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### Rosenthal: The Documentary Conscience: A Casebook in Film Making

John Stuart Katz  
*York University, Toronto*

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## Rosenthal: The Documentary Conscience: A Casebook in Film Making

**Alan Rosenthal.** *The Documentary Conscience: A Casebook in Film Making.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980. 436 pp., ill. \$19.50 (cloth). \$8.95 (paper).

**Reviewed by John Stuart Katz**  
York University, Toronto

Over the last few years hardly a week has passed in which newspapers of North America did not carry at least one story dealing with the issue of image ethics. Consider the following:

Item: On December 3, 1978, the *New York Times Magazine* featured a cover story entitled "The Black Middle Class: Making It." The tone of the piece was less than laudatory, but the real controversy arose because of the cover photo, which depicted a dapper black man in a three-piece suit, carrying an attaché case. The subject of the photo, Clarence Arrington, had no idea that his picture had been taken, let alone that it would be used on the cover of the *Times Magazine* section. Needless to say, when the photo appeared he was upset, and sued the *Times*, the free-lance photographer, the photographic agency, and the agency's president.

Item: In October 1982, actress Elizabeth Taylor filed suit against the American Broadcasting Company to stop the airing of an unauthorized docudrama portraying her life. Said Taylor: "I am my own commodity. I am my own industry. . . . This docudrama technique has gotten out of hand. It is simply a fancy new name for old-fashioned invasion of privacy, defamation and violation of an actor's right. My livelihood depends — and don't laugh — on my acting — the way I look, the way I sound."

Item: In March 1983 WHMA-TV, the only television station in Anniston, Alabama, received the following telephone call: "If you want to see somebody set himself on fire, be at the square in Jacksonville in ten minutes." The caller was an unemployed and troubled laborer hoping to use the media to draw attention to his plight. The TV camera crew (a cameraman and a soundman) met the caller, momentarily stalled him, then filmed as he set himself ablaze for the camera. The sound technician eventually rushed in to save him, but the caller had already suffered second- and third-degree burns over half of his body. WHMA showed the conflagration in edited form the following evening. Subsequently, excerpts have been seen by tens of millions around the globe.

Behind each of these cases lie conceptions of image ethics which proscribe and prescribe the rights of the press or of artists to take and use a picture (motion or still) of another human being. Ethical dis-

putes arise from the conflict between the public's right to know (freedom of the press as protected by the First Amendment) and the individual's right to privacy (as protected by the Fifth Amendment). With few exceptions (Ruby 1981, Pryluck 1976, Linton 1976) academics or filmmakers have rarely addressed the issue of image ethics. More often than not, filmmakers, particularly documentarians, have assumed that the ends justify the means and that they, the filmmakers, "know what is best" for both the audience and the subjects of their films.

Although Alan Rosenthal's newest collection of interviews, *The Documentary Conscience*, does not restrict itself to the issue of image ethics, the problem is central to many of Rosenthal's discussions with the thirty-two filmmakers whom he has interviewed for the book. In his introduction, Rosenthal calls attention to the "unfashionable" aspects of questioning the ethics of documentarists, but says he will nonetheless do so:

How far can a film maker exploit a subject in the name of the general truth or the general good? . . . How far does the subject realize what is going on? Does the subject realize the implications and possible consequences of his or her life being portrayed on the screen, or of being interviewed? What consent was given, what was really meant by the film maker and what was understood by the subject? When does one have to shut off the camera or destroy footage? (p. 5)

Rosenthal has selected for his interviews filmmakers to whom such questions are more than just mental exercises; he has chosen to focus on filmmakers with social concerns, those whom he calls "committed." Among the ranks of these conscientious filmmakers are Albert Wasserman of "60 Minutes," members of the team from the British Thames Television production "The World at War," American political filmmakers Emile de Antonio, Cinda Firestone, Barbara Kopple, Julia Reichert, and James Klein, and Canadians Beryl Fox, Michael Rubbo, Robin Spry, and Doug Leiterman.

But even among these "committed" filmmakers, the ethical ramifications of what they are doing do not always constrain their activities. For example, in one of the earliest interviews in the book, researcher Susan McConachy of "The World at War" tackles the dilemma of getting the subject of an interview (in this case a former SS officer) to talk about his wartime experiences:

In all the times I had met him before that incident, I was not playing totally honest. For example, there he was telling me about how he had tried to protect Langbehn [a Resistance member]. Now in a normal situation I would have said, "Oh, come off it, that story is absolutely rubbish. How stupid do you think I am," but because I eventually wanted to get that man up in front of the camera there is no point in contradicting him in the research stage." (p. 74)

Or, in his interview with Director Jill Godmilow, Rosenthal raises the issue of provoking, on camera, Antonia Brico, the subject of the film Godmilow codirected with Judy Collins. Rosenthal is asking about a scene in the film in which Brico talks about her problems as a woman conductor, blows up, and gets very angry:

Q. How did you provoke that?

A. I had Judy ask a very stupid question to which she already knew the answer, and to which I knew Antonia knew she knew the answer. Antonia refused to bite for the first few times and Judy kept on asking her. . . . I considered the issue very seriously before I provoked her like that. I knew it was going to take her "out there" and it did. She was very shook up when she finished and she was angry at us for having done it. We had to live with that for a while. She said, "It's all very fine for you to bring these feelings out and then leave with it on your film, but I have to live with them." And that's why I leave in that line where she says, "I don't discuss my heartbreak every day." (pp. 366-367)

With George Stoney, founder of the Canadian National Film Board's "Challenge for Change" program, Rosenthal discusses how the family in the film *The Things I Cannot Change* (a predecessor to "Challenge for Change") was vilified by their neighbors as a result of its telecast on the CBC. Stoney says:

Now my own hunch is that this came about, not because the film was made as it was, but because the film was not introduced properly. The way I would have handled that film (and the way I do handle my films) would have been to show the film to the family in rough cut, and get their reactions and talk to them about it. Help them learn to deal with it. Then I would have set up screenings where they brought in their neighbors and friends and we could have talked about why the film was made. This way they might have begun to see the film in context so that by the time the film was actually seen by the general public they would know what's there, and would have been proud of what they had done, rather than ashamed or betrayed. Because it's usually two sides of the coin. (p. 354)

This past year I used *The Documentary Conscience* as a textbook in two different courses. One was a seminar dealing with image ethics, and for this the book was invaluable. In the other course, a survey of documentary film, Rosenthal's book became a prime resource for student research into recent nonfiction films. Because most of the films he discusses are readily available in North America, there is little problem (as with many documentary film books) with reading about films you have only heard about but never seen. What intrigued the students most, however, is Rosenthal's comprehensiveness in interviewing. Because he is both insightful and persistent as an interviewer, Rosenthal sheds new light on the con-

ceptualization, financing, production, distribution, exhibition, and exploitation of documentary films. His subtitle—"A Casebook in Film Making"—reveals the essence of his approach, which is to view each film as an artifact, worthy of complete and thorough investigation. Moreover, Rosenthal's enthusiasm and appreciation of these films becomes infectious. As do his other critical works on documentary, *The Documentary Conscience* displays an engaging zeal for a genre which has too long been misunderstood or ignored.

By reviewing the book in the context of image ethics and of university film teaching, I do not imply that it is only of marginal use otherwise. *The Documentary Conscience: A Casebook in Film Making* is an irreplaceable addition to the library of anyone interested in film, communications, or social change.

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