



1985

## Waugh: Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary

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### Recommended Citation

Allen, J. T. (1985). Waugh: Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary. *11* (4), 76-78. Retrieved from <https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol11/iss4/7>

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## Reviews and Discussion

**David Rosand.** *Painting in Cinquecento Venice: Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982. xvii + 346 pp. 165 ills.

**Reviewed by Peter Burke**  
Emmanuel College, Cambridge

This study—or more exactly this collection of essays, neatly reconstructed into a book—has two main aims, one relatively limited and the other more ambitious. The more limited aim is to re-place the work of three great Venetian painters in “the specific context for which they were intended.” The notoriously imprecise term *context* is here understood in more than one sense. Like many art historians of late, Rosand is well aware of the social context of painting, the position of the artist, and the conditions of patronage. He is also concerned with problems that have attracted less attention, concerning the physical context of particular paintings, their original location, and their architectural frames. The value of this latter approach is demonstrated most clearly in Rosand’s interpretation of Titian’s asymmetrical *Madonna di Ca’Pesaro* as “a response to the challenge of a particular site” (to the left of the high altar in the church of the Frari) rather than “a deliberate assault upon aesthetic and theological tradition.”

Rosand’s second and more ambitious aim is to reveal and trace the history of the “expressive conventions” of painting in sixteenth-century Venice. He rejects the term *iconography* because he is unhappy with the implied distinction between form and content. He does undertake analyses of a type that others would call iconographic, including an interpretation of the old egg-seller in Titian’s *Presentation of the Virgin* as a symbol of the Synagogue, but the thrust of his argument goes in a different direction. The author is at his most interesting when dealing with what he calls the “narrative space” of paintings intended for “lateral scansion” from left to right as if the figures were walking in procession. As he points out, these conventions allow individual artists considerable freedom for manoeuvre. Titian’s *Presentation*, for example, breaks the flow from left to right with figures looking back, while Veronese’s *Family of Darius* confronts the spectator with “a great wave sweeping down from the left frame . . . met by the solid block of figures of the Greek warriors.” In both these cases, the narrative flow is “parallel to and close behind the picture plane,” as was traditional in Venice: “the protagonists act on a narrow foreground stage.” Tintoretto, on the other hand, broke with tradition by adopting a deep perspective that made lateral scan-

sion impossible. To give the spectator the necessary cues, he relied on the gestures of the figures, as in his *Miracle of St. Mark*.

In these spatial analyses, which are generally convincing (and throw into high relief the contrast between Tintoretto and his predecessors), Rosand may be thought to have left “context” far behind. However, his book does contain a middle ground where narrative space and local conditions meet: the theater. Especially in the case of Veronese, the author demonstrates both the artist’s involvement with the stage and his imitation of theatrical backdrops, costumes, and other visual conventions in his pictures. It is too bad that so little is known about the staging of religious plays, in particular, in Renaissance Venice, so that religious paintings have to be interpreted in the light of the conventions of secular drama, but the method remains illuminating.

*Painting in Cinquecento Venice* betrays its origin in self-contained studies by some of the ends left hanging loose. After the Titian chapters, the imaginative replacement of paintings in their original locations is virtually abandoned (if for lack of evidence in the cases of Veronese and Tintoretto, the author might have told us so). Apart from the case of Tintoretto’s *St. Mark*, curiously little attention is paid to gesture, despite its potential for enriching a dramaturgical approach to painting. All the same, Rosand’s achievement is considerable. Anyone interested in art as part of a cultural system would do well to meditate on this book and how to adapt its approach to read the narrative paintings of other cultures.

**Thomas Waugh** *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary.* Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1984. 508 pp. \$37.50.

**Reviewed by Jeanne Thomas Allen**  
Temple University

Thomas Waugh’s *Show Us Life* is a distinctive, much-needed text devoted to what he calls the “committed documentary.” Why he does not say political documentaries of the radical left would perhaps be an essay in itself, but the collection serves the extremely valuable function of organizing an often superb body of periodical literature and academic research of the last fifteen years. *Show Us Life* will be of particular use to scholars not specializing in this area and students whose rate of attrition on “closed reserve” arti-



cles grows seemingly annually. I have written to Scarecrow to encourage a paperback edition for Spring 1986, but at \$37.50 in the current hardback incarnation, the book's over 500 pages of concentrated scholarship is a frontrunner without peer in the area of political documentary. Scarecrow should be praised once again for venturing into another progressive area where other publishers fear to tread. Hopefully they can do for this field what they did for women's studies in its early years: prove its marketability to more timid publishing houses.

A text entitled "Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary," which claims to benefit from the new methodologies developed in the seventies (semiotic/structuralist analysis, psychoanalytic approaches, formalist analysis, ideological analysis, oral history, specialized technological, industrial, exhibition and audience history), must deal with the thorny issues of contemporary film theory. Not the least of these of course is "the case against realism" that sometimes posed documentary as the most naive instance of ideologically complicit practice conflating the empirically available with social reality. The result is presented as uniform, homogeneous, and unquestionable. A number of articles Waugh has selected allude to and summarize this debate but do not "reinvent the wheel." Waugh stays with this issue insofar as it concerns the strategies of representation of committed documentary, particularly in the articles of Guy Hennebelle ("French Radical Documentary after 1968"), Claire Johnston and Paul Willemsen ("Brecht in Britain: 'The Nightcleaners' and the Independent Political Film"), and Chuck Kleinhans ("Forms, Politics, Makers and Contexts: Basic Issues for a Theory of Radical Political Documentary").

Definition is another of those issues of theoretical significance. Waugh's introduction approaches it directly as a genre question. "Committed documentary" for Waugh entails the following requisite conditions: (1) an ideological commitment to radical sociopolitical transformation, (2) an activist stance supplying "tools" to make the revolution, and (3) that the films be produced with and by people engaged in struggles of liberation. Although he doesn't say so, each of these conditions specifies a different dimension of filmmaking as a process. The first treats the film as a text, a structure of various messages; the second pertains to a knowledge of the spectator or audience and anticipates an experience that incorporates but is not limited to viewing; and the third considers the experience out of which the film grows, historically and socially, to be as pertinent as the images and sounds on the screen. Clear enough, but this important consideration of genre definition as pre- and posttextual deserves greater elaboration, the kind that Steve Neale begins in his "Notes and Questions and Political Cinema" when he discusses the term *politi-*

*cal*. Waugh's characteristics certainly avoid a fixed or essentialist definition, a point many of his selections reiterate. Social context and historical position determine radical political postures relative to each other like a semiotic field. No single position or representational style fixes the stance of committed documentary for radical sociopolitical transformation: what is strategic is contextually determined.

Neale's discussion of the political film begins by identifying it topically for its concern for government and the state but moves through the debates about the nature of distinguishing personal and political issues on to the conditions of production, distribution, and exhibition as determinative of its political stance. Unlike Waugh, Neale contends that a film can be made a political act by its context. On the other hand, commodification may preclude or coopt politically topical issue films. Conversely, however, if an audience is constituted not on the basis of cinema entertainment but on political processes and goals, it can transform the film into a political act. Waugh's definition implies but does not highlight the notion of the spectator's reading process or the reading community's ability to define what is political in a film, outlining instead a historical tradition of production in relation to historical events and an evolving aesthetic. Other authors such as Julia Lesage ("Feminist Documentary: Aesthetics and Politics") and Joan Braderman ("Shinsuke Ogawa's 'Peasants of the Second Fortress': Guerrilla documentary in Japan") engage this subject more completely and persuasively.

As a history, Waugh's text bares a rupture between the 1930s and 1960s that he himself notes but does not explain. The gap invites interpretation since he claims that the tradition maintains a continuity his selections do not support. Ceplair and Englund's account of Hollywood in the so-called quiescent decades of wartime and postwar consensus certainly warrants a parallel history, and one hopes a second volume may be forthcoming. As it stands the structure of the collection invites the comparison of decades but does not make such comparisons explicit or the roots of one decade in another clear. The selection of "Pioneers" for the first section is predictable and classic with the benefit of considerable hindsight: Vertov, Shub, Renoir, and Ivens. Bert Hogenkamp's piece on worker newsreels in Germany, the Netherlands, and Japan and Russell Campbell's on the United States in the 1930s are less a part of the canon established by Jacobs and Barnouw but help alter the auteur orientation of single filmmakers to illuminate the significance of collective political action. The opening section also sets an appropriately international stance that the section on "Contemporaries" maintains while adopting the split between the West and the Third World.

While some connections are teased out or hinted at, the historical gap of this text makes prominent an



absence within individual articles and the state of research in the field generally; despite the effectiveness of the case study of a limited time period and its relation to historical events, we have not ventured into the study of influences, an internal history of associations within the tradition and community of committed documentary: among filmmakers, among political communities, among traditions of social action. We do not reinvent ourselves regardless of the "radical" stance and its claim to invent; the idea of a radical tradition put forward by this book makes that evident. Waugh's own piece is a fine instance of a contextual history, although it is not as broad an intellectual history as one might hope for on *The Spanish Earth*. But a blend of the theoretical and historical might be stimulated by the goal of explaining a film's inheritance. A study of a collective like California Newsreel or Kartemquin in Chicago, whose work and styles of filmic representation has evolved with its financial, production, and political practices, might show us how committed documentary evolves historically. It would also demonstrate the necessary self-consciousness about social practice for this kind of filmmaking—in production, distribution, and exhibition to specific audiences.

Waugh, however, proves his point. We *do* have a tradition of scholarship in this area with a high level of theoretical sophistication. I am inclined to agree with him that feminist circles have made a decisive contribution to this, probably because the speed, pressure, and diversity of the movement have fostered a need for metacommunicative analysis. I would have liked to have seen even more excerpts from current debates in this vein. Barbara Martineau's piece about "talking heads" offered a significant focus but shed little light of a theoretical nature. Similarly, Julianne Burton's catalog promised a theoretical discussion but produced a detailed description with shorthand conclusions rather than closely reasoned arguments about what is and is not "democratizing" and why. While an occasional selection embodied the passion behind the phrase "committed documentary" with its goal of changing the world (Hennebelle, Georgakas, Braderman, and perhaps Kaplan do this), too often the style of writing is "academic," betraying the vitality of the films and their political concerns. One thinks of the contrast of Grierson's writing compared to the infectious energy that the Canadian Film Board's *Grierson* was able to seize from his speaking body. I am not talking about gushing with sophomore zeal but the media journalist's ability to convey with concentrated intensity the *heat and light* of the experience of *Hour of the Furnaces* or *The Battle of Chile*, masterpieces of engaged filmmaking. Authors like James Agee or Adrienne Rich distill their insight with a passion that makes us see. Not only students but scholars need to understand and experience the *pleasure* of this genre, not just analytical rigor, which we also need, but its own *joissance*.

## Reflections on the Social Psychologists' Video Camera

**Review Essay by Norman K. Denzin**  
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

This article is based on a paper prepared for the session "Media and Social Research," chaired by Dan Miller, at the Midwest Sociology Meetings, St. Louis, Missouri, April 11, 1985. It is a response to a viewing and "reading" of the video tape *Studying Social Processes, Parts 1 and 2* (Carl Couch, Producer; Mari Molseed and Joel Powell, Associate Producers; David Maines, Editorial Consultant). Copyright © University of Iowa, 1984.

Sol Worth (1981:111) reminds us that educational films have been used for instructional purposes in United States grade schools since 1918, in high schools since the 1930s, and in colleges since the 1960s. Anthropologists have been producing such films at least since the 1940s, when Mead and Bateson (1942) produced their famous photographic study of Balinese character (see Worth 1981). Sociologists have more recently entered the field; Becker's essays on photography and sociology (e.g., 1974) and Goffman's (1976) study of gender advertisements are recent instances. Carl Couch and his students have been utilizing video film records of interactions in small-group laboratories since the early 1970s (e.g., Couch and Hintz 1975). A visual sociology, or a sociology that relies upon photographic and video film records of social life, has thus come into existence. The most recent production from the Iowa group is the newly released film *Studying Social Processes, Parts 1 and 2*, produced in 1984 by Couch and his coproducers, Mari Molseed and Joel Powell, with David Maines the editorial consultant. This is an educational film, intended to teach sociologists how to conduct laboratory studies of interpersonal and group negotiations. I offer a review and interpretation of that film. I shall take up in order the following topics: (1) the distinction between visual sociology and a sociology of visual communication; (2) the sociologist as filmmaker; (3) *how* a film "means"; and (4) the place of the video camera in the field of social psychology.

### Visual Sociology and a Sociology of Visual Communication

A film is simultaneously a means of communication and an instrument of instruction. A film is a cultural and symbolic form that, when released by the filmmaker, enters the communication process (Worth 1981:119). As such, a film may be used to illustrate patterns of cultural and social life. This was the use that Mead and Bateson (1942) and Goffman (1976)