” 50–53). Instead of “correcting” television news reports or filling in the holes they willingly leave empty, *Handsworth Songs* took as its agenda “to reopen the questions.”

Regardless of the fact that more white people than blacks were arrested in earlier unrest, a popular image grew of a black threat with the black male youth as

the archetypal instigator. By the time of the 1985 disturbances in Handsworth, there was an already established, limited aural and visual vocabulary about blacks in Britain—what Coco Fusco calls a “riot iconography.” And the image of the antagonisms between black male youth and the police was a consistent and primary factor in the formation of this riot iconography (“A Black Avant-Garde” 10–18). *Handsworth Songs* undercuts this iconography and unseats the authenticity of this evidence by bringing forward the experiences of black families and black male youth. Besides images of the disturbances (TV footage shot from behind the protection of police lines, as well as footage shot from the point of view of those being born down upon by the troops), we are introduced to evidence of happier times: wedding photos, archival footage of interracial dances, of settlers arriving on ships, and of toddlers in multiracial childcare. But the film presents this new evidence without direct explanation, not as if it were monolithic, timeless, unitary, or fixed evidence but as part of a dialogue, a lyrical, intimate struggle between different voices.

The contrast between these different types of evidential material is rendered obvious at various moments in the film. An old newsreel of a labor unionist assuring viewers that West Indian workers want social integration is followed by an overturned car on fire. Footage from the 1950s of Luther Thomas, a bus driver trainee, kissing his wife goodbye is juxtaposed to a traveling shot of the destruction of shops and businesses. And the death of an Afro-Caribbean woman (described in a radio interview with her daughter over an image of a cold, gray housing project) as a result of a police raid on her home precedes an excerpt from a vintage documentary showing fresh-faced young women at work in a factory and a folk song about fine young women on the sound track. In each of these examples, the “new” evidence coexists and competes with the images of violence, although it never really disputes the fact of the disturbances.

This thought-provoking use of evidential material also differs from the view of colonial history proposed by accredited sources. *Handsworth Songs* shows, for instance, an excerpt from an unadorned address by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, sitting calmly in a wing chair, stating, “People are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people of a different culture. And you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law, and done so much throughout the world. But if there is any fear that it might be swamped, people are going to react and be rather hostile. . . . The moment the minority threatens to become a big one, people get frightened.” Thatcher’s statement seems shocking not solely because of its moral shallowness but also because it lacks credibility. As the history of the riots shows, the complex reality of British society in the

1980s cannot be subsumed under the idea of a cultural threat to what she calls the "British character." Thatcher's comments reflect the blind patriotism of a nation besieged and reinforce long established prejudices against cultural diversity, the same prejudices that are discredited by the documentary's use of different types of evidential material. Not accidentally, *Handsworth Songs* follows the television address with slowed down footage of nearly a dozen police chasing, capturing, and subduing a lone dreadlocked young man.

Handsworth Songs confronts the problems of trying to re-present the complex and sometimes contradictory meanings and experiences of diaspora culture and identity — the culture and identity of peoples far from their homeland, often living in an environment that no longer welcomes them. It is both a reflection on racial disturbances and an indictment of the inadequacy of television news and other dominant institutions to represent racial violence. By exposing evidence as conditional and often precariously constructed, the film renders doubtful as well the values that keep the mainstream media in power as the provider of information. If the evidence on television aims toward definitive understandings of the events, the evidence in *Handsworth Songs* destabilizes not only those understandings but also what "Britishness" meant as a national and cultural identity in the mid 1980s.

In *Handsworth Songs*, there is some archival footage of Lord Kitchener, the calypso king, singing "London Is the Place for Me" to reporters, from the ship's deck upon his arrival in England. As it is used in *Handsworth Songs*, this sequence seems clearly ironic. After seeing so much violence, it is not possible to take this footage at face value. The same footage is used in an American film celebrating calypso, *One Hand Don't Clap* (Kavery Dutta, 1989). In this case, though, the meaning and effects of the evidential material are without irony. In *One Hand Don't Clap*, the footage follows an interview with Lord Kitchener talking about how he grew to enjoy London and became accustomed to the cold. There is not a hint of either hostility or thwarted dreams. The same footage thus operates as evidence in two separate films, but is employed for different purposes and takes on different meanings in each case. The dissonance between the said and the unsaid invites skepticism in *Handsworth Songs*. In *One Hand Don't Clap*, the context and consequences of the choice of evidence, its social and political aims, do not invite the same epistemological dialogue with the viewer. The footage speaks with little ambiguity.

Documentaries that examine the nature and function of evidence do more than simply represent a particular aspect of the sociohistorical world. They serve as critical texts as well. Like *Handsworth Songs*, they offer insight into problems

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that are commonly discussed by film critics but not necessarily addressed by documentary filmmakers. In their own way, they contribute to debates that find resonance in books like the one you are reading. At their most ambitious, these films tend to implicate their own strategies of representation in their critique of the documentary process, drawing attention to their particular interests and exposing the nature of their intervention in the world of lived experience. Rather than simply criticize someone else's work, the filmmakers here show what lies behind their efforts to gather and present evidence in a coherent and persuasive manner.

Evidence and Reflexivity

Film scholars have used the adjective *reflexive* to characterize this type of documentary, suggesting that the finished work reflects upon its own "constructedness." A reflexive documentary lets us know how it was made and what was involved in its making, turning the process by which the documentary produces meaning into part of the film. While the "outside world" continues to be a relevant subject, the way that subject is transposed to the screen can be just as important. Reflexive documentaries trouble the relationship between the film and what it represents, rendering opaque what other works might have tried to present as transparent. Since much of the credibility of nonfiction films depends on the authority of their evidential sources, these documentaries can draw considerable attention to the way evidence is made available to the audience.

At the center of most reflexive documentaries is thus the awareness, foregrounded in the work itself, that nonfictional representations are artificial constructs, not natural or unchangeable revelations. They are the result of a laborious process that involves particular material and technological conditions, institutional obligations, and specific interests. Any one of these factors can potentially determine the way evidence is gathered and presented to the audience, or influence the decision to omit or reveal a particular piece of information. While other films might suppress knowledge of this artificial quality, providing access only to a finished product that conceals its history, reflexive documentaries invite us to look at this process from the inside. Perhaps for this reason, reflexive documentaries have earned the reputation of being intellectually demanding and mistrustful of nonfictional representation in general. Seen from a different perspective, though, documentaries that are self-referential can also be compelling, thoughtful, and stimulating.