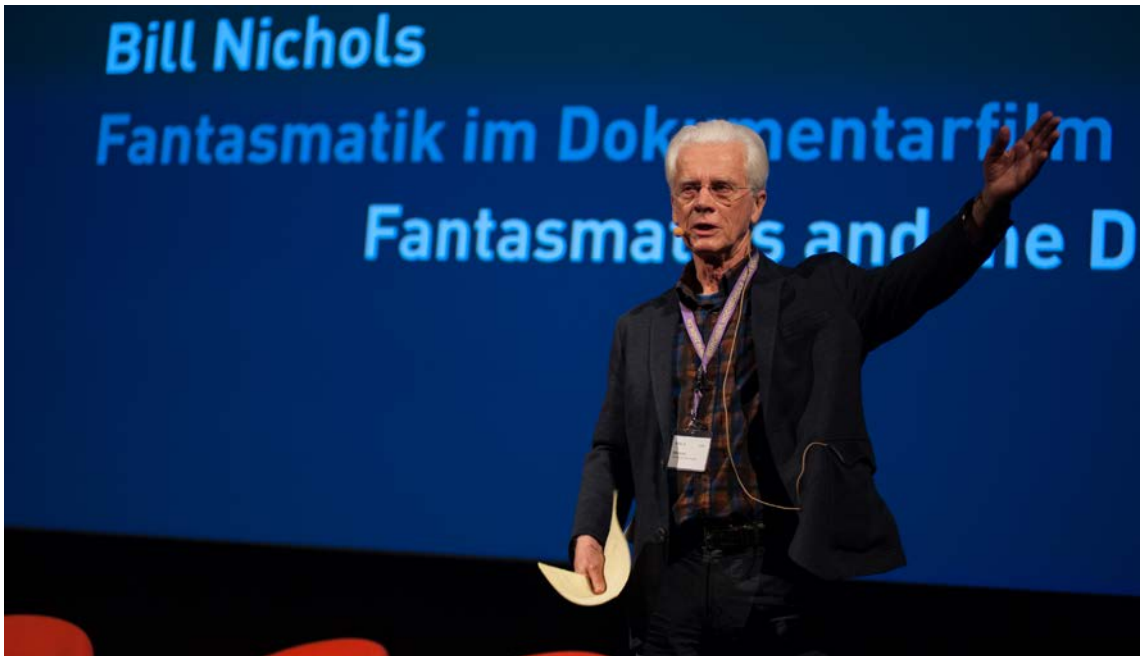
Going through the Motions: Repetition and Reenactment[1]

by Bill Nichols



Bill Nichols at the ZDOK documentary conference in Zurich, May 20, 2016

How can we repeat something that was unique? How can we repeat the past? These questions have figured into the documentary tradition from the beginning, with Robert Flaherty reenacting aspects of Inuit life that were more typical of pre-contact existence than of the lives of the Inuit he worked with and with John Grierson buying into reconstructions of typical events that no camera was there to film in many of the 1930s British documentaries from *Coal Face* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1935) to *Night Mail* (Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936). Reenacting the past gives comfort and coherence; it brings back to life what had passed from it.

Apart from the years when observational and participatory cinema ruled the day (the 1960s and 70s for the most part), reenactment has played a vital part in documentary and clearly does so today. This is not surprising. The act of going through motions associated with a previous action, again, can be seen as the origin of fantasy and creativity. This origin lies in childhood. Put more concretely, and psychoanalytically, the child's act of thumb sucking may be the moment when fantasy takes its place in the human psyche. This act, similar to but

1 I have explored these issues in greater detail in an article, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject," Critical Inquiry 35, no. 1 (2008): 72-89. The article also appears in my Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016): 34-50.

different from the act it repeats (nursing) is the act that launches us on the royal road toward a psychic reality that is no less real for being a product of our imagination.

This idea stems from the work of Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis who argue that the child sucks at the breast to fulfill a basic biological need–nourishment–but sucks on its thumb to fulfill a psychic desire–pleasure.[2] The child would have no reason to go through the motions associated with satisfying a need (nursing) that fails to do so (thumb sucking) if it did not provide satisfaction of its own. This satisfaction is what they call fantasmatic: it stems from reenacting something not available in the present moment and deriving pleasure from the act of doing so. The reenactment of sucking at the mother's breast provides a distinct pleasure of its own just as reenactments do in documentary. They allow what was an object (the breast), or actual occurrence (historical events) to be replaced by a simulacrum and for the act of doing so to generate a pleasure of its own. What was real becomes imaginary; what was factual becomes fantasmatic, what was a referent becomes a signifier, and it retains a definite psychic link to that which it re-presents.

To put this phenomenon in a more tongue twisting form, one proposed by Gregory Bateson, "These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote" (italics his).[3] Similar actions carry different signification. The pay off or pleasure of each is different. And just as a child may go through the motions of sucking to generate a new, psychic pleasure, animals may go through the motions of fighting to generate a new, non-injurious pleasure–play. Documentary filmmakers may go through the motions of repeating the past to create the new, fantasmatic pleasure of making vivid and cinematically real what is no longer historically present.

That which forms a reenactment needs to be understood as one. Just as the child can only experience frustration if it mistakes thumb sucking for actual breast feeding, so the viewer will feel a sense of frustration, or, more likely, betrayal, if he mistakes a reenactment for that which it reenacts. Filmmakers generally take care to insure that viewers understand that a reenactment is a reenactment and not a magical re-presentation of something not originally available for filming. We long to experience what is lost, past, forgotten, but can only derive fantasmatic pleasure from this desire if we do not mistake the reenactment for what it reenacts.

This longing can have multiple pay offs. It yields the pleasure of giving vivid, cinematic form to what was not captured on film at all when it originally occurred. It can facilitate the act of mourning as we return to sites and times of loss the better to address them. It can give a sense of mastery as we repeat something that cannot, in fact, be repeated. It can enhance our understanding of what has

2 Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," in Formations of Fantasy, Victor Burgin, James Donald, Cora Kaplan, eds. (New York: Methuen, 1986).

3 Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," in Steps to an Ecology of Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 180.

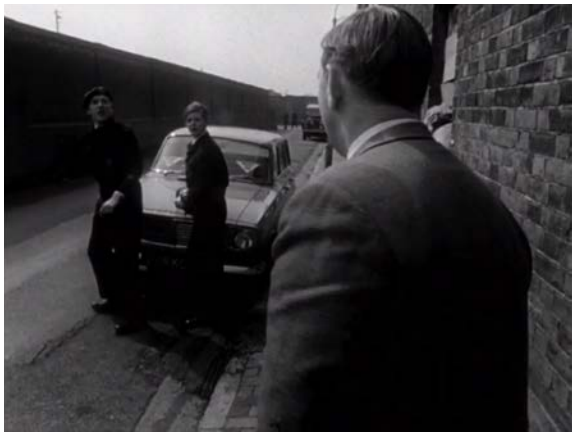
gone before from a new, distinct perspective. And it can signal our desperation as we strive to recapture what cannot be truly recaptured at all.

Going through the motions is the formula for all these goals; the outcome will depend on the particular case and the specific voice or style adopted in the reenactment. The sounds and images of reenactment stem from the present, not the past. They stem not from the actual historical participants but from the filmmaker whose distinct voice inflects the past with an understanding and perspective that the past initially did not possess.

In sum, reenactments make what is past present to help us undergo the work of mourning; come to terms with trauma; achieve mastery over and greater understanding of what has come and gone; to experience something in fresh, vivid, moving ways; to see how participants or witnesses reconstruct what they have previously experienced; and to hear the voice of the filmmaker as he or she re-presents the past from their own distinct perspective. This they do in their own unique ways. Every reenactment is a creative act of interpretation. These interpretations, though, tend to fall into types or categories that we can describe further.

Realist and Historically Specific

These reenactments attempt to return us to a very specific, never to be repeated moment in the past. A prime example is *Touching the Void* (Kevin MacDonald, 2003). The film relies massively on carefully staged and filmed reenactments that capture what it was like for two mountaineers to become separated and nearly die. The reenacted scenes strive to bring us fully into this past moment experientially and rely on music, vivid sound effects such as the crunch of snow beneath a boot, and close ups to do so. At the same time, we hear the two actual climbers recount their ordeal in a film studio. The result is quite gripping, highly dramatic, if not melodramatic, and invites us to forget, for a moment, that the reenactments are precisely that, even as it is made patently clear that the reenacted scenes do not come from the original climb: they are far more visually and acoustically engaging than that original event ever was.



The War Game (Peter Watkins, 1965)

Another, more paradoxical and thought-provoking use of historically precise reenactment occurs in Peter Watkins' *The War Game* (1965). It is, in fact, not a reenactment at all but a pre-enactment: a visual depiction of what would happen if a nuclear bomb were to explode in England. Watkins creates an entire scenario of events that led up to this catastrophic moment and then takes us to the precise minute when the bomb explodes. We see a family and a family doctor do all they can to find shelter and survive the blast even though they have virtually no warning. We then follow television news reporters who roam the streets, trying to report on the terrible

devastation and death that they see. At one point, police prevent a reporter from getting any closer to a scene, but he is close enough to let us see that policemen are shooting victims of the blast to put them out of their untreatable misery. The effect is quite wrenching. Watkins sought to make the dangers of nuclear weapons vivid and his realistic, and highly detailed images help him achieve this end powerfully.

Realist and Historically Typical

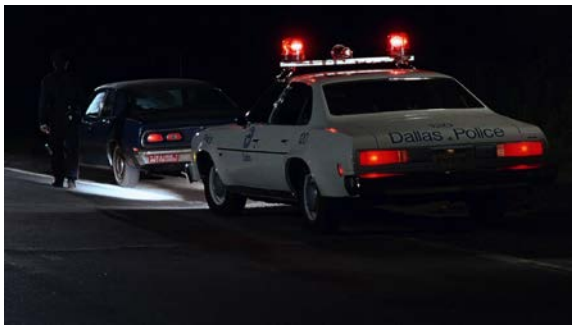
These reenactments seek to show what actions and events were like in a more general way. This is the form of reenactment that Robert Flaherty can be said to have initiated when he made *Nanook of the North* (1922). Almost all of the events represent Inuit life as it existed some 25–30 years before Flaherty arrived to film it. This is not disclosed in the film, and this lapse has led some to argue that Flaherty deliberately deceived his audience in order to heighten the dramatic impact of scenes that do not demonstrate what it used to be like, from the safety of a more secure present, but instead seek to give the impression that Nanook's very survival depends on his success in hunting and fishing now, as the camera rolls. This debate has been slow in coming to the film, though, and its successful depiction of a world filled with challenges and danger, regardless of its historical authenticity, has prompted most film histories to treat it as a genuine milestone.

No Place on Earth (Janet Tobias, 2012) is a much more recent example of this general trend. It tells the story, set in the Ukraine, of two extended Jewish families who hid from the Nazis for over two years in a large complex of caves. The film uses a contemporary narrator, an American cave explorer, who stumbles onto this story; different Jewish survivors who were children at the time they hid in the caves; archival footage of small village life in the Ukraine, and reenactments of what it was like for these families both before and after they took refuge in the caves. Several archival sequences depict typical moments of shopping or doing chores that give a vivid sense of what quotidian life was like in the 1940s. In some cases, the reenactment spins off from this archival footage. They sometimes begin in sepia or black and white and then transition to color as if to fully vivify these lives from some 70 or so years ago. Now, however, actors take the place once occupied by the actual historical personae. There is never any doubt that the reenactments are not historical footage and their effect is less to authenticate what is recounted than to give more compelling embodiment to it.

Stylization

These are situations where the *how* of the reenactment highlights its constructed quality, unlike the more immersive, melodramatic form of *Touching the Void,* say, yet also retains a sense of historical authenticity, often to a specific historical occurrence.

The prime example of this type, for me, is *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988). With this film Morris rejected all the precepts of observational documentary,



The Thin Blue Line (Errol Morris, 1988)

exaggerated the concept of participatory documentary, and presented reenactments that were far richer in subjective embellishments than historical accuracy. The embellishments did less to drag us into the scene melodramatically than to make us aware that the pasts is always seen from a distinct point of view and that this perspective is not only that of the witnesses or participants but also the filmmaker. Morris strives to reenact the murder of a Dallas police officer; the harrowing experiences of the man accused and convicted, wrongly, of the crime, and the testimony of alleged eyewitnesses in a film noirish, exaggerated form that intensifies our sense that an injustice has been done. Newspaper accounts from the time, for example, appear on the screen, but in so large a close up that we cannot read complete sentences. They convey the impression of factual information without actually providing it, in accord with the distorted way in which justice was twisted and the killer left at large. It is a landmark film that has reminded filmmakers ever since that documentary films need not simply observe what happens in front of the camera but can actively and creatively stage what they want us to see.

The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012)

Another vivid example is *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012) where highly stylized images (a gigantic fish placed in a lush tropical setting from which beautiful women appear) and garish reenactments of horrific torture and murder are presented, not primarily from the perspective of the filmmaker but from the perspective of the perpetrators of mass murder in 1960s Indonesia. The men live freely, protected by the government, but Oppenheimer uses their sense of power and untouchability to get them to recount and reenact their crimes for all to see. There is less a sense of historical accuracy than a powerful feeling of continuing impunity, a feeling that throws our usual sense of justice and rule of law into disarray.

Little Dieter Needs to Fly (Werner Herzog, 1997).

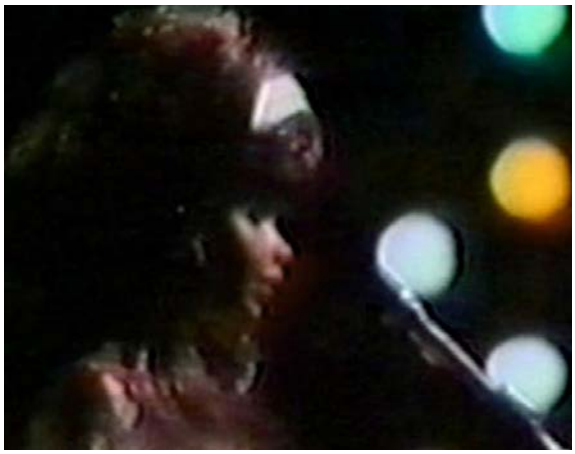
Brechtian Distantiation

Bertolt Brecht proposed a theater that would prompt thought and reflection as well as emotional engagement.[4] Some filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, Rainer Fassbinder, and Michael Verhoeven adapted his ideas of feature films while others such as Werner Herzog and Todd Haynes have applied them to documentary. Herzog does so most tellingly in his film *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997). Dieter Dengler recounts how, as a fighter plane pilot, he was shot down during the Vietnam War, captured by Laotians,

4 For a general introduction to Brecht's concepts, in his own words, see Brecht on Theatre, John Willet, ed. (London: Methuen, 1978).

and eventually managed to escape. He returns to Lao to reenact elements of his capture but rather than adopt the heightened realism of *Touching the Void* or the stylization of *The Thin Blue Line,* Herzog and Dengler cooperate in an emphasis on going through the motions as gestures and symbols. The Laotian men playing his guards, for example, carry rifles but stand about listlessly, making no effort to actually guard him. The effect is to provide more of a demonstration than a dramatic reenactment. It also spares Dengler from the emotional risks of repeating more realistically what was, in fact, a traumatic experience.

S 21: The Kymer Rouge Death Machine (2003) by Rithy Panh uses similar techniques to explore the horrors of the Kymer Rouge and their vast execution machine in Cambodia. S 21 was a death camp where thousands died and only a handful survived. Panh brings a survivor, an artist, and several guards back together and in multiple scenes, the guards reenact the daily routines they carried out of counting prisoners, enforcing rules and singling out individuals for punishment, torture, or death. These scenes are done with no props or makeup, no sets and no music. There is no attempt to make us feel we are once again the midst of the original events. Instead, the guards move through the now empty rooms reciting commands and comments they often made in the past but to no one, other than to us, the observers, now. The survivor is spared reenacting a traumatic event, as was Dieter Dengler, and we are given a more Brechtian representation of what needs to provide thought and reflection as well as visceral disgust.



Superstar (Todd Haynes, 1988)

Irony

Superstar is an underground cult film because Todd Haynes never secured the musical rights to Karen Carpenter's songs. The film is about her. And the eating disorders, including bulimia and anorexia, that killed her. Instead of using actors to reenact key scenes or typical moments, though, Haynes turns to Barbie dolls. The reenactments therefore have a campy, ironic, hard to believe quality and yet the real life dilemmas that get retold engage us all the same. We know full well it is a reenactment but still cannot discount the intensity and pain of what we witness. We have a vivid sense that what we see is not what there was, but that the emotional distress and conceptual issues remain fully intact. The doll figures take on deeper meanings than they might otherwise have as we project our growing understanding of Karen Carpenter's troubled life onto them.

The same can be said of the much earlier Luis Buñuel film, *Land without Bread* (1933). There are no Barbie dolls in this case, but there are poor villagers whose lives take on greater significance as Buñuel uses them to draw attention to the arrogance and judgmentalness that often underlies our encounters with other, more traditional or impoverished cultures. Ethnocentrism was a commonplace

in 1930s Europe and by coupling his images of the Hurdanos, occupants of a very remote region of Spain, with a caustic and fatalistic voice over commentary, Buñuel pulls us up short.

Land without Bread (Luis Buñuel, 1933)

In one scene, the narrator tells us the Hurdanos only eat goat meat when a goat accidentally falls from a mountain side. But as he says this we see a goat on a rugged mountain side fall. Just as it falls, we also see a puff of smoke from a gunshot screen right. And we immediately cut to a shot higher up on the mountain as the now dead goat tumbles down. The scene exposes a lying, and highly unreliable, narrator and a falsification of fact: it was no accident that the goat fell.

Buñuel has used a reenactment to "bare the device" in Brechtian terms–to show us the tricks that underlie an apparent realism–and give an ironic twist to the reportorial, fact-oriented commentary that simply pronounces the Hurdanos unfit for inclusion within civilized humanity. The final irony Buñuel intends is to draw our attention to how often this assumption slips into our thinking about strange, unfamiliar cultures and others, almost as if it happened accidentally.

Just as we expect human actors to re-represent historical figures, we expect documentary commentators to convey respect for the people of whom they speak, but Haynes and Buñuel overthrow these conventions ironically, so that what we see doesn't quite mean what it appears to mean: dolls aren't just dolls anymore and our darker, more ethnocentric judgments of others are held up, as if in a mirror, rather than blindly endorsed or casually dismissed.

Irony, like reenactments, has to be recognized for what it is rather than mistaken for what it is not to be fully effective. The ironic compliment that is not truly a compliment, taken at face value as a compliment, loses its sting. The fact that important, tragic lives can be represented with Barbie dolls or that desperate, impoverished lives can be represented with cold indifference turns an ironic eye on us, the viewers, when we realize the irony. Like a wink, the irony tells us that Haynes and Buñuel want us to reflect on commonplace and often conventional modes of commentary to better understand what goes unsaid and unexamined.

Films, of course, follow no rules and obey no laws. They do share patterns, motifs, forms and conventions but constantly modify them as well. This is what creativity and originality are all about. Reenactments are but one arena in which creativity can have its say as filmmakers return to the past to re-present it in original ways. These types of reenactment are but suggestive categories which filmmakers can explore as they develop a voice of their own for engaging with the world around us.

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is Professor Emeritus in the Cinema Department at San Francisco State University. He is perhaps best known for his pioneering work as founder of the contemporary study of documentary film. His 1991 book, Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary, applied modern film theory to the study of documentary film for the first time. It has been followed by scores of books by others and by additional books and essays by Nichols. The first volume of his two-volume anthology Movies and Methods (1976, 1985) helped to establish film studies as an academic discipline. The widely used Introduction to Documentary (2nd ed., 2010) has become a standard reference in documentary studies worldwide. Recently Bill Nichols published a collection of essays, entitled Speaking Truths with Film: Evidence, Ethics, Politics in Documentary (Univ of California Press, 2016).