**Introduction:**

Since the early days of cinema nonfiction film has been woven into the fabric of political life: actualities of the Spanish American War, First World War propaganda films, British social reform documentaries of the 1930s, American television documentaries of the 1960s, and recent documentaries depicting social or political conditions, have all set their sights on explaining or depicting political realities. But within the broad set of documentary films depicting these varied facets of political life there is a smaller subset of films, those which are made and circulated not simply to educate viewers about features of the world around them; but instead, are made and circulated with the express goal of altering social or political realities. It is this subset of films within the general field of documentary film making that is the focus on my attention in the chapters to follow: the politically committed documentary film.¹

The history of the committed documentary is both a history of a way in which documentary film has been ‘used’, and a history of the social and political movements that have shaped political realities over the hundred or so years since the invention of the cinema. A champion of the term “committed documentary,” film scholar Thomas Waugh argues that the term ‘committed’ indicates, “a specific ideological undertaking, a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-political transformation” and “a specific political positioning: activism, or intervention in the process of change itself” (1984:xiv). Over the years, the makers of committed documentaries have been unequivocal in their belief that documentary film can be used as a tool by which to bring about political transformation in this way. In the
1930s, the American workers’ movement filmmaker Harry Alan Potamkin proposed that documentary film is equipped to "expose" socio-political conditions in need of redress, to “impel” people to take action on these conditions, and to “sustain" social movement based activities that will ameliorate such conditions (Alexander 1981:23). In the late 1960s, Robert Kramer of the New York based film collective Newsreel argued: committed films can serve as political “can openers” which “shake people’s assumptions, that threaten, that do not soft-sell, but hopefully (an impossible ideal) explode like grenades in people’s faces.” Writing on militant left wing filmmaking in France soon after the student and labor unrest of May 1968, Guy Hennebelle proposed that politically committed films serve four functions: “to arouse spectators’ enthusiasm for a given problem; to exhort targeted audiences toward one or more determined actions; to instill in spectators a political culture; to help people unmask the enemy’s tactics” (1984:175).

In the hands of such individual filmmakers or filmmaking groups as Esfir Shub, Joris Ivens, Emile de Antonio, Patricio Guzmán, Santiago Alvarez, Newsreel, Julia Reichert, Anand Patwardhan, Alanis Obomsawin, DIVA TV, Robert Greenwald, or Big Noise Films, the committed documentary has for nearly a century served as a tool of activism, political organizing, consciousness raising, or revolutionary agitation. The films of these and other committed filmmakers provide for us today a visual record of nearly one hundred years of political and ideological struggle, stretching from the early twentieth century to the anti-corporate movement of today. But films such as these serve as much more than a record of the history of
social movements or political struggle during this period: the committed documentary is never simply a record of political conflict or social change, nor is it simply a representation of past historical events. Instead, it is one among the varied instrumental elements that serve to shape political outcomes. When successful, the committed documentary exerts instrumental political power and is therefore not a depiction of political life or history: it is a political act and process unto itself, one by which history is made.

**Why documentary?**

Why is the documentary so commonly the film genre of choice for individuals or groups seeking to use film as a means by which to bring about social or political change? A variety of answers to this question are readily available: documentaries offer a means by which to present images of real occurrences soon after they actually occur; because they depict features of the real world, documentaries seem to be able to directly impact the real world; documentaries are more easily made than fiction films; and so on. However, explanations such as these offer only a partial picture of why the documentary is so commonly the genre of choice for politically committed filmmakers. Indeed, these explanations play the disingenuous role of naturalizing connections between the documentary film project and political life, rather than critically examining these connections.

The merits of documentary film versus the merits of fiction film, with regard to the ability of these two kinds of filmmaking to influence political life, has been
hotly debated since, at least, the early years of Soviet filmmaking in the late 1910s. Briefly stated: proponents for documentary making argue that although there are many features documentary and fiction films hold in common (including the technical apparatus of camera and lights, storytelling structures, camera angles, editing styles, audio tracks or music, sound effects, dialogue, and so on), the two forms are categorically different. Most fundamentally, the difference between documentary film and fiction film rests on the documentary’s use of images that possess an index-like relationship to ‘real’ extra-filmic things—of which the indexical image is a depiction. An indexical image refers a viewer to something else, to the image’s referent, which is or was existent and real, although elsewhere.

When we talk of the documentary’s ability to document reality or to enable a viewer to witness real occurrences, we are referring to the indexical image’s analogous appearance to its referent. Thus, through the use of optical-photographic or optical-electronic processes, images that appear analogous to real arrangements of light, dark, color, and movement (through the rapid replaying of frozen images) are generated. These indexical images, delivered to viewers by documentary films, through photojournalism, television-based electronic news gathering, and other indexical image based communication forms play a role in anchoring our beliefs regarding the reality of our world. They exert influence upon almost every aspect of the way in which we orient ourselves in relation to the physical and social environments we inhabit. In no way does an acknowledgement of the unique features of the documentary diminish the fact that fiction film can and does play a substantial
role in shaping or changing political realities, but it does indicate that the
documentary is imagined to possess a more direct connection to the ‘real’ than is
typical of most fiction films.

Film scholars Brian Winston and Bill Nichols provide two key frameworks
through which to understand how the documentary’s indexical connection to reality
has led our society to value films of this type. These frameworks are worth briefly
restating: Winston argues that our valuation of the indexical image (and of
documentary films made from indexical images) rests on the categorical similarity
between the indexical image and rationalist scientific methods of evaluation and
assessment (1995). He writes: there is a long history of “pictorial representation as a
mode of scientific evidence” and it is common within modern science “to produce
data via instruments of inscription whose operations are analogous to the camera”
(1995:127). This, he proposes, provides the documentary genre with a “potent
legitimation for its evidentiary pretensions” (1995:137). In the roughly one hundred
years of documentary film making, many styles of documentary have been generated
(Soviet cine Pravda, British documentary of the 1920s and 30s, American Direct
Cinema, and so on), and each of these varied styles has displayed distinct syntactical
and formal arrangements. However, despite the formal dissimilarities that distinguish
each of these varied styles, all are unified in their use of the indexical image, and the
claim of ‘truth’ or ‘realism’ made on behalf of each of these styles rests
foundationally upon their employ of mechanically generated indexical images.⁴
Winston argues that an additional common and powerful ‘truth’ feature of the documentary film project is the presentation of verbal testimony as evidence. He traces the origins of the kind of testimony commonly foregrounded in documentary film, to reforms in the British legal system during the early 1800s. These reforms led, he argues, to the introduction of the cross-examination of witnesses as a means to test the credibility of the evidence submitted in trials. Winston writes: “almost as soon as the new ‘natural’ interrogatory was in place in the courts it was borrowed for journalism… and then borrowed again for radio and the cinema” (1995:140). Thus, through the inclusion of verbal testimony, documentary films draw on discourses of reality established by the legal precept that truths can be ascertained through the questioning and cross-examination of witnesses.

The connections Winston identifies between the indexical image and scientific measurement and between verbal testimony and legal discourses of witness and truth, dovetail with the second key formulation with which to understand society’s valuation of the documentary; Nichol’s proposal that documentary film serves as one among our society’s reality-defining “discourses of sobriety” (1991:3). Nichols argues that our society’s discourses of sobriety (such as science, economic, politics, foreign policy, education, religion, welfare) define our understanding of reality, establish truths, and frame our relationship with the world around us (1991:3). To do this, he argues, these discourses orchestrate instrumental power and are thereby able to shape and reshape ‘reality; he continues:
[the discourses of sobriety] have instrumental power; they can and should alter the world itself, they can effect action and entail consequences. Their discourse has an air of sobriety since it is seldom receptive to ‘make-believe’ characters, events, or entire worlds… Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent. Through them power exerts itself. Through them, things are made to happen. They are vehicles of domination and conscience, power and knowledge, desire and will (1991:3).

The discourses of sobriety work to order, explain, and police our social and political environment; the exercise of their authority rests on the mobilization of broad society-shaping principals such as justice, democracy, fairness, truth, or a positivist commitment to progress.

As one among these discourses, documentary film commonly asserts its standing as a discourse of importance by situating itself in relation to these same principals of fairness, truth, progress, and so on. Thus, just as scientific positivism operates on the presupposition that through observation and analysis the world can be made ‘all knowable’, the discourses of documentary filmmaking operate on the assumption that a documentary film can make previously unknown features of our culture or environment (or features of other cultures) known through the gathering and display of visual evidence; and through a process of evidence gathering and evidence display, social progress or societal improvement can be facilitated. For filmmakers seeking to use documentary film for the purpose of political or social change, the instrumental power ascribed to the documentary film by virtue of its status as a discourse of sobriety, make it an attractive tool.
For the leftwing committed documentary filmmakers who feature prominently in the chapters to follow, the appeal of documentary film is furthered heightened by the film genre’s apparent utility as a film form that can service Marxist concepts of social realism. Documentary films composed of indexical images, filmmakers of this ilk argue, serve as a means by which to press viewers to witness ‘reality’ as it really ‘is’, to peel away the veneer of bourgeois realities, and thereby to counter ‘false consciousness’ while depicting ‘real’ conditions of oppression or injustice. For instance, in their seminal film manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema” filmmakers Fernando Solanos and Octavio Getino argue, “imperialism and capitalism, whether in the consumer society or in the neocolonized country, veil everything behind a screen of images and appearances” (1986:45). Solanos and Getino propose: film, and documentary films in particular, serve as a powerful tool with which to counter these bourgeois obfuscations. They argue that “the cinema known as documentary… from educational films to the reconstruction of the fact of a historical event, is perhaps the basis of revolutionary filmmaking” since “every image that it documents, bears witness to, refutes or deepens the truth of a situation is something more than a film image of purely artistic fact; it becomes something which the system finds indigestible” (1986:46).

Although it is less common to hear Marxist rhetoric of this kind from committed filmmakers today, traces of this stance are visible in the thinking of many contemporary leftwing or left-leaning committed documentary makers. A commonly stated goal behind the making of many of today’s independent committed
documentaries is a belief that the dominant channels of corporate media communication inadequately serve the political or informational needs of viewer-citizens and instead serve to support particular political or corporate hegemonies. In opposition to this tendency, many contemporary committed documentary makers seek to use film as a means by which to illuminate features of the world that go unreported in the corporate media, or to provide political perspectives that are denied an airing through these dominant media channels. Documentaries conceived in this way, including many I discuss in the chapters to follow, are seen as a means by which to retrieve reality from an abyss of mass media generated and hegemony-supporting distractions, and to thereby allow viewers to experience reality as it really ‘is’.

**Against naïve realism**

The demand that documentaries both depict reality, and operate to change reality, has ignited one of the key debates about the nature, relevance, and performance of the committed documentary. For the makers of radical committed documentary films, the close ties between the documentary film project and powerful hegemony forming discourses of sobriety is, on the one hand, attractive since it imbues the documentary with the power to shape social or political realities. However, on the other hand, these ties pose an ideological problem for radical filmmakers since they indicate that as a genre the documentary is closely tied to powerful prevailing hegemonic understandings of the ‘real’. In the eyes of these radical, usually Marxist influenced, filmmakers, the documentary’s ties to hegemony indicate that the documentary risks
serving as a form of naïve realism; one in which the realities presented by
documentary film replicate reality as it is defined by the prevailing hegemonic
order. vi

Concerns about naïve realism, and fears that committed films might replicate
the ideological frames to which they are opposed, has driven committed documentary
filmmakers to innovation, experimentation, and the emergence of a range of
filmmaking approaches stretching from conventional evidence or testimony
delivering film formats, to found footage constructed compilation films, jarring forms
of didactic film making, autobiographical filmmaking, and many other forms. The
struggle to evade a simple replication of the pre-existing hegemonic order has led
committed documentary makers to push the limits of the documentary form, in the
process situating the committed documentary as both the documentary genre’s most
ideologically challenging and formally innovative form. Waugh argues:

[the committed documentary] refuses to meet any of the expectations of
bourgeois aesthetics, modernist or otherwise. Instead of meeting the criteria of
durability, abstraction, ambiguity, individualism, uniqueness, formal
complexity, deconstructed or redistributed signifiers, novelty and so on, all in a
packagable format, political documentaries provides us with disposability,
ephemerality, topically, directness, immediacy, instrumentally, didacticism,
collective or anonymous authorship, unconventional formats, non-availability,

As will be discussed at many points in the chapters to follow, the varied formal
innovations developed by committed documentary makers, as they seek to break free
of existing hegemonies, has been matched by an equally vigorous attempt to develop
documentary production models and film distribution networks that defy the conventions of dominant hegemony-serving documentary filmmaking practice.

**Studying the committed documentary**

In the scholarship devoted to the study of documentary film, the politically committed documentary has in some ways fared quite well and has in some ways fared quite badly. With regard to the academic study of documentary film, it is the category of films termed social documentaries—films addressing social and political themes—which has received the greatest attention from scholars, including, among the films studied, those that can be defined as ‘committed’. Other documentaries, such as nature documentaries, historical documentaries, autobiographical, melodrama-centered, or comedy-integrating documentaries, have received less critical attention, thereby ensuring that the social documentary has been at the center of documentary film scholarship. Conversely, documentary film has, despite a recent growth of interest in this genre, received significantly less scholarly attention than fiction film, and many of the best recent studies of the documentary have focused on exploring how the documentary operates as a textual system, rather than examining the impact of documentary film on social or political life (Nichols 1991, Vaughan 1999, Bruzzi 2000). As a result, the connections between documentary filmmaking and political life remain inadequately theorized, despite the publication of a number of useful recent texts on this theme (Buchsbaum 2003, Chanan 2007, Kahana 2008).
In this dissertation, I seek to contribute to the filling this gap in the scholarship on the committed documentary and to explore the history, operation, and political impact of films of this type. But how should committed documentaries be studied or critically approached? Should the committed documentary be studied as a film text to be examined in terms of form or syntax? Should it be examined as an act of political entrepreneurship, one best studied through an examination of the social or revolutionary movements of which this film entrepreneurship is often a part? Or, should it be examined with regard to the production processes behind the making of a particular film or collection of films, including an examination of the conditions within which production occurred and the way interpretations and meanings are generated during the filmmaking process?

Nichols proposes there are three frames through which documentary films can most productively be studied (1991). First, he argues that we can examine the intentionality of the filmmaker, including the rhetorical approach employed by the filmmaker, and the way they intend their film to be received by viewers. Second: we can examine the film as a text, including its style, grammar, and its invocation of truth claims in the form of indexical images and testimony. And third: we can examine the way viewers respond to and categorize documentary films, including the viewer’s ability to situate individual documentaries within the larger corpus of nonfiction filmmaking, and their relationship to documentary or nonfiction images in general (Nichols 1991). These frames suggest three co-existent locations where the meaning of a documentary film is created and arbitrated, and provide the beginnings of a
theoretical foundation on which to build a framework within which to study the 
committed documentary.

However, to further enrich a study of the committed documentary, an 
additional fourth frame of examination must be added, one exploring the specific 
‘context’ within which a particular film or corpus films were made and circulated. As 
Julianne Burton and Third Cinema filmmaker Patricio Guzmán argue:

No film is a self-contained entity to be evaluated solely on the basis of its 
narrative content and formal technique. Each film emerges out of and is 
directed toward a particular historical, social, political, and cultural context. The 
revolutionary nature of any film… is in large measure determined by its mode 
of production and its mode of distribution, by the human relations that brought 
the film into being and human responses it engenders as it interacts with its 

Thus, I argue, to properly understand the committed documentary we must explore 
the circumstances within which films of this kind are made, and the “social history, 
market considerations, (and) economy of production” that shape these circumstances, 
including the nature of available technology, the available networks of distribution, or 
the institutional practices underlying the film making process (Gabriel 1991:36).

Drawing on these four analytical frames, I propose the study of the committed 
documentary will be most productively realized not simply by studying 
documentaries with political themes, or by studying particular films simply because 
that were intended by their makers to perform some form of advocacy. Instead, I 
propose that the committed documentary will most productively be studied by 
exploring the production processes and textual content of particular films in relation
to the circumstances within which they were made, circulated, and received by
audiences within distinct historical and political conditions. In the course of my study
the significance of this approach will become clear and, in the chapters that follow, in
addition to describing the texts of particular films, I explore the production processes
underwriting the making of committed documentary films, the networks within which
they were circulated, and the reception and use of these films as they circulate within
and interact with real audiences within particular historical conditions.

Chapter Overview

Part one: a history of the committed documentary

The six chapters to follow are divided into two sections: the first of these two
sections, composed of three chapters, provides a chronological introduction to the
history of politically committed documentary making and outlines some of the
repeated themes and methodologies used in the making and circulation of films of
this type.

Chapter one, titled “The Early Years: From the Birth of Cinema to the 1940s,”
presents a general introduction of the emergence of documentary filmmaking as a
means of representing social or political realities and an introduction to some of the
committed filmmaking activities that emerged during the early years of the cinema. In
this chapter (as with the two chapters which follow), one of my goals is to draw
attention to less well known aspects of the history of the committed documentary; for
this reason, I devote only a small amount of the limited space available to films or
filmmaking activities which have been well documented elsewhere. For instance, I devote only a few short pages to an examination of the work of the Soviet documentary makers of the 1920s despite the significant role these filmmakers played in shaping the entire field of committed documentary filmmaking and the inspiration they provided to subsequent generations of committed documentary makers. In this instance, a significant body of scholarly literature on this subject is already in circulation and a lengthy re-stating of the history of Soviet documentary making is unnecessary (Leyda 1960, Shub 1988, Vertov 1985). Instead, I devote my attention to workers’ newsreel making in Germany, Holland, Britain, the U.S. and Japan during the late 1920s and 1930s. The activities of these groups provide an important illustration of early committed documentary making and bring to light themes and processes which are of significant relevance to the committed documentary film project as it operates today.

In chapter two, entitled “Anti-Colonial Struggles, the New Left and War in Vietnam,” I chart the history of committed documentary making from the immediate aftermath of the Second World War to the derailment of the American New Left’s political agenda in the early 1970s. Mirroring the diverse political agendas that characterized this period, committed documentaries made between the 1940s and 1970s address such varied themes as Third World decolonization, anti-imperialism struggles in the Second World, First World campaigns for nuclear disarmament, the civil rights and black power movements, opposition to America’s war in Vietnam, and other issues linked to the political agendas of the New Left.
No historical account of the evolution of the committed documentary during this period would be complete without noting the filmmaking activities of key committed documentary makers such as Joris Ivens, Fernando Birri, Emile de Antonio, Chris Marker, Santiago Alvarez and Patricio Guzmán, and all are mentioned in this chapter. However, in this chapter I again seek to forefront the activities of less well-known filmmakers or filmmaking groups, including, for instance, the work of the Angry Arts Film Society, the Medvedkin Group, and New York Newsreel and California Newsreel, among others. Some of these filmmaking groups have received little recent critical attention despite the role they, and their films, played in shaping and articulating the political agendas of the key social movements of the second half of the twentieth century.

My third chapter, titled “Small Documentary Making and the Contemporary Committed Documentary,” provides an introduction to some of the current trends in committed documentary production. Here, I specifically highlight, first, how the introduction of video technology from the late 1960s onwards led to a dramatic increase in the making of ‘small’ documentaries; and second, how in tandem with the emergence of racial, indigenous, and gender ‘rights’ and ‘power’ movements of the 1960s and 1970s, committed documentaries from the late 1960s onwards addressed a range of previously unforeseen themes linked to the political agendas of these movements. In this chapter, I argue that present day ‘activist’, ‘organizing’ or ‘advocacy’ small video documentaries are a natural descendant of the workers’
newsreel and other filmmaking ventures discussed in chapters one and two; although they are often not recognized as such by documentary film scholars.

To explore the making of small documentaries, I specifically highlight the operation of ‘participatory’ film making ventures and explore the filmmaking model developed by Canada’s Challenge For Change program, the emergence of ‘collectivized’ video activist projects in the 1970s, and the ongoing use of participatory approaches to film and video making in the world today. These themes will be more fully explored in chapter four, where I discuss the participatory video making activities of Chinese workers in the New York City’s Chinatown. Chapter three concludes with a brief summary of some of the key features of the committed documentary project as they have been revealed thus far in the three-chapter history of the committed documentary I have presented.

**Part 2: New realities for the committed documentary**

The second section of my dissertation is composed of three chapters examining features of contemporary committed documentary making: the first of these, the fourth chapter of my dissertation, is titled “Documenting Chinatown’s Workers” and examines the participatory documentary making activities of the New York City based Chinese Staff and Workers Association (CSWA), a workers’ membership organization composed, primarily, of Chinese workers employed in the service and garment industries. The documentary making work of the CSWA Video Project offer an illustration of the proliferation of small documentary making that occurred from
the 1970s onwards as affordable consumer grade video cameras were introduced (and as these consumer cameras were re-purposed by activists or community organizers for the making of committed videos). The activities of the CSWA Video Project exhibit features in common with earlier committed film projects (including the work of the Workers Film and Photo League, New York Newsreel and the Challenge For Change program discussed in earlier chapters), while also illustrating, as a documentary project serving the needs of a particular ethnic community in the center of New York City, the emergence of a new site of documentary production as ethnic workers respond to the reorganization of local and global economic relations by late twentieth century global capitalism.

My fifth chapter, “We Are Not Filmmakers: Documentary Filmmaking and Transnational Activism,” examines the intentions and practices of U.S. filmmakers Jennifer Wager, Sandi Simcha DuBowski, and the filmmaking group Big Noise Films. The work of these filmmakers illustrates that the circulation of small to medium size committed documentary film is an ingredient feature of the field of transnational activism. In this chapter I argue that through the making and distribution of their work, these filmmakers serve as political entrepreneurs who, operating independently of national states or authorizing institutions, use documentary film to circulate ideas and social or political agendas in a transnational context.

The filmmaking enterprises I discuss in this chapter illustrate three markedly different approaches to transnational documentary filmmaking: Jennifer Wager’s micro-budget documentary *Venezuela Rising!* depicts events leading up to a ballot
referendum on the presidency of Venezuela’s President Hugo Chávez, and was intended to present a favorable image of Chávez and his presidency for U.S. and world audiences. The film was circulated in the U.S. and elsewhere through an informal network of exhibition sites, including at church and community centers, universities, and workers’ organizations. Sandi Simcha DuBowski’s documentary *Trembling Before G_d* depicts the experiences of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer Orthodox Jews living within the dispersed transnational Jewish Diaspora. Since its release in 2001, the film has played in influential role in animating debate about, and a reevaluation of the status of, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queers within the Orthodox faith. The third filmmaking venture discussed in this chapter, the filmmaking activities of Big Noise Films, illustrates documentary making in the service of the transnational anti-corporate movement. The group’s films illustrate the agenda and aesthetic sensibility of transnational anti-corporate activism, and are made by filmmakers who crisscross the globe riding the reticulate informal and personal connection networks that serve as the information and organizing mechanisms of the anti-corporate movement. In this chapter I seek specifically to explore the motivations that underlie the activities of these committed filmmakers as they engage in their work as transnational political entrepreneurs, and study how these motivations distinguish the work of these filmmakers from the activities of professional news or documentary makers employed by the mainstream media industry.
My sixth and final chapter, titled “Muckraker or Radical: Positioning Robert Greenwald’s Documentary Films,” examines the documentary filmmaking activities of contemporary American filmmaker Robert Greenwald. As the director of such titles as *Uncovered: The War on Iraq, Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism* and *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, Greenwald has emerged as one of the most prolific and influential U.S. committed documentary makers and a political entrepreneur with national influence. In this chapter, I discuss the aesthetic features of Greenwald’s documentary making work and how in the making of his films he draws on both filmmaking techniques developed by radical compilation documentary makers of the past and techniques common to contemporary television programming. In this concluding chapter, I argue that Greenwald’s filmmaking work illustrates features of the current state of the committed documentary project, including the absence of a coherent ideological foundation on which to base the production of political work, and the adoption of a hybrid film style that mirrors features of contemporary television and Internet video aesthetics. I also explore the Internet based distribution strategies adopted by Greenwald to circulate this media works and, in a targeted examination of Greenwald’s documentary *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, explore the ideological underpinnings of his work and its political ‘position’ in the contemporary American political landscape.
Theodor W. Adorno argues: “A work of art that is committed strips the magic from a work that is content to be fetish, an idle pastime for those who would like to sleep through the deluge that threatens them, in an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political” (1982:301). However he adds, “committed art in the proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or practical institutions… but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes” (1982:303). The committed documentary making activities I propose to discuss cannot be contained within Adorno’s definition for ‘commitment’, since in many instances they seek to generate direct ameliorative measures and thereby fall within what Adorno terms “propaganda” (1982).


Hennebelle uses the term “militant cinema” to describe both political nonfiction and fiction works.

Richard Dyer notes that Western culture privileges sight above all the other senses and, through optical technologies (including the camera), “seeing has been enhanced and transformed such that human beings can see better, can record what they see more accurately and can reproduce that record more or less ad infinitum” (1997:104). Conversely, Dyer notes that our society also has significant reservations about the value of the indexical image as evidence. He argues: “on the one hand, the twentieth century has continued to place faith in seeing… Yet the same period has also shown an ever increasing suspicion of film’s truth. We are all too photo-literate not to know about the camera’s deceits” (1997:106).

An examination of the comments by documentary filmmakers and documentary educators reveals the ubiquity of this way of thinking. In the introductory pages of Directing the Documentary, a popular technical handbook designed to teach students how to make a documentary, author Michael Rabiger argues: “the documentary exists to scrutinize the organization of human life and to promote individual, humane values” (1987:4). Underlying this approach is the positivist belief that social improvement is possible through scientific discovery, visual observation, and social examination. It is a belief which should be approached with caution and, while I certainly do not seek to find the assumed connections between documentary film and social improvement baseless, it is necessary to ask whether it is fair, sensible, or practical to uniformly presume that there is link between the activity of documentary filmmaking and social improvement? Indeed, by assuming there is equivalence between the ‘exposing’, ‘spotlighting’, or ‘revealing’ of social ills by a documentary film and the rectification of these ills, we risk deflecting critical attention away from an exploration of the other functions documentary films play in society, and the varied other pleasures they offer to viewers. Much analytical work still needs to be done to explore the varied viewership pleasures offered by documentary film in such areas as the escapist pleasures of voyeurism or seeing ‘how the other half lives’ (and how they suffer); the fetishistic depiction of other races or cultures; documentary film as emotion-evoking melodrama; the epistophilic pleasure of knowing about an issue without being compelled to react in any way to what is seen; or the pleasures implicit to viewing films that willingly or unintentionally promulgate an aesthetic of despair.

For instance: Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea argues that in the early years of the Cuban revolution there was an emphasis on documentary filmmaking and at the time “it was almost sufficient just to record events, to capture directly some fragment of reality, and simply reflect the goings-on in the streets” (1997:108). However, he adds, over time it was realized that the recording of reality as it appears is not enough for the committed filmmaker. Instead, he argues: “Realism does not lie in its alleged ability to capture reality ‘just like it is’
(which is ‘just like it appears to be’), but rather lies in its ability to reveal, through associations and connections between various isolated aspects of reality—that is to say, through creating a ‘new reality’—deeper, more essential layers of reality itself” (1997:122). In contrast to documentary film discourses which forefront the transparency of the documentary film form or seek to situate the indexical image as a simple form of evidence, Alea proposes that the valuation and reception of the documentary and its images is always bounded by ideology; and if conventional ideologies of realism go unexamined, naïve realism will ensue.

Nichols argues: “Film is a form of production incomplete at the point of production insofar as a primary function of film is the production of meaning and/or ideology. A film’s meaning cannot be packaged. It produces new meaning at the point of consumption through its participation in systems of use and exchange value… this exchange is conditioned by internal and external factors. These I will call the textual and the extra-textual systems, respectively. Together, they locate the production of meaning within the realm of ideology—the generation of an imaginary relationship to real conditions of existence” (1980: 11).