

1 / NATIONAL FABRIC

Authorship, Textuality, and the Documentary Front

Established in 1935 by George Gallup, the American Institute of Public Opinion (later the Gallup Organization) was one of the means created in the 1930s for giving form to what, according to historian Warren Susman, was until then a vague abstraction to most Americans: an American culture. In fact, Susman suggests, the concept of "most Americans" would have been relatively meaningless to most Americans before the 1930s, when new intellectual, technological, and cultural forms allowed the consolidation of a felt sense of national identity.¹ Polling was one of a number of cultural technologies refined in the period to give the authority of large numbers, technology, and scientific expertise to aspects of experience that otherwise remained "in solution," as Raymond Williams says, as feelings within and about social and national life.² What came in the period to be called the documentary drew social and political authority from its manipulation of this tension between particularity and generalization, between the subjective and the social, between what Williams calls "practical" and "official" forms of consciousness.³ In Susman's apt phrasing, the "whole idea of the documentary . . . ma[de] it possible to see, know, and feel the details of life, its styles in different places, to feel oneself part of some other's experience."⁴ But the empirical economy in which "one-self" is both a unique entity and mere evidence of a larger social phenomenon, outside of which one's individual experience is meaningless, presents a paradox that social documentary has never been able to resolve. In a survey conducted a month after the theatrical release of Michael Moore's blockbuster documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), the Gallup Organization predicted that a majority of American adults

would see the film: in addition to the 8 percent of poll respondents who had already seen the film, 18 percent claimed they intended to see the film in the theater, and another 30 percent said they would see it when it was released on video.⁵ Moore's proud claim about Gallup's *Fahrenheit 9/11* poll—that "no one could remember when a film posted those kinds of numbers"⁶—embodies this paradox.

The commercial success of Moore's muckraking first-person films, from *Roger & Me* (1989) onward, might seem something of a contradiction, especially since the remarkable popular appeal of these films, indicated by domestic box-office grosses of \$6.7 million for *Roger & Me*, \$21.6 million for *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), nearly \$120 million for *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), and more than \$22 million in the first month of release for *Sicko* (2007), has been leveraged by equally remarkable budgets for production and promotion. Some of Moore's detractors seize upon the apparent discrepancy between these numbers and the character he plays in his films, the earnest rube from the Michigan working class, to call into question his integrity and the authenticity of his films and his politics.⁷ As evidence of Moore's duplicity, these critics point to the fact that Moore did not grow up in the General Motors company town of Flint but in a middle-class suburb nearby and that he maintains homes in New York City and a wealthy resort area of northern Michigan. Such literal readings of the character Moore creates in *Roger & Me*, *Bowling for Columbine*, and, to a lesser extent, *Fahrenheit 9/11* are tendentious and shortsighted. Nevertheless, they are faithful to the empirical logic of Moore's style, which holds that the value of first-person testimony is that it comes from a speaker who can be held accountable, unlike the empty institutional speech of corporations and the state, and whose accountability is manifest most strongly in the speaker's apparently naïve response to the recording apparatus. Thus, in *Michael Moore Hates America* (2004), one of several conservative films made to answer *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the director, Michael Wilson, takes Moore's pursuit of General Motors chairman Roger Smith as a model for his own attempt to conduct an interview with Moore, with the aim of forcing Moore to apologize for his unaccountably gloomy view of America. Although he fails to meet with Moore, Wilson encounters along the way Americans from different walks of life—some of whom appear in *Bowling for Columbine* and

Fahrenheit 9/11—who reflect Wilson's Horatio Alger vision of the United States as a place where adversity (losing a job or a limb) only makes the inevitable rewards of citizenship sweeter.⁸ Although its shrill interviews with conservative celebrities and pundits do little to convince viewers not already opposed to Moore, by engaging Moore's subjects and methods Wilson's film raises the important question of how documentary can make credible claims to speak for a collectivity. This question is not entirely answered by Moore's facile claims that the popularity of his films is a measure of their fidelity to public opinion, and that buying a ticket is a form of political speech for those otherwise disengaged from the political process.

A more sympathetic, and far more interesting dialogue on the problems of Moore's empirical populism is opened by Morgan Spurlock's clever *Super Size Me* (2004), a film that combines the crusading anticorporatism of Moore's films with the pranksterism of conceptual art and reality television. Taking the empirical premise to extremes, Spurlock makes himself into the experimental subject of his film, which tests the proposition that too much fast food is bad for your health.⁹ Restricting himself to a month-long diet of food purchased at McDonald's restaurants across the country, taking no more exercise per day than the "average" American, Spurlock quickly gains weight and eventually becomes seriously ill. But despite the film's welter of professional experts, attesting to the dangers of overconsumption and the role of corporations in promoting it, it remains unclear precisely why Spurlock undertakes and persists in his experiment. When his doctors warn him that he risks irreversible organ failure by continuing, his commitment to finishing the experiment seems merely pathological. The apparent impetus for the film is a line quoted early in the film from a legal ruling in a lawsuit against McDonald's, asserting that the claimants may have a valid case if it can be demonstrated that McDonald's encourages daily consumption of McDonald's products. But Spurlock's remark about this possibility—that "people were suing the 'Golden Arches' for selling them food that most of us know isn't good for you to begin with. Yet each day one in four Americans visits a fast food restaurant"—suggests that he is undecided about whether the corporation or its clients are at fault. The film's obsessive visual attention to grossly overweight bodies makes clear that it bears as much contempt for ordinary people as

for corporate capitalism. In the end, his demonstration seems inspired as much by a terror of the statistical person Spurlock risks his health to become as by any political or ethical principle.¹⁰ If it retains any of the oppositional sense of demonstration, it is a petulant anger directed at large numbers—the profits of multinational corporations, the masses who consume their products, and the weight of individual bodies larger than Spurlock's "own"—as well as at the professionals and activists who seem incapable of stemming this flow of statistics. Parodying both the passive "everyman" and the activist's commitment, *Super Size Me* appears to invert Moore's approach: where Moore attempts to fashion a position between particular individuals and the abstract systems that oppress them, Spurlock attempts to inhabit both sides of the opposition at once, with disastrous results.¹¹

As is clear from the degree to which Moore, Spurlock, and other first-person filmmakers share themes, styles, narrative structures, and rhetorical devices with one another and with previous generations of American documentary, the place of the critical intellectual in the social fabric, relative to the common people and their antagonists, is a problem both generic and enduring. Their films are only the latest manifestation of a longstanding question in American progressive culture about how to give problems like commitment, character, and collectivity effective form. Experimenting with social recording and reporting in the 1930s, progressive writers, intellectuals, and artists treated documentary as a crucible of their cultural authority. Documentary offered a means for grounding political abstractions like state, party, movement, and nation in the apparently natural formation of the American people. At the same time, documentary practice also tested the categories by which intellectual production had been justified and valued as an individual craft: as authorship and signature, as subjectivity, as calling, as career. Pursuing "living history," progressive documentary attempted to express the sense of change that Williams calls a structure of feeling, "a social experience which is still *in process*," and not yet frozen in an established idea, position or institution.¹² Various protocols of leftist documentary work, including the hybridization of forms and media, the "proletarianization" of author or artist, and the artist's itinerant movement between classes and locations, suited this fluid sense of experience. Documentary film, the medium with which

the chapter concludes, was one among many in which these themes could be explored, as well as a privileged case of this experiment, because film presented the most dramatic contradiction between fixed forms of representation and knowledge and the capacity for resubmitting those forms to popular subjectivity, opening social and political thought to the "undeniable experience of the present."¹³

THE VOCATION OF DOCUMENTARY

What William Stott later termed the "imaginative tendency" of American documentary in the 1930s began to appear, by the end of that decade, a coherent cultural practice. In works of literary and journalistic prose, poetry, photography, film, theater, radio, audio recording, painting, and dance, artists and critics began to discern the regular features of a style of representation to which the term documentary could be applied in a programmatic way.¹⁴ Typical of these efforts was the statement produced by one of the avatars of Depression-era documentary, Dorothea Lange, for a show of photographs at the San Francisco Golden Gate Exposition in 1940. "Documentary photography records the social scene of our time," Lange wrote. "It mirrors the present and documents for the future. ... It is pre-eminently suited to build a record of change."¹⁵ Among many cultural forms capable of registering the effects of social and technological progress on the "facades" and deep structures of human beings—from "customs" to academic disciplines—documentary, Lange asserts, "stands on its own merits and has validity by itself."¹⁶

But in the formulation that follows this confident announcement, Lange seems to immediately change her mind about what, if anything, constitutes the essence of the documentary:

A single photographic print may be "news," a "portrait," "art," or "documentary"—any of these, all of them, or none. Among the tools of social science—graphs, statistics, maps, and text—documentation by photograph now is assuming place. Documentary photography invites and needs participation by amateurs as well as by professionals. Only through the interested work of amateurs who choose themes and follow

them can documentation by the camera of our age and our complex society be intimate, pervasive, and adequate.¹⁷

Sentence by sentence, this statement expresses some of the fundamental ambivalence of the documentary mode. Is documentary characterized by a material inscription—the document—or its use in a discourse? Is it a textual practice, or an intertextual one? Lange's grappling with the ontological question of documentary form seems to predicate an institutional crisis. No sooner can it be said that documentary is established as a legitimate practice of social knowledge than one must worry about its vitality, as if the incipient professionalization that marks its maturity as a form of knowledge is, at the same time, a threat to its social relevance. Lange thus reiterates a dynamic central to the conception of documentary in the 1930s and after, a formal instability that mirrors, or allegorizes, its mobility between different levels of the social. She suggests that to define the documentary, one must look beyond the camera and what it produces: authenticity, the source of its social power, comes not merely from some technical capacity but is realized in the diffusion of documentary into a number of different, even antithetical, practices. It would thus be a mistake to see the motility of documentary, in Lange's definition, as imprecise thinking, or even to see it as the product of an individual consciousness. This material and conceptual itinerancy (which, as we shall see, could even take physical form for artists who made the documentary commitment) was one of the distinguishing features of documentary discourse. Within this discourse, "everyman" was at once the content, audience, and idealized author of the documentary.

The idea of a cultural technology whose public was also its product does not, of course, originate with the documentary mode, nor must it be grounded in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century media of mass mechanical reproduction associated with documentary. As historians and theorists of print culture have argued, the eighteenth-century concept of the public sphere rested on just such a notion of printed texts as the instrument of social mediation.¹⁸ Print was more than a technological medium for civic discourse in the formative years of the American republic. It was also a social metaphor, a way of imagining relationships among people and imputing to those relationships a solidity and

stability (or, by contrast, a dispersion and heterogeneity) they did not yet have—indeed, never could have—in practice.¹⁹ What was revolutionary about constitutional discourse in the early American republic, as Michael Warner points out, was less its claim that the people were sovereign than the grounding of this claim in the performative nature of its medium: "By constituting the government," Warner remarks, "the people's text literally constitutes the people. . . . The text itself becomes not only the supreme law, but the only original embodiment of the people" (102). Because print had come to signify publication, in the sense of circulation among an indefinite and unidentified social body, the very printedness of federal and state constitutions could be understood as the vehicle, if not the engine, of democracy. Within such a historical context, the writing and printing of constitutions made possible, Warner argues, the "abstract and definitionally nonempirical character of the people." The "opacity of signification," as Warner observes, became "a political fact" (103).

How, then, to make sense of the contradiction between that "fact" and the claims by, and on behalf of, American social documentary in the 1930s to achieve the same ends through an empirical and transparent representation of the ordinary lives of ordinary people? Within the state, outside it, or somewhere in between, partisans of documentary claimed it would extend the polity through a style that would overcome, in its transparency and empiricism, the alienation of the people from representation, in both the figural and political senses. Documentarists could claim to do so by combining textual and social features of literary print culture with those of the mass media, even as both were decried by cultural liberals and leftists as forces contributing to popular alienation.

The artists struggling with this contradiction were by no means unaware of its paradoxes and debated them endlessly, even in their art, where the very form of the work might be used to display contradiction. Hence the apparent confusion governing James Agee's contribution to one of the period's exemplary texts, his prose-photo collaboration with Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (1941). On one page, Agee might sound like Benjamin or Georg Lukács of the same period, "reflect[ing] deeply on the conditions of present-day production," as Benjamin urges in "The Author as Producer," and

thus creating literary works which are "always, at the same time, on the means of production,"²⁰ as when Agee agonizes over

'the whole subsequent course and fate of the work: the causes for its non-publication, the details of its later acceptance elsewhere, and of its design; the problems which confronted the maker of the photographs; and those which confront me as I try to write of it: the question, Who are you who will read these words and study these photographs, and through what cause, by what chance, and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to, and what will you do about it; and the question, Why we make this book, and set it at large, and by what right, and for what purpose, and to what good end or none.'²¹

Only a couple of pages later, Agee appears to simply wish away the material opacity of the form:

'But to a person of my uncertainty, undertaking a task of this sort, that plane and manner are not within reach, and could only falsify what by this manner of effort may at least less hopelessly approach clarity and truth.'

'For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and centrally and simply, without either dissection into science or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands: so that the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no symphony can: and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is.

This is why the camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time.' (11)

Because Agee here expresses textual and technical problems—his concerns about the "clarity and truth" possible in a certain voice or medium—in moral terms, it is easy to mistake his reflections for attempts at self-expression. Rather, they should be read for the signs of a structure of feeling that documentary made possible, since such expressions of anxiety and alienation were a conventional gesture of the progressive intellectual.

Documentary of the 1930s has often been described in these terms. William Stott argued that documentary "educates one's feelings";²² Alfred Kazin's foundational study of the period in *On Native Grounds* (1942) pressed heavily on the idea that documentary was a group psychological response. Writers turned toward descriptive nonfiction in part, Kazin said, because the distinction between public and private consciousness that separated literary writing from journalism had been eroded by the Depression, "a series of shattering shocks and tremors that has pounded away mercilessly at the mind."²³ These extended works of reportage allowed the author to address not just public events but also the problem of literary subjectivity itself. Society, Kazin contended, had been "changing too rapidly and violently for literature even to command the necessary detachment for imaginative truth" or the kind of conceptual totality required by the novel form (490); as a result, many authors sought alternatives to conventional prose forms.

One alternative was the political travelogue, the account of the author's impressions of the popular mood, based on his excursions into rural and industrial areas of the country and his conversations with authentic Americans. The itinerant observer, carrying a question or problem from place to place to encounter the rich palette of differences that make up the country, is one of the most venerable figures of American documentary. Setting out among people who are socially or geographically distant from the intellectual's experience, or from whom he or she has been estranged by circumstances of class, profession, or politics, the traveler embodies difference and, through the process of narrating his or her findings, comes to mediate it. Since it submits the author of the documentary work personally and bodily to the pursuit of truth, becoming its instrument—since it requires, in other words, a kind of commitment to the process that is also a kind of self-sacrifice—this particular kind of documentary can seem not just like one kind of documentary among others but like the essential act of American documentary, one connected in a fundamental way to its institutional and national aspirations.

Sherwood Anderson's *Puzzled America* (1935) is an early and striking example of this kind of work. Anderson, who already had a considerable reputation as a literary author, declared his impatience with literature in the book's introduction. There, he announced his intention

to abandon a literary position of omniscience. Anderson's declaration turns the general issue of labor and employment into a specific investigation of authorship as a profession, laying out schematically a program of self-correction for the professional author:

The sketches, attempts at pictures of America now, here being made into a book are the result of a good deal of wandering about. I have tried to be as impersonal as I could.

I am in the position of most writers nowadays. Formerly, for a good many years, I was a writer of tales. It may be that I should have remained just that, but there is a difficulty. There are, everywhere in America, these people now out of work. There are women and children hungry and others without enough clothes. Middle-aged men and women, who but a few years ago felt themselves secure, are now suddenly facing old age, thrown out of their security. They have been thrown out of their houses, off their farms. You see and talk with such people. The amazing thing to the observer is that there is so very little bitterness.

People want to tell their stories, are glad to tell. I blame myself that I do not get more of these stories, do not often enough get the real feeling of the people to whom I talk. I am caught up in something in which all present-day writers are caught. Well, not all. There are some of our writers—they may be the wise ones—who keep themselves in the clear. Such a one says to himself, "What have I got to do with all this? We writers know that government has gone on for a long time. There never was such a thing as a just government."

This is all very well, but there is a sort of blindness, too. I cannot take the impersonal tone. It will not do any more. Government has again grown near to life. It may be that the politicians remain a race apart but the politicians are no longer the government. It may happen that presently they will get lost.

You, the reader, must imagine the writer as going about, constantly puzzled as you are.²⁴

If many people want to tell their stories, Anderson observes, the author's professional qualification appears as an obstacle to the general circulation of stories; admitting this ("I blame myself") compels the

author to reevaluate his vocation in social and political terms. And he discovers that "government" is constituted *in* the relations of storytelling, not in exteriority to these relations. Government can be thought of as nothing more than the subject's awareness of his or her economic and social relation to other subjects. Politics is distinguished from government, just as authorship is distinguished from the circulation of stories.

Taken as the description of a structure of feeling, the insecurities voiced by Anderson—echoed over and over in allegories of vocation by all manner of intellectuals—can be read as the argument for a particular cultural practice. From this perspective, the subjectivity of guilt-ridden authors was merely a textual puzzle whose solution was lodged in the analogy between their geographical movement and their vacillation between one form and another. Thus, the greater the degree of formal and professional inconsistency, the more authentic the work of representation.²⁵

The most typical example of this tendency was perhaps the career of Erskine Caldwell in the late 1930s, which took Caldwell back and forth between one medium or mode and another, often in the same text. In Caldwell's 1935 collection of social sketches, *Some American People*, the point of view of the narrator changes from one story to the next.²⁶ In some, the narration is delivered in the novelistic third person or with a journalistic detachment ("The crop control plan as it is practiced in the cotton states of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and elsewhere, penalizes the tenant farmer and enriches the landowner" [238]); in others, the faculty of observation is personalized ("The Billings, Montana, autocamp owner was anxious to know if we had heard the story about the banker in a small town in the North Dakota Badlands" [25]); or given to a character who is clearly not Caldwell: "I'm harvesting sixty bushels of corn to the acre this fall, and by the time I get ready to sell it looks like I'm going to make more money this year than I ever did before" (49). And in a few cases, Caldwell moves entirely into the narrative style of literary fiction, dispensing with the first person entirely.

One short piece puts this problem into a narrative frame. "A Country That Moves" is a five-page slice of life at a hamburger stand, where the main event is an exchange between Frank, the operator of the grill, and an unnamed customer. Caldwell is present in the story only as the

listener to whom this story has been told, a perspective reflected in the notations "he said" and "he told":

Twenty miles from Springfield, Illinois, Frank Hanley fries hamburgers in his roadside lunch stand and listens to what is going on in the country. He said he learns more about what is happening, from what travelers tell him, than he does by listening to the radio.

He told about a man stopping in for a bite to eat a few days before and telling him that the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago was going to run another year. (106)

The conversation between Frank and his customer concerns "the Eighteenth Century": they measure the difference between the current century and the past in terms of the movement of people and information. "'Since the country has started to move,' Frank said, 'everything has changed. Nobody settles down long enough to hold a steady job any more. Everybody gets on wheels and travels'" (107). This is, Frank says, exactly the way it was in the eighteenth century, except for the increased speed of such transit today. He knows that this is the way it was in the eighteenth century, Frank insists, because he gets his information from listening to stories and reading history, rather than from the radio. In his view, this makes the lunch counter—which stands still in the midst of the whirl of progress—a repository of common sense:

"People zipping up to Chicago, down to New Orleans, across to Los Angeles, over to New York, everywhere in the country, day and night, rain and shine, keeps the country on the move and the tales fresh and reliable. If one man tells me a tale about something that happened in Texas, I can check up on him with the next half a dozen Texas travelers that stop for something to eat. In the Eighteenth Century tales got pretty wild because there was no way of checking up on them." (109)

Frank's final piece of evidence for his position is a story he was told by a traveler from Alabama, which concerned a government camp for transient workers. The workers petitioned Washington, according to the traveler, to be sent a preacher to keep them amused. "'The Government had been sending around tickets to moving pictures every

once in a while, but these boogers said they'd rather have a revival preacher than movie tickets'" (109–10). The customer is anxious to know whether the men in the camp got the preacher they asked for. When Frank says that they did, the customer asserts that today is, after all, better than the eighteenth century. No, says Frank, it's just the same. The customer becomes indignant: "'That's what's wrong with the country now. . . . You people flood the country with tales like that, and people have got so they won't believe even their own grandmother any more'" (111). But Frank maintains that the point of the story, improbable as it sounds—transients organizing to demand religion instead of cinema—is not that society has become irrational, or even that the speed of information in a country "on the move" makes for wild distortions that pass for the truth. Rather, the point is that from the proper perspective, the perspective represented by the *collector* of stories, a connection with the past can be established that will allow the nation to move into the future with a common interest. The goal of Frank's scrutiny of stories is not to establish the priority of the present over the past but simply to establish the legitimacy of a structure or system of comparison. Essentially, Frank argues that the literary mode of representation, as a linear mode of narration, is an inefficient way to document the nation. By privileging firsthand knowledge, gained one piece at a time, the national quilt that Caldwell is himself constructing must remain a patchwork. Frank's method, on the other hand, centralizes knowledge. It rationalizes the information brought to the lunch counter by local correspondents, establishing a standard of truth and reliability.

The obvious technical model in this period for this capacity to both gather and disseminate individual voices across the territory of the nation was radio. Caldwell's description of Frank as a sort of human radio transmitter might have in mind Franklin Delano Roosevelt himself, who was described by H. G. Wells as a "ganglion for reception, expression, transmission, combination, and realization."²⁷ But Frank's disdain for the purely contemporary perspective offered by radio discourages this comparison, and Caldwell seems to be suggesting that the function of the lunch counter is something other than pure communication. He seems also to insinuate—in the inscrutable theme of "the Eighteenth Century" and in the double figure of the listener with

which the story begins—that the particularity of individual points of view is meaningless unless they are matched by a faculty of judgment, a perspective from which they can be collected and compared. The nation is imagined here not merely as a roll call of individual voices but rather as a system of incorporating these voices into one. (The documentary medium of the sound film lent itself easily to this sort of polyvocation; an example written by Caldwell is the focus of the last part of this chapter.)

Within such an indirect discourse, the function of the author as originator of narrative, someone who gathers sensual impressions or experiences and puts them into discourse, becomes obsolete. The point of the journeys that a number of writers undertook in the early years of the Depression was twofold: to escape the middle-class location of literary authorship and to develop a true sense of what the “rest” of America was going through. It was as if the motion of these travels would, when narrated, bridge the gap between, in Antonio Gramsci’s contemporaneous terms, “intellectual-cerebral elaboration” and “muscular-nervous effort”: making authorship socially meaningful, in other words, by identifying it with the physical labor of travel and the migrant worker’s experience of dislocation.²⁸

The narrative of encounter and estrangement was crucial to the identity of the documentary intellectual, as can be gleaned from the origin story told by Dorothea Lange. Lange’s anecdote concerns her memory of a trip to observe agricultural labor with Paul Schuster Taylor, a Berkeley professor of agricultural economics who was then working for the California State Emergency Relief Administration as the field director of the Division of Rural Rehabilitation. Lange had only recently begun to work in social documentary, having established a career in San Francisco as a portrait photographer. Taylor had used some of Lange’s earliest efforts at documentary photography, images of the 1934 San Francisco general strike, to illustrate an article in *Survey Graphic* and had arranged for Lange to join his team of investigators.²⁹ The event began Lange’s long relationship with state institutions, one of the most productive public careers in American documentary.³⁰

I remember . . . the first day we were out in a car—we’d stopped at a gas station—Paul asked the fellow who put the gas in the car some question

about the country around—as we drove off Tom said, “He was a good informant.” . . . I thought, “What language! What kind of people are these? ‘He was a good informant.’” That really surprised me. I knew then that I was with people who were in a different world than mine.³¹

Because of their use of a technical language to refer to the gas station employee, it is the observers who appear to Lange to be different from herself, and not the employee, whose unreconstructed difference is presumably what Lange and Taylor have come to his “country” to study. Lange’s description of the encounter shows how the identity of the documentarist depends upon not only upon difference—the difference between the documentary subject and its audience, or between the subject and the observer—but on an economy of differences: Lange is in a “different world” not only from the gas station employee, the native, but also from the official observers. She occupies a mediating position between science (technology, the professions, the objectivity of the state) and “life.” At the same time that she and her camera are present to support the academic and governmental intervention into life, Lange establishes a critical edge between the institutions of social knowledge and their object, signified by the unspoken question “What kind of people are these?” Lange’s trip out into the rural working classes, one kind of displacement, occasions another: in her question lies a challenge to the same professional power she wields with her camera. Behind her question is, of course, the image of another “people,” the common people, folk, or nation from whom social science and politics draw their authority.³²

Lange’s double-edged question hints at a problem that preoccupied authors and artists on the American left throughout the 1930s, the problem of perspective. Gaining currency in the early part of the decade in the pages of Communist Party organs like *New Masses* and *Partisan Review*, the concept of perspective was derived from Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* (1909), a text familiar to many leftist intellectuals of the period.³³ In *What Is to Be Done?*, Lenin explained how a truly political consciousness depended on members of a particular class being able to see outside of its own limited sphere of activity. Class-consciousness did not, in other words, come only in the sphere of production and economic existence. “The consciousness of the working masses,”

he wrote, "cannot be genuine class-consciousness, unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all topical, political facts and events to observe *every* other social class in *all* the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life."³⁴ As was emphasized in Marxist debates on both sides of the Atlantic about the social-realist technique of reportage,³⁵ such a perspective did not simply mean that the experience of the working class would be represented where it had previously been excluded from representation. Rather, the proletarian consciousness described by Lenin was an abstraction, a theoretical position "from which alone it is possible to obtain this knowledge of the sphere of relationships of *all* classes and strata to the state and the government, the sphere of interrelationships between *all* classes."³⁶ Whatever proletarian literature was—and the American cultural left debated this question endlessly in the early part of the decade—it would not simply assert the moral or empirical distinctness of working-class experience. But nor would it permit refuge in purely academic objectivity. "Objective writing," Meridel Le Sueur argued in *New Masses* in 1935, "can never provide will or purpose and is related to the liberal formal idea of neutrality and disinterestedness."³⁷ "You cannot," Le Sueur challenged, "be both on the barricades and objective or removed at the same time" (200). Given their grounding in bourgeois institutions by birth, professional training, and financing, artists who became interested in documentary were placed in a difficult position by this ideology.

As is made clear by Lange's quizzical response to the scene of social inquiry, documentary opened a position of immanent criticism within those systems of representation operated by the state, the left, and the sciences. Michael Denning has suggested that the most important function of documentary for the American left in the 1930s was in providing an alternative to progressivist or teleological social explanation; or, as Denning puts it, as "a sign of the failures of narrative imagination."³⁸ While it conceives of both narrative and documentary too narrowly, this formulation helps us understand the theme of the itinerant intellectual in 1930s documentary work. The journeys that documentarists seemed to be required to take *in search of* something (true or real) were also journeys *away from* something (false). If these accounts of estrangement, alienation, or displacement could be read as tropes of the failure

that Denning regards as central to the Depression-era left, they were also tremendously successful at giving form to its imagination.

Indeed, the success of this antinarrative can be seen, by inversion, in another account of gas-station sociology, a story told by Erskine Caldwell in *Say, Is This the U.S.A.*, his 1941 collaboration with Margaret Bourke-White. The book depicts, in prose and photographs, a nation entering the war recovery that would lift it out of economic and social depression, and this vignette, which Caldwell calls "The Filling Station Circuit," announces the obsolescence of an earlier style of social explanation:

There was a time not so long past when it was the practice of many well-intentioned writers to make periodic tours of the country's gas stations for the purpose of feeling the American pulse. Assuming that it would be unnatural for it to be normal, they tore over mountains and prairies day and night, stopping spasmodically to inquire of filling-station attendants the current state of the nation. The answers they received, which were duly recorded in their notebooks, were to them statistically, sociologically, and esthetically satisfying. In hard times, the country was going to the dogs; in lush times, it was O.K., America!

I know what the answers were, because I have taken a modest number of such junkets. Probably I would have continued touring the filling-station circuit if it had not been for an incident that occurred in Missouri.

We stopped at a filling station and I asked the attendant if he believed that the patriotism, granting its existence, of the American people would arise to the occasion if a foreign aggressor should threaten the peace of the U.S.A. In other words, if an Asiatic or European dictator came over here and attempted to set up another form of government, I asked, would Americans stand up and fight it out, or would they welcome such a change with open arms.

With a business-like gesture the attendant handed me a neatly printed card. It read as follows:

"I am 36 years old. I smoke about a pack of cigarettes a day, sometimes more and sometimes less, but it evens up. I take an occasional drink of beer. I am a Baptist, an Elk, and a Rotarian. I live with my own

wife, send my children to school, and visit my in-laws once a year on Christmas Day. I wear No. 9 1/2 shoes, No. 15 1/2 collar, and No. 7 1/4 hat. I shoot a 12-gauge shotgun and have a 27-inch crotch. I like rice, sweet potatoes, and pork sausage. I vote for F.D.R., pull for Joe Louis, and boo Diz Dean. I wouldn't have anything against Hitler if he stayed in his own backyard. I don't know any Japs, but I've made up my mind to argue with the next one I see about leaving the Chinese alone. I'm in favor of the AAA, the CCC, the IOU, and the USA. If I have left anything out, it's an oversight. My business is selling gasoline and oil. If you want your tank filled, just nod your head. If you don't want anything, please move along and give the next fellow a chance. I thank you. Hurry back."

We were getting ready to leave when the attendant came back to the car and, pushing his head and shoulders through the window, leaned towards us.

"Say," he began, "I hope you folks don't think I was rude just now when I gave you that card. I figured I had to get up something like that to hand out, because I was being Q'd and A'd to death by people stopping and asking all sorts of fool things and not buying gas, either."

We shook our heads sheepishly.

"Anyway," he said, "you folks ought to know the answers to all those questions you go around the country asking, especially the one you asked me a while ago, the one about defending the country."

"Why?" we asked.

"Hell!" he said. "This ain't one of those foreign countries! This is America, ain't it?"³⁹

The encounter might seem fanciful; Caldwell and Bourke-White had, after all, fabricated typical speech by the subjects of *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), their earlier collaboration on poverty in the cotton belt, and had admitted this on the first page of *Faces*. But this implausible encounter touches on a number of ethical and aesthetic preoccupations of the documentary movement of the 1930s that it memorializes. By the end of the decade, documentary had become so thoroughly identified with the narratives and imaginings of the national popular, it seemed, that there could no longer be any distance between the observer and the object. The works examined in the rest of this chapter

demonstrate the power of documentary as a social and aesthetic technique for mapping and bridging such distances, before a change in the political climate required their complete elision.

NATIONAL FORMS

In the period of the American left known as the Popular Front—usually dated from the call at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in 1935 for a united democratic effort against fascism, to the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939—the focus of left sympathies shifted from the proletariat to the people, from an antagonistic, anticapitalist figure of class to a softer, more general conception that made class and nation roughly synonymous. One can read the effects of this shift in the opening lines of Muriel Rukeyser's epic 1937 documentary poem, "The Book of the Dead," her modernist verse rendering of congressional hearings on an industrial disaster in the rural South, an epidemic of silicosis-related deaths produced in a Union Carbide mining operation and covered up by doctors and scientists employed by the company.

These are the roads to take when you think of your country
and interested bring down the maps again,
phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,

reading the papers with morning inquiry.
Or when you sit at the wheel and your small light
chooses gas gauge and clock; and the headlights

indicate future of road, your wish pursuing
past the junction, the fork, the suburban station,
well-travelled six-lane highway planned for safety.

Past your tall central city's influence,
outside its body: traffic, penumbral crowds,
are centers removed and strong, fighting for good reason.

These roads will take you into your own country.⁴⁰

The poem begins by considering the variety of abstractions and symbolic forms in which a country can be depicted and suggests that these forms—maps, statistics, plans, wishes—themselves generate an endless series of variations of their object, as many countries are there are readers (“you”) to respond to the invitation the poem offers. In the teasing self-reference of the poem’s first words, we are enjoined to think of the poem as an interpretive tool, even offering the key to its own interpretation: these lines might serve as the roads down which one has to go to understand how local and personal experience become the matter of a country, or vice versa.⁴¹ The sentimental territory thus constructed (“your own country”) retraces the national along the lines of the popular. Describing the act of reading as both a centralizing activity, placing you in the position of the planner, and a decentralizing one, prompting you to leave home, the poem poses from the outset the questions of how textual operations—writing, publishing, reading—are related to this national reconstruction, and of how the creative textuality of the poem might be related to the work done by the other kinds of documents named here and throughout the poem.

The poem thus functions not only as a memorial to the working-class victims and the political process that took up (or impeded) their cause but also as an argument for the political efficacy of documentary. Although “The Book of the Dead” is today regarded as one of the landmark achievements of late-1930s documentary modernism, its style provoked sharp disagreements about the poem’s success and value, debates that were made more complicated by the fractious politics of the cultural left at the end of the decade.⁴² Walter Benjamin’s approving description, from a few years earlier, of Brecht’s method as “the use of reality in experimental rearrangements”⁴³ could equally be applied to Rukeyser’s poem, which incorporates a variety of evidentiary forms, including stock reports, interviews, journalism, testimony, and legislative speech taken more or less directly from the public record. By drawing characters and methods from a wide variety of classes, professions, regions, and political positions, the poem synthesizes the progressive strategy of documentary during the Popular Front. These discussions concerned the literal and figurative place of the bourgeois intellectual, relative to the people and the nation, sometimes referred to as the prob-

lem of “perspective,” and they were decisive for the development of documentary, in the period and after.

By the end of the 1930s, documentary named not only a form but a position. There were enough political variations of this position that to refer to it as a movement would be an oversimplification. Nonetheless, the poem is consistent with what we might call the documentary tendency of the 1930s, insofar as it argues that no image of the world was a neutral one. The figure of the photographer who appears throughout Rukeyser’s poem to thread together its views was, unlike the cameraman in *Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov’s 1929 film, a foil for the poem’s politics: “viewing on groundglass an inverted image” (10), this character experienced technological vision as objective truth, an ideological error that the poem, with its panorama of voices and perspectives, seeks to correct. This argument was carried by blunt rebuke (“What do you want—a cliff over a city? / A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses? / These people live here.” [14]), as well as by the kind of dialectical juxtaposition that went, in the period, by the name montage, a term embraced internationally, from theorists such as Vertov and Benjamin to the New York Film and Photo Leaguers with whom Rukeyser associated. On one page, Rukeyser presents the New River valley as an “audacious landscape. The gangster’s / stance with his gun smoking and out is not so / vicious as this commercial field, its hill of glass” (28). On the next, it was a source not of profit but of desire:

The quick sun brings, exciting mountains warm,
gay on the landscapers and green designs,
miracle, yielding the sex up under all the skin,
until the entire body watches the scene with love. (29)

Such contrasts were meant to unearth the contradictions covered by the land, a term that, as we see in this chapter and the next, was crucial to the national politics of documentary in the period. Signifying both people and place, the land becomes the source of an “authentic power” (37) that will call representation to account:

The subcommittee subcommits.
Words on a monument.

Capitoline thunder. It cannot be enough.
 The origin of storms is not in clouds,
 our lightning strikes when the earth rises,
 spillways free authentic power:
 dead John Brown's body walking from a tunnel
 to break the armored and concluded mind.

(37)

The poem bears an explicit critique of intellectual labor, and those intellectual forms—science, medicine, journalism, law, economics, art—that objectify the material world.⁴⁴ This critique was energized by the reflexive question of what kind of work was documentary itself: mechanical labor, art, craft, or career? This question was an allegory for the problem of the American cultural left more broadly, a concept riven by its partisans' multiple identifications and commitments. If the aesthetics and politics of this vexed position, "the left," were shaped by the critique of bourgeois realism undertaken by European cultural Marxists of the period, such as Lukács and Benjamin, documentary was also a specifically American problematic, part of a broad-based progressive attempt to redefine democracy and other "institutional patterns" in terms of popular experience. Part of what Warren Susman argued was a general reinvention of the very concept of American culture in the period, requiring the work of many disciplines, this interest in the folk and their ways was hardly a spontaneous alignment of committed intellectuals and the common people.⁴⁵ Rather, it was one of what we might call the professional fictions of the American left, one it shared with other institutions of social knowledge in the period.

LOW-BROW HISTORY

In his 1931 Presidential Address to the American Historical Association, Carl Becker presented a discovery so dramatic that it made the pages of the *New York Times*, despite the fact that, as a piece of historical knowledge, it was utterly banal. "If the essence of history is the memory of things said and done," Becker announced, "then it is obvious that every normal person, Mr. Everyman, knows some history."⁴⁶ This "invidious truth," as Becker called it, delivered at the outset of the Depression,

might have struck some in his audience as a cruel joke, since it threatened to put the academic historian out of work: Becker suggested that "a professional manner" and a few institutional procedures were all that separated the historian from the ordinary man who labored to remember, on the basis of a document he recovers from his "little Private Record Office (I mean his vest pocket)," whether or not he had paid his coal bill.

But unlike the past of objective history, the traditional purview of academic historians, the "living history" Becker described was a stream of associations, mental and social, that flowed from such artifacts.

Instantaneously a series of historical events comes to life in Mr. Everyman's mind. He has an image of himself ordering twenty tons of coal from Smith last summer, of Smith's wagons driving up to his house, and of the precious coal sliding dustily through the cellar window. . . .

The picture Mr. Everyman forms of Smith's wagons delivering the coal at his house is a picture of things said and done in the past. But it does not stand alone, it is not a pure antiquarian image to be enjoyed for its own sake; on the contrary, it is associated with a picture of things to be said and done in the future. . . . At four o'clock Mr. Everyman is accordingly at Smith's office. "I wish to pay that coal bill", he says. Smith looks dubious and disappointed, takes down a ledger (or a filing case), does a bit of original research in his Private Record Office, and announces: "You don't owe me any money, Mr. Everyman. You ordered the coal here, all right, but I didn't have the kind you wanted, and so turned the order over to Brown. It was Brown delivered your coal: he's the man you owe." Whereupon Mr. Everyman goes to Brown's office; and Brown takes down a ledger, does a bit of original research in his Private Record Office, which happily confirms the researches of Smith.⁴⁷

When Mr. Everyman discovers that both his memory and his documents led him astray, he reaches important insights about the materials and methods of history: the documentary record can be imprecise, and the archive is often incomplete.

This sense of the document as plastic—artificial and malleable—was an affront to the "noble dream" of an impersonal, scientific history, one made up of "heavy tomes full of actual, self-expressing facts."⁴⁸

The process of historical reconstruction that Mr. Everyman is drawn into by the lapses in his memory and his archive differ from the protocols of the professional historian, as Becker's audience would have understood them, by its subjective, collective, and effective character. With it, Mr. Everyman can "live in a world of semblance more spacious and satisfying than is to be found within the narrow confines of the fleeting present moment."⁴⁹ In a gesture of humility designed to save the profession from social irrelevance, Becker argued that with this expanded conception of experience, the American historian placed himself on the same plane as ordinary life: "we do not impose our version of the human story on Mr. Everyman," Becker demurred; "in the end it is rather Mr. Everyman who imposes his vision on us" (235)—a position the *New York Times*, in its approving account of Becker's address, called a "low-brow" approach to history.⁵⁰

The "Ithaca Everyman"—a reference to Cornell University, Becker's home institution—was, according to the *Times*, "more gifted [and] more utilitarian" than other, no less ordinary, Americans, in his ability to see how his history might be applied to the problems of life in the present. An echo of Nietzsche's "effective" history, Everyman's "living history" opposed itself to the "useless history" practiced by academic historians.⁵¹ If his sense of the present should occasionally become confused by the "elfish" memories of a freckled former sweetheart, this would merely serve to remind us that history is grounded in the vicissitudes of subjectivity and experience, "as his physical, intellectual, and moral status, his environment and so on, dictate." The *Times* concluded, with a remarkable openness to the politics of history, that such contingency was only correct: "Each age must have its history suited to its form and pressure." At the outset of a decade in which all aspects of social and political life would be shaped by the "form and pressure" of the problems of classes and masses, the *Times*'s excited response to Becker's speech can be seen as the birth announcement of a new form of culture.

Although the term "documentary" was in use by American radical filmmakers as early as 1930—an effect of their exposure to the work of, among others, John Grierson and Dziga Vertov⁵²—it would take most of the decade for a cadre of specialists and promoters to make low-brow history into the national-popular form that the AHA and the *Times* had

called for at the decade's opening. Doing so would require an unprecedented collaboration between radical and experimental artists, liberals working in both policy and publicity capacities in state institutions, and the owners and operators of the communications industry. This conjoint effort to create an official mass culture from competing aesthetic and political tendencies locates documentary on what Michael Denning has called the "cultural front" of the 1930s, and it accounts in part for the remarkable range of documentary forms and politics in the period.

Denning revives this term, which was used by the cultural left in the period (and, later, against it), in order to contest the conventional view that Depression culture was dominated by a documentary aesthetic, where documentary is taken to be synonymous with social realism.⁵³ He argues that the concept of documentary "fails to capture the complexity of the aesthetic ideologies of the cultural front" (119) because of its legacy in American literary and cultural studies, where the concept stood for realism, authenticity, and common sense, embodied in the presentational aesthetic of photographers like Bourke-White, Lange, and Evans. In its direct address to the middle-class reader, the title of Bourke-White's photo-textual collaboration with Erskine Caldwell, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), embodied this aesthetic and the welfare-state politics that underwrote it. By maintaining that the 1930s were a laboratory for a variety of aesthetic projects, Denning means to resist what he calls the "documentary synthesis" of William Stott's formative 1973 account in *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. Instead, Denning tells the story of the decade's art and politics in such a way that a different kind of collectivity is possible, beyond the simplified notion of democracy, prevalent in many studies of documentary, which equates it with representational transparency and technological diffusion.⁵⁴

Within the frame of the cultural front, documentary becomes a mere symptom of social crisis, "a sign of the failures of narrative imagination" which characterize Depression culture (Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 119). Denning does not remark on the contradiction between these two views of documentary, the one in which it serves as a compensatory reaction to crisis, and the one that includes documentary in the creative and improvisational "aesthetic ideology" of the period,

a form very different from the reality but capable of rending the meaning and feeling of the real event. From this point of view, the documentary film was anything but a document. It did not "document" reality at all. Its tiny documents in the form of shots and sounds bore the same relation to the film as the small pieces of colored stone and glass to the mosaic mural, the brush-strokes to the painting, the individual words and phrases to the novel. The stuff was document, but the construction was invented, a time-collage. And it was clear that the question of *truth or lie* lay not in the stuff you were using but in the thoughts, responsibility, empathy of the film maker and his capacity to shape a form which could tell . . . how much of the truth? This responsibility and empathy were not different from the truth or lie of the fiction film or any other art.⁵⁹

As Hurwitz's phrasing suggests, the conflicts to which documentary as an aesthetic and social ideal gave rise were in fact dynamic aspects of the form for its partisans on the left and shaped, as we shall see, its development both *within* and *across* institutions of politics and ideology. To Hurwitz and his cohort, documentary was a dialectical conception whose essence was extrinsic: it could only be expressed in terms of the movement between one form, medium, or social location and another.

Among radicals, documentary was seen as a means of combating popular alienation from the social and political institutions of American life and of giving the leftist intellectual, through acts of "responsibility and empathy," renewed popular relevance. One typical catalyst of this process was an act of self-alienation on the part of its makers, who took leave of their native forms, places, and class positions. Bringing the cultural intellectual in contact, or conflict, with unfamiliar categories of craft, occupation, and class was meant to disrupt the traditional relation of concern between the socially conscious artist and the proletariat.

It was precisely this sort of crisis that Walter Benjamin wished to institute in his concept of "the author as producer," in his 1934 essay of the same name. Benjamin's critique of a "new objectivity" in social realism argued that this style merely described poverty and thus reinforced class structure as a given in modern life. By taking poverty and the everyday settings of industrial life as its object, this movement not only objectified class structures, but also posited the transparency of documentary media, thereby separating art from the historical condi-

tions that made it possible. It was "only by transcending the specialization in the process of production that, in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order," Benjamin wrote, that one could "make this production politically useful" ("The Author as Producer," 230). A symptom of this order was the distinction between the work of the photographer and the work of the writer, a specialization that reinforced and reified a purely aesthetic conception of intellectual labor. "What we require of the photographer," Benjamin demanded,

is the ability to give his pictures the caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary useful value. But we shall make this demand most emphatically when we—the writers—take up photography. Here, too, therefore, technical progress is for the author as producer the foundation of his political progress. (230)

The recasting of traditional literary structures in the modern mechanical forms of reproduction would, Benjamin argued, make it possible for the leftist author to recognize his place in the sphere of production and, by extension, within the class struggle, rather than outside it, looking on.

These oft-quoted passages fail to make clear, however, just how the combination of image and word would overthrow cultural specialization and the bourgeois conceptions of connoisseurship and professionalism that support it. By the end of the essay, in fact, Benjamin admits that "the proletarianization of an intellectual hardly ever makes him a proletarian," and he is resigned to describing the relation between the committed author and the proletariat as, at best, a "mediated one" (237). In this case, the concept of the specialist can serve as Trojan Horse: the intellectual is most effective when he can betray his class origins, a process he begins by merely observing the material character of his work. Benjamin concludes his address with a series of rhetorical questions, meant to define this cultural praxis: "Does he succeed in promoting the socialization of the intellectual means of production? Does he see how he himself can organize the intellectual workers in the production process? Does he have proposals for the *Umfunktionierung* [functional transformation] of the novel, the drama, the poem?" (238). In his emphasis on the material aspects of cultural work that make it and its

products comparable to any social process of production, he outlines a paradoxical strategy for being *against* capitalism, in the double sense of the term: adjacent to it while opposing it.

Many writers on the American left experienced a crisis of vocation in similar terms. Or, rather, it might be more correct to say that at certain moments "the left" seemed to be constituted by such a crisis.⁶⁰ The April 1935 American Writers' Congress, for instance, one of the iconic events of leftist culture in the period, was roiled by the questions of where the radical writer should stand, vis-à-vis the proletariat, and what form was best suited to advance the cause of working-class revolution. The published proceedings reproduce the address to the Writers' Congress by John Dos Passos called "The Writer as Technician," in which Dos Passos argued that the professional writer was distinguished from "anybody who can put the words down on paper" by his "discovery, originality, invention" of language.⁶¹ "The professional writer," Dos Passos claimed, "discovers some aspect of the world and invents out of the speech of his time some particularly apt and original way of putting it down on paper" (79). In doing so, he both reflected and inflected the "mind of the group," a social obligation no different from that of the scientist or engineer. Placed immediately after Dos Passos, Jack Conroy's presentation, "The Worker as Writer," argued roughly the same thing in precisely the opposite terms. Conroy lamented that "a semi-private terminology almost unintelligible to the masses" had been the result of a "desperate striving for novelty of phrase and imagery" (83). To achieve an effective literary mechanism for galvanizing revolutionary sentiment, Conroy recommended that writers employ as subject matter "those aspects of American life important to the masses," and "communicate this material as simply and clearly as we are able to the largest body of readers we can command" (83). The difference in language obscured the degree to which the two authors were aiming at the same thing, the same proletarianization of the writer theorized by Benjamin.

The opposition between these two incompatible expressions marks a crucial moment in the formation of the 1930s left. Though Conroy's uncompromising language of popular experience and taste suits a certain stereotype of the left, the rhetoric of the worker-hero that American communists borrowed from Soviet culture in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Dos Passos better captures the ethos of the cultural front with

his nuanced conception of a duplicitous professionalism. As Denning explains in his compendious history of this long-lived and highly flexible cultural formation, the concept of the "front" had several meanings. It was used both affirmatively by its partisans, to describe allegiances across political and social lines, and pejoratively by its critics, who meant it in the sense of a deception, when they accused all manner of liberal and left individuals and organizations of masking their communist or Soviet ties.⁶² In fact, the value of the front as a metaphor for describing leftist cultural activity was precisely its imaginative character, for this allowed it to accurately describe sites of contradiction within the left. As a concept that prefigured the official communist strategy of the Popular Front, announced in 1935, the flexible notions of "culture" on this front helped make possible the national strategy of the communist left during the Popular Front phase. This was the point made at the Congress by Minnesotan author Meridel Le Sueur, who told the American Writers' Congress that class conflict could also be thought of in regional terms. The Middle West had "*always* been depressed," Le Sueur claimed, and thus knew best how to exploit the "rich and powerful chaos" of the times (135, 137). "Revolution can spring up from the windy prairie as naturally as the wheat" (138), promised Le Sueur, anticipating later generations of Midwestern militants. The Midwestern middle and working classes had been joined as "dissenters, individual madmen, anarchists against the machine." Now, said Le Sueur, a Midwestern intelligence was maturing,

finding a place, sending a new and vigorous interrelation between himself and others, which at least will give him the free association from the factual bourgeois and decaying reality to the true subjective image of the communal artist, which is already real in Russia: not the spurious subjectivity of the bourgeois artist of personal defeat, subterfuge and apology, but the subjectivity of the communal root image of a rising class that has no reason for entrenchment and subterfuge, and links him further and deeper to all. (138)

In a 1935 essay published in the pages of the American communist journal *New Masses*, Le Sueur issued a wrenching challenge to middle-class intellectuals like herself, titled "The Fetish of Being Outside."⁶³



Figure 1.2. *People of the Cumberland*. Still capture from DVD. Courtesy of the Highlander Research and Education Center and the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

modern composition. In themselves, these visual and aural markers of bourgeois and professional culture remind us of the class antagonism that produced the misery documented in the previous section. The film thereby begs the question crucial to the ideology of the Popular Front: how will the history of these class differences be overturned by a culture uniting rich and poor Americans? And how, furthermore, can ideological apparatuses like education be refashioned to serve the ends of social amelioration, rather than social division?

The narration informs us that Horton and Highlander offer a “new beginning” to the people of the Cumberland, “a link between the towns and the mountains,” a statement that emphasizes what has already been made clear in the montage, when the film shifts abruptly from pseudo-photographic images of the impoverished hillside and valley communities, imitating the aesthetics of FSA photography and Pare Lorentz’s films, to the clean and dynamic compositions of the sec-



Figure 1.3. *People of the Cumberland*. Still capture from DVD. Courtesy of the Highlander Research and Education Center and the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

tion introducing Highlander. The same kinds of people we saw in the opening are now shown happily engaged in ordinary tasks, in marked contrast to the morose and static dispositions of the earlier bodies. The school and the local population are now described as “neighbors” and a “community.” The image of a folk-dance lesson at the school, one of the dances “of a long time ago, when the community was happy and prosperous,” is evidence for the claim that “the school took roots among the people” (see figure 1.3).

If folk culture, remediated by the school’s ethnologists, is the mechanism for binding this community, labor education is presented as the means for expanding it beyond the southern Appalachians. In an upbeat series of short sequences, the film expresses the idea that labor unions are both the outgrowth of these local forms of community and the means of their dispersion onto the national scene. Students at the school are shown learning about the merits of unions and the protocols



Figure 1.4. *People of the Cumberland*. Still capture from DVD. Courtesy of the Highlander Research and Education Center and the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

of civil discourse, and emphasis is placed on the active nature of their learning (see figure 1.4). In an innovative application of *mise-en-scène*, they discuss the benefits of unionization while attending to a garden at the school. Then they test their knowledge by debating and making speeches (see figure 1.5). In these educational units, the school's pedagogical method is adapted for the medium of film, and in accordance with the principles of documentary as a "moving document of life" that Steiner and Hurwitz had developed in their *Nykino* phase.⁷⁶ These sequences show the students of Highlander learning and articulating ideas themselves rather than giving these ideas the voice of the narrator, as would be conventional. While the flat sonic texture and imprecise lip-synching of the labor-organizing lessons give away that these discussions were concocted in postproduction, this pantomime of discourse answers the question posed by the narrator's blunt assertion that the school had rooted itself in the lives of the people and suggests that cinema can assist in this incorporation. If the school is

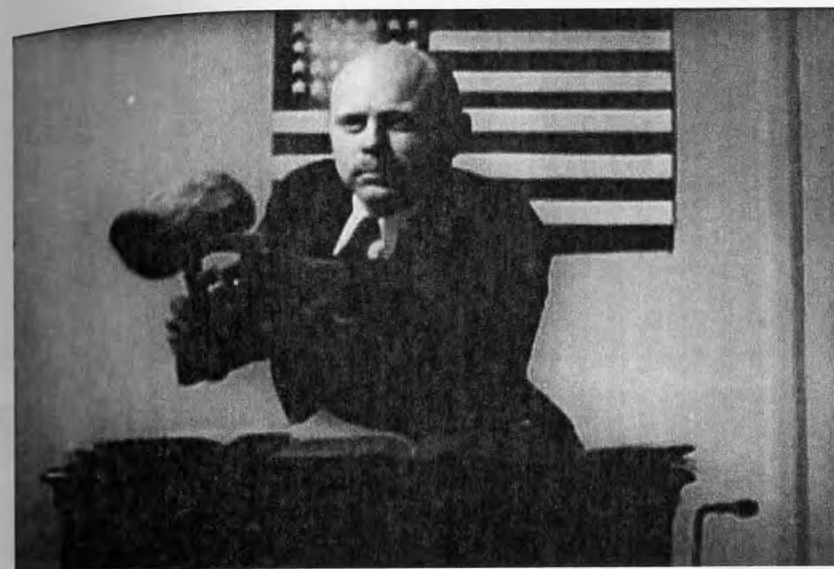


Figure 1.5. *People of the Cumberland*. Still capture from DVD. Courtesy of the Highlander Research and Education Center and the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

necessary because the folk have lost their ability to speak and commune with one another, film can help reconstruct their voice. That it does so in both staged actions and newsreel footage of strikes and marches from around the country, set to audio recordings of protest singing, should strike us less as stylistic inconsistency than a refusal to hierarchize styles of knowledge that is in keeping with the Popular Front politics of social diversity.

Indeed, this section features one of the few sequences in any progressive documentary of the era that does not condescend to women. Women figure prominently in footage of UAW marches and sit-down strikes. In a sequence focusing on the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, women are seen and spoken of as leaders of a technologized national movement, presented in a series of heroic close-ups at their cutting and sewing machines and shown in groups, composing and distributing the ACWA newsletter (see figures 1.6–1.9). Images of this sort, of course, cannot help but raise the question of women's role in



Figures 1.6-1.9. *People of the Cumberland*. Still captures from DVD. Courtesy of the Highlander Research and Education Center and the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

documentary filmmaking, and the significance of their absence—from the production of *People of the Cumberland*, besides the sound editing of Helen Van Dongen; from the Frontier group, other than in advisory or supporting capacities; and from left documentary film of the period and for decades after. The passage is an aberration in the masculinist image repertoire of the genre, which can perhaps be seen as consistent with its makers' devotion to Vertov and his aesthetic of gaps and intervals. Associating women with action, and with the production of both goods and knowledge, the film remakes the largely static images of women in the first section, which already restage well-known images by Dorothea Lange and Margaret Bourke-White.⁷⁷

Amplifying the dynamic interval introduced into the film by the theme of women's role in the movement, the following section appears stylistically inconsistent, within itself and with the surrounding sections. Based on an actual incident of antiunion vigilantism, the section uses dramatic techniques to imagine the murder of a United Mine Workers of America organizer; these techniques include a voice-over that switches from the perspective of the antiunion forces to that of the doomed organizer, recalling his murder from beyond the grave. Cross-cut with a scene of miners being sworn into the UMWA, the vignette of the organizer's murder stands out in its emphatic use of continuity editing, which distinguishes it from the presentation of the union ceremony and from the rest of the film. Precisely because of this contrast, the visual continuities from one shot to another and the character-based interior monologue act here as a sign of trouble and a source of anxiety, expressing the violence of capitalism in the form and structure of the conventional narrative film. These narrative devices recall the arguments made against the "fascist" propaganda of Hollywood film in the Film and Photo League journal *Filmfront*, putting them into practice by a technique of inversion. Contemporary viewers seemed unprovoked by this section and likely saw it as less of a disjunction than do more recent viewers habituated to the *vérité* aesthetic. (Vlada Petric's 1973 description of the reenactment as "histrionic" and "in total stylistic dissonance with the strongly documentary fashion of recording reality in the remaining portion of the film" says more about the conception of documentary in the United States in the mid-1970s than it does about the film.)⁷⁸ If the noir look and fictional subjectivity of this part of the film is out of step with the aesthetic of other sections, this is not because other sections of the film eschew constructivist techniques in favor of literalist realism. And the patchwork quality of the entire film text testifies also to the flexibility of the documentary concept on the left in this period. As a front of cultural struggle, documentary could not be reduced to a singular perspective on a social reality that was in itself a collection of diverse, often disjunctive parts.

Isometric social force is a pronounced theme in the last part of the film, centered on the 1937 Fourth of July celebration in La Follette, Tennessee. This section deploys the full resources of what Kenneth Burke called the "revolutionary symbolism" of the left to elevate the

specific struggles the film has addressed—of labor, of the Cumberland region—to the status of a national mythology.⁷⁹ Featuring speeches by the heads of the local branch of the UMWA, the Highlander School, and the TVA, the La Follette event becomes an opportunity to weave together the forces of the workerist and intellectual left with those of the liberal state. This montage compares the power managed by the government, visualized in the turbulent waters of a TVA dam, with the raw social power of the people. The cinematic resources of mise-en-scène and montage allow the film to demonstrate how its own creative faculties can be crucial to the mythology of this political front.

Although the section begins with images that seem, as Petric says, merely to inscribe reality—signs advertising the July Fourth rally and groups of marchers assembling—these are soon interspersed with images staged for the camera, in which marchers' movements are choreographed to end in dramatic compositions. The posters we see in the opening images promise a series of speeches by labor and government leaders, followed by festivities, but the film mixes the speakers together with games, races, and a hog-calling contest, even going so far as to admonish "no more speeches—this is a holiday!" This emphasis on play and fitness is reminiscent of the Soviet revolutionary cinema that Frontier members would have viewed in the early 1930s, and the contention that revolution is a form of physical as well as mental conditioning recalls the hygiene newsreels made by Medvedkin and the exercise sequence in Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Extending the stylistic tension produced by the previous section, the idea that solidarity is formed in contest is threaded through this section as theme and form. A marriage, a boxing match between friends, a tug of war between miners and mill workers, and the rift between the American Federation of Labor and the Council of Industrial Organizations are strung together as examples of dynamic tensions and reversals. "These lads are buddies on weekdays, but on holidays they slug each other" is the caption the narrator offers for the boxers, inverting the usual opposition between workplace and site of leisure and between workday and holiday; and speaking for a UMWA representative, the voice urges "AFL or CIO, we've got to get together—that's what union means."

Keyed by the statement "youth takes over," the final minutes of the film enact a frenetic series of combinations and reversals. Russell



Figure 1.10. *People of the Cumberland*. Still capture from DVD. Courtesy of the Highlander Research and Education Center and the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Campbell notes that the staging of events in *People of the Cumberland* that were not and could not have been filmed, like the killing of the UMWA organizer, was consistent with the desires of Nykino members, from the time of their split with the Film and Photo League, to be able to document what capitalist control of the media prevented from being recorded.⁸⁰ The final section of the film, however, constructs a future vision from fragments of the past. Images from minutes or even seconds earlier in the film reappear and are given new meaning. One may see this as resignifying; a stronger reading would say that Frontier's aim was to show that images have no inherent meaning and are in constant flux, like the flows of water harnessed by the TVA dam, which is the source of new energy for the region. The film's opening images of gaunt mothers, barren mines, and dirt graves are reprised as a reminder of the past that may always return. In its place, the film unsentimentally suggests, "daughters of miners, daughters of lumbermen" will provide energy "to bring out of the stony ground: light—

TVA—light for the dark valley,” a series of terms that connects the potential energy of nature to the power of the welfare state (in the form of the Tennessee Valley Authority and its hydroelectricity) and the luminous power of cinema. Channeled back into those collectivities who are both the film’s subjects and its addressees, this power is symbolized by the group of young men in a shot-put competition on whom the film ends. Given heroic stature by the low-angle framing, the final shot captures one in an iconic pose, clenched fist raised toward the camera. But equally impressive is the crowd of young boys who lean into the frame around him, watching for his shot to land (see figure 1.10). The incorporation of this organic audience into the film is one more form of synthesis. This striking image not only brings together an action and its reception within a single frame, but it also confronts us with an image of ourselves, watching and waiting for the effects of a projected object. In this way, the film attempts at its conclusion to symbolize its own future: the horizon or *frontier*, one might say, of the audience, which it might energize as a public sphere. But as a tableau, this image also marks the uncertainty of this future and the anxious temporality of all progressive documentary, as it “memorializes the present for the future.”⁸¹ (This group of ordinary, anonymous young men, one becoming several, prefigures the statistical sublime of *Fahrenheit 9/11*’s audience, the number so big, according to Moore, that no one could remember it.) In order to understand why the outcome of this narrative was so difficult to imagine, and has since become so difficult to recall and to view, we must turn to the other major partner in the cinematic cultural front: the New Deal state. That documentary enterprise is the subject of the next chapter.

2 / VOICE-OVER, ALLEGORY, AND THE PASTORAL IN NEW DEAL DOCUMENTARY

THE POLITICAL ALLEGORY OF THE VOICE

The totalizing state projects of social welfare, land management, and economic regulation carried out by Western industrial nations in the 1930s have often been described in terms of an all-powerful vision that mapped both space and social relations. Documentary photography and cinematography were perfectly suited to the optic of social, scientific, and economic rationality that James Scott identifies as a hallmark of the high modernist state.¹ These modes of visual representation gained prominence in the period as means to document and promote state efforts to transform natural and social space. Fusing the symbolic registers of art and science, the new medium of the social documentary film provided a model for the processes of abstraction crucial to the new mode of governing.

This modeling started with the empirical methods of documentary, which often entailed vast projects of mapping and collecting. One of the grandest examples was Robert Flaherty’s two-year, twenty-thousand-mile trip to gather raw materials for *The Land* (1941), his government-sponsored film about agricultural reform. On the screen, this affiliation could produce images that were at once artistic and ideological, like *The Land*’s abstractionist patterns of curving furrow lines of contour plowing. Seen from a plane flying high above, this landscape could be made to resemble its opposite, the highway cloverleaf taking commuters to and from the suburban greenbelt idyll that appears at the end of Willard Van Dyke and Ralph Steiner’s 1939 film *The City* (see figures 2.1 and 2.2). In these strange and beautiful images, an entire