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## University Distinguished Lecture - A Necessary Art: Narrative and Truth in Documentary

Graham Townsley  
*Shining Red Films*

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**A NECESSARY ART**  
**Narrative and Truth in Documentary**

Graham Townsley

Thank you. It is a real honor to be here and I would like to start by thanking the Center for Engagement and Community development and the distinguished lectures committee of the Provost's office of Kansas State for inviting me. This is a real treat for me, not just to get to know a part of the United States I have never been to but also to take part in an event that seems so timely – Championing Civility. What an important notion!

I spent quite a lot of my life in parts of Africa and Latin America at a time – I am thinking of the 80's and 90's - when the idea of civility and respect for norms of good governance and political discourse was sort of a joke in some of those parts. Corruption, brutality and a lack of civility was almost the norm. I remember how I would come back to England – and it could have been The US or France or anywhere in Europe – and be amazed by people complaining about boring bureaucrats in Brussels or Washington – as if these people and their rules and regulations were the enemy. And I would think – you don't what you are talking about! If you had lived in real political chaos and knew what it was really like to live in a failing state, you would be thanking your lucky stars for boring bureaucrats in Brussels!

But if you haven't lived in those situations, you just don't get it. And so as a result we seem to have arrived once again at a replay of one of the defining crises of modernity. While the developing world suffers violence and poverty, the so-called developed World – Europe and North America - suffers alienation, boredom and identity crises.

In so many ways that alienation and the search for an end to it, seems to be the drama that is coming back to bite us now. Many Americans and Europeans are once again obviously yearning for the sort of tribal satisfactions they feel Liberalism, modernity - and now globalization - have denied them. They just want to revel in being British, or American, or white, or Russian or whatever their chosen identity is – as if that will bring flooding back all the meaning and sense of belonging they have been missing.

And it seems this self-assertion naturally comes with a sort of brutality. The whole point is to reject the pale, cerebral, reasonable values of the liberal order in favor of something visceral, earthy and primitive.

So as all this goes on around us, it seems like a great moment to reflect on what social order and civility really mean and how much we want them.

Now all that might seem like a strange introduction to a talk about documentary-making but as this lecture has developed a theme that you might call narratives of tribal identity has taken shape in my mind and it seemed interesting to me to weave this through some of the documentaries I'll talk about.

When I was first invited to give this lecture and Donna asked me for a title I wasn't sure exactly what I would talk about but the phrase just came to me – A Necessary Art.

Why “A Necessary Art?” At the time, like so many people, I was being bowled over by the extravagant mendacity of much of the current political discourse; the frightening way in which truth was swept aside in favor of grand ideological narratives, the wrapping of known truths in clouds of doubt and suspicion, the claims that any inconvenient truth was a fake or dubious truth, and so forth. So the phrase came to me because I thought what a great moment to give a lecture that would drive home the point that there is a thing out there called reality, it is not easy to know, and that in a highly ideologized universe, somehow documentary had a sacred mission to describe it. We are fed such a steady diet of fictional/fantasy images to entertain us, excite us, sell us things and generally divert our attention - there really should be at least one cultural space where we find out about the world as it is. So that was my first idea about documentary as a necessary art.

But of course it is worth remembering that Documentary has no absolute claim to truth. It can just as easily support warped ideological narratives as debunk them – and we are going to see an example of that in a moment. The fact that documentary makes a claim to be real as opposed to fictional makes it a very powerful tool to be used to either of those ends.

So here, anyway, are the two themes I want to weave together. On the one hand narratives of tribal or ethnic identity and on the other, the ways documentary can support and legitimize those narratives or break them up.

A word about tribalism. It is a concept that when I was being trained as an anthropologist was very out of fashion. It seemed like a very 19<sup>th</sup> century idea somehow – that primitive people lived in tribes while we Westerners lived in societies and cultures. So there was a big push going on to deconstruct that notion and show that anthropology had in fact imposed the idea of tribalism on non-western peoples and that their idea of their social groups were a lot more fluid than that.

And that was probably as far as my thinking on tribalism went until I made a documentary about EO Wilson – which I think some of you may have seen – and discovered a whole new meaning of the term. It has now taken on a profundity for me that it never had before.

As some of you may know, EO Wilson believes that tribalism is one of the most fundamental instincts at play in the human psyche and that evolution has hard-wired it into our make-up. He believes in what he calls group selection – something that most biologists don't by the way – the idea that evolution works not just on individuals and their genes but on whole groups. That fact of group selection is what has given us our absolutely biological instinct to aggregate in groups which are in competition with other groups. He sees it in the worlds of all advanced social species – what he calls the eusocial species – and that includes ants, termites, and us humans. In our modern lives this plays out not just in racial and ethnic ways but in the many social groups that we all belong to and have these fierce allegiances to. We see it in its most raw form in sports. Here he is talking about it in the film.

[EXCERPT: E.O. Wilson on Tribalism, from the film “E.O. Wilson: Of Ants and Men” <http://www.pbs.org/program/eo-wilson/>  
1:08:48 – 1:12:42 *I believe you cannot understand the evolution of eusocial species without the idea of group selection . . . why waste the money otherwise ]*

So you get the idea. Tribalism is part of our make-up. Sports are a benign expression of it. Other expressions are, of course, not so benign.

As it happens, as I have been working in the last few months on a perfect example. I am currently writing a screenplay for a feature film based on the real lives of Jewish artists in 1930's Berlin who suddenly found themselves surrounded by these tribal narratives – first of all about their own Jewishness and secondly about the Aryan-ness of the Germans around them.

Many of them, by the way, were not that concerned about being Jewish and felt themselves German to the core. But as we know, the revival of these tribal narratives – in a particularly brutal form - was at the core of the Nazi project and to do that all sorts of realities had to be pushed aside. And here documentary played a role.

One of the extraordinary powers of the Nazi propaganda machine, which has often been noted, was to envelope people in a cloud of confusion, to keep them permanently off balance, to induce a sort of perpetual nervousness and vertigo in which paradoxically the only solid thing to hold on to became the party and great tribal narrative of the Aryan Folk, their humiliations and their rebirth.

So I want to play for you just a few minutes of a famous documentary made by Leni Riefenstahl in 1934 about the Nazi congress in Nuremburg – The Triumph of the Will. The film is infamous for being a propaganda documentary but as a piece of filmmaking it's really good and well worth watching. Here is the opening of the film

[EXCERPT: from the film "Triumph of the Will"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHS2coAzLJ8> 00:00:00-05:00:00]

So there are the great beats of the tribal narrative. The opening titles – which are the only commentary in the entire film – set them out perfectly. The great humiliation, the great suffering, the great rebirth. Then as the film opens we are drifting godlike through clouds – we look down on crowds massing - then deliriously excited bystanders who do indeed look like they are waiting for a god to arrive, finally the plane lands and there he is.

So without directly telling any sort of lie, the film creates a narrative which will soon launch a thousand lies.

One of the great lessons of the 1930's (and perhaps of our time too) is a troubling one. Most of us humans have a tenuous relationship to reality which is easily lost or distorted. It is hard to know what is really going on and most people are not prepared to make the effort to find out, particularly if it involves too much thinking. At the same time, As Ed Wilson has pointed out, we have an innate love of tribal narratives that cast us (whoever the us is) in a good, heroic light, tell us who our enemies are, tell us that we have been humiliated and abused - and promise us some sort of salvation. In moments of crisis when reality seems opaque and frightening, a grand narrative of salvation is a very comforting thing – much more comforting than the facts.

And in the case of 1930's Germany, that narrative bore a certain relation to the facts. The country had been humiliated at the end of the First War, it had suffered through Weimar and the depression and it was certainly desperate for salvation. And under those circumstances, a narrative like the Nazi one, perfectly set out in Triumph of the Will, was very seductive. After the war, there was this great puzzlement about how it could be that Germans would acquiesce in the horrors of the holocaust. The truth of course is that ordinary Germans were no more evil or cruel than anybody else. They were ripe for the Nazi narrative and like most people they didn't make many efforts to question it or find out what was really going on. They just weren't sure what the truth was.

Here is the philosopher Hannah Arendt, who lived through the 1930's in Europe, talking about those times.

*Just as terror ..... ruins all relationships between men, (isolating them in a sort of radical loneliness) so.....ideological thinking ruins all relationships with reality. (.....) The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction ..... no longer exists. (from: The Origins of Totalitarianism, Part 1, page 474)*

So the promise of documentary is that it will tell the truth about the world. But the issue of truth is really complicated. Just because they don't have actors or zombies in them, documentaries are not necessarily accurate reflections of reality. Ask any documentary maker – the art of documentary is about taking elements of reality and shaping them into a narrative. Above all with a

documentary, as with a fiction, you are telling a story and you inevitably select certain bits of reality to tell your story and exclude others.

Facts can be true or false but with narratives it is not so clear. Narratives are about meaning. They are the way we engage with the world. A successful narrative is one that mobilizes not just facts but our whole sense of the world and our position in it. It engages our intuitions and feelings. It moves us. And that is where narratives and facts can collide.

I want now to take leap away from our world to very distant where a lot of these things become clearer. Before being a documentary film maker, I was an anthropologist and did field work for my doctorate with an Amazonian group called the Yaminahua. They live in a very remote area on the borders between Peru and Brazil. What I was interested in was above all their shamanism and their cosmovision, their understanding of the make-up of the world. In the end, that comes down to the stories they tell about the origins of things – what we would call myths. Like all mythological narratives, these were the stories of the fantastic occurrences that happened in a sort of dream time at the beginning of the world in which humans transformed into animals or plants or stars. And when I asked if these stories were true – did this really happen? – they looked at me as if I was crazy and said “of course.”

What was interesting to me was that they felt they could relive these mythological narratives under the influence of a halucinogenic preparation – Ayahuasca or what they call Shori. I want to play for you the opening scene of a film we made for the BBC about why work with the Yaminahua and the relationship between a shaman and his apprentice. That was back in 1990. By the way, the two men in the scene may look very westernized but were both born into a society which knew nothing about the modern world. The older man – the shaman - was about thirty when he met his first Peruvian or white-man and his apprentice had only come out of the jungle about 4 years before we made this film. Here it is.

[EXCERPT: Opening minutes from the film “The Shaman and His Apprentice”]

These are the sorts of narratives Anthropologists regularly listen to and we don't say – Oh that's all nonsense. It can't possibly be true. That never happened. This

is the sort of thing we expect indigenous people to say and are fascinated by. We accept that those stories have their own sort of truth and we try to figure out what it is. Now that story actually has some experiential basis to it. Komoroa, the shaman, actually experiences these type of flights with Harpy eagles that we would call imaginary but which for him are very real.

Other narratives don't. I remember conversations like the following: Someone was telling me about another group called the Chitonahua who lived some days away who over the years they had raided but also married into. "So are the Chitonahua just like you?" I asked. And with a very earnest expression on his face, as if telling a painful truth, my friend said "No, they're really different. They're sort of disgusting. They have sex with tapirs and just last week one of their women gave birth to a stingray." "Wow", I said, "are you sure?". He was sure. Did you see it? No but my cousin did and we've always known they do things like that". End of story. Of course, the Yaminahua have an incredibly acute perception of the world around them and are just as keen as we are to know the truth about things that really happened but here was a great example of facts colliding with a cultural narrative. The narrative about the Chitonahua is important to the way the Yaminahua make sense of themselves, their position in the world and their own sense of being good, true people surrounded by others who are not. In these collision of important cultural narratives with fact, so often the narrative wins out.

And here, I can't help mentioning a story from Washington, today that reminds me so much of that Yaminahua story. A lot of you probably have heard some of it but it is so extraordinary it is worth repeating briefly because it bears so closely on my theme. It is the story of Comet Ping Pong a pizzeria which happens to be just down the street from my house. It's a friendly sort of place, always full of families and in the back they have ping pong tables where kids and others can play.

Around the time of the election, the owner, Jim Alefantis and all his staff started getting weird abusive messages through social media and then on their cell phones. The messages were so violent and disturbing – and soon became such a flood - that pretty soon staff were terrified and started to leave.

The gist of what had happened is that somehow extreme rightwing chat forums had got hold of the information that Alefantis was gay and that John Podesta had

once gone with some democrat friends to eat pizza at Comet Ping Pong. In the fevered universe of sites like The New nationalist and The Vigilant Citizen those innocent facts were elaborated into a wild, completely mythological narrative that leading democrats, including Hillary Clinton, were in fact running a pedophile ring out of the basement of Comet Ping Pong. Comet Ping Pong doesn't even have a basement but none of that mattered. Something about this story was just too perfect not to be true. Hey hacked into the ordering system of Comet where people were ordering pizzas and became convinced that pizza was a code for trafficked children. In the days after the election, the insane pizzagate conspiracy theory took the stranger corners of the rightwing internet by storm – so much so that at one point James and his staff counted five pizzagate posts a minute. Finally, as you probably know, it led to someone driving all the way from North Carolina, armed to the teeth, to “self-investigate: and free the children he was sure were imprisoned in the basement dungeons of the pizzeria. The man was arrested and charged – the whole story was investigated by the police and shown to be nonsense. At which point you might think the whole thing would go away, Not at all. The Pizzagate conspiracy theory now embraces the idea that the government and FBI has undertaken a massive cover-up and now, months later when the comet ping pong shooter has been tried and convicted – people still show up in DC wearing T-shirts saying Pizzagate is real, we demand the truth. Their children wear T-shirts saying “we are not pizza.”

Just like you can't convince a Yaminahua, that women –even Chitonahua women – don't give birth to stingrays, you can't convince a committed Vigilant Citizen that children were not being trafficked out of Comet Ping Pong because his whole universe tells him it must be true.

Well we could multiply examples of cultural narratives that fly in the face of facts forever. We humans are mythmakers and storytellers, It's one of our greatest pleasures, it's the way we make sense of the world and facts are not necessarily going to get in the way.

So back to documentary. Even having said all that, and having realized that it is probably impossible to fashion a true documentary narrative –in the sense that facts or statements can be true – I do believe that what makes documentary interesting and important is that it tries. And we really must try because telling the truth about the world is really important. We need it so badly.

And here I want to play another clip – which I warn you is brutal – but it represents probably the ultimate example of a noble documentary attempt to tell important truths. What I am going to play you is the trailer for a film called Night Will fall, made by a close friend and mentor of mine in England, Andre Singer. It won an Emmy last year. It's the story of the film makers who were sent to document the German Concentration camps just after the war. They went because as the horrible reality of what had happened in those camps started to emerge, they thought – this is so nightmarish, so impossible to grasp – no one will believe it unless we show it. Show the world but also show the German people what has been done in their name.

Anyway, here is the trailer.

[EXCERPT: Trailer to the film, "Night Will Fall"

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/video/2014/sep/02/night-will-fall-trailer-documentary> ]

So their project was called The German concentration camps Factual survey and as a few voices in the trailer make clear, their aim was to record the facts – and record them in long unflinching camera takes so that nobody could say that they had somehow been doctored.

The film Night Will Fall tells the story of their project – It is wonderful and I urge all to see it. It tells is a perfect example of the problems of fashioning facts into a narrative. When all this horrendous footage came in, the man who was at the center of the project, Sydney Bernstein sat down with it all to make it into a film. It struggled with it for months because he couldn't decide what was the right narrative. Because of course once you put together these overwhelming facts and images into a one-hour film they start to tell a story which goes beyond what you are seeing. Is it a story of pure evil, is it a story of the evil of the Nazis, is it a story of the complicity of ordinary Germans, of pure suffering, is it a story of the heroism and goodness of the allies, etc. It could be all of these things and more. And it was all so overwhelming, he struggled. It is at that point he brought in Alfred Hitchcock to try and help him. Which I don't think he did very much.

Just as Bernstein was finishing it later in 1945, the War Office ordered that it should be shelved. By now, their project had changed. The war had been won, the Germans defeated and immediately the concern was Russia. They decide that the Germans were not to be further humiliated and suddenly all the talk was of reconstruction because communism had to be contained... So the film was shelved and sat in a vault of the imperial War Museum until Andre came across it a few years ago.

So in many ways this is a powerful story about documentary narratives and truth. The power of film to reveal truth, the difficulties of deciding exactly what that truth should be and then of course how certain truths can become inconvenient and be suppressed by the powers that be.

All of the examples I have been talking about so far are in different ways about the opacity of narrative to reality, that reality doesn't come with its own narrative and that we have to construct them— which is not really what we want to hear. It would be great if it was easy to tell truthful narratives and know that people would be immediately moved by them. It often is not – but sometimes it is.

I want to end with one final clip which is an example of a narrative that people were so eager to hear they just couldn't get enough of it. Because it inspired them. It is the story of a group of children living on a trash heap in Paraguay and one inspirational character who encouraged them to form an orchestra. And when they couldn't find the money for instruments they decided to make the instruments out of the garbage that surrounded them. The film we made about this was called landfill harmonic. Here is a short trailer.

[EXCERPT: Trailer to the film, "Landfill Harmonic"

[https://www.facebook.com/pg/landfillharmonicmovie/videos/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/landfillharmonicmovie/videos/?ref=page_internal)  
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So from all these different documentary narratives what conclusions can we draw? Let me say immediately that I don't think there are any rules for making documentaries or any other type of film. But I do believe that documentary should be the cultural space we all hope it can be that allows us to engage the world as it is and communicate that engagement. The knowledge that all narratives are constructed should be no deterrent. It should simply remind us

that we have to bring to the fashioning of documentary narratives the same care, love and attention that we bring to any important communication. They engage, or should engage, our intelligence, our knowledge and our deepest emotions. Documentary narratives can open us to the world. I really do believe they are a necessary art. Thank you.