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THREE DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS: ERROLL MORRIS, ROSS MCELWEE AND JEAN ROUCH

William Rothman, editor. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. 246 pp.

William Rothman's edited volume makes a useful contribution to what he describes as a "dearth of serious critical studies of documentary films and filmmakers" (1).

(Documentary scholarship is flourishing. See Visible Evidence for links to publications and an annual academic conference devoted to the serious study of documentary <http://visibleevidence.org/>.)

Morris, McElwee, and Rouch are well-known, highly regarded filmmakers whose work is well-recognized in the literature. This work considers each filmmaker individually. Although it's not entirely obvious why this particular set of filmmakers was selected for inclusion in this survey, I agree with Rothman that in very different ways the films of Morris, McElwee and Rouch meditate "on the impossibility of knowing with certainty where the imagination ends and they world begins....Their films, too, are both philosophical and deeply personal." (3).

About 50% of the book is devoted to Morris and McElwee, the remainder to Rouch. Although Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* has influenced generations of documentary filmmakers, for the most part his films are little known outside the worlds of ethnographic filmmaking and historians of the French New Wave. Given the difficulty of accessing Rouch's films and the many studies available ---including Rothman's 2007 *Jean Rouch: A Celebration of Life and Film*, I find myself wishing for a more in-depth consideration of Morris and McElwee. The six pages on "Errol Morris's Irony" and ten pages of "Reflections on *Bright Leaves*" (McElwee's film) seem more like sketches than fully developed essays.

The role of the filmmaker as an author and participant is a common theme in many of these commentaries. The filmmakers profiled here have created unique personas for themselves. Morris, McElwee and Rouch are (non-commercial) brands with clearly recognizable styles and points-of-view. In this spirit and in the interest of full disclosure, allow me to make my point-of-view explicit. I'm a documentary filmmaker and teacher of documentary production and analysis. In class I sometimes tell a story about the encounter between John Adair, an ethnographic filmmaker, and a Navajo shepherd. When asked if he would participate in Adair's and Sol Worth's film, Sam Yazzie replied by asking, "Is it good for the sheep?" If not, why would he be interested? The question for me regarding documentary criticism is, "Is it good for documentary?" I'm most interested in criticism and analysis that leads to better, more compelling work. I am particularly interested in criticism that is useful in the shared enterprise of creating and understanding documentary production.

I share an appreciation for theory coupled with cogent, accessible analysis. (I find Bill Nichols's work especially insightful.) I am less enthusiastic about what appears to me to

be overly abstract formulations that revel in complexity, seemingly without offering sufficient rewards. Perhaps I am too unfamiliar with the literature, or am merely a philistine, but passages like Alan Cholodenko's concerning "Jean Rouch's *Les maîtres fous*" do little, I think, to advance the practice of documentary or appreciation of Rouch.

"Carrying us beyond deconstruction's hybrid form, Eaton's 'more real than the real' designates for me what Baudrillard calls the hyperreal. The hyperreal is the 'new reality' that cinéma vérité creates, or better animates....[H]ypertelia [is] the pushing of things to their extreme limits where 'more x than x ,' they at once fulfill and annihilate themselves, becoming virtual" (159).

Where does this lead in terms of the film under consideration? "...[T]he film leaves the viewer not with a sense of knowing its subject, as in classical ethnography, but rather of not knowing it, at best of knowing only that one does not and cannot know it" (161). To me this is solipsism, and I find myself wishing that like Errol Morris I could live where "Baudrillard isn't in the phone book" (7). (For a book length treatment of Rouch, which is focused on his process, style and approach, see *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* by Paul Henley.)

On a more positive note, Carl Plantinga's clear exegesis, "The Philosophy of Errol Morris" is spot on. He traces Morris's path from an aborted Phd in Philosophy at Berkeley, "a world of pedants" (44) to complex visual mediations and interrogations demonstrating a belief that "1. Objective Truth Exists; Truth Can Be Known; Truth is Difficult to Know" (44).

Plantinga suggests that "... in many cases this truth is less interesting than the human dreamscapes that provide the bizarre and somewhat morbid topography of Errol Morris's work" (49). Certainly it's no surprise that Morris is obsessed with death (*Thin Blue Line*, *Mr. Death*, *Standard Operating Procedure*). But for me there was the shock of recognition in the apparent truth of Bill Nichols's assertion that "Death may, in fact, be the underlying theme of the great majority of documentaries...." (37) (McElwee's pre-occupation with his father's death (*Time Indefinite*) and his contemplating of the past life of his great-grandfather and his son's future after he is gone (*Bright Leaves*) also support this assertion.)

Ira Jaffe offers a very detailed summary of the formal aspects of Morris's work. His detailed shot list for *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* is helpful. A two column audio/video script would give a much better view of the interplay between picture and sound. Oddly, even though most of the articles in this collection include frame grabs (sadly only in black and white), there isn't a single visual here. Given that so much work is readily available on DVD, perhaps it's time that to expect authors to refer to elapsed time as a reference for points under discussion. And how wonderful would it be to have this kind of critique on-line and actually see the clip under discussion?

Jaffe notes that Morris tempers the balance between form and content in response to the subject of the film. *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* is playful and provocative, telling an unfamiliar story in an unfamiliar way. While in *Fog of War* --- perhaps because of an implicit concern about the responsibility of shaping our collective memory--- Morris tells McNamara's story in a relatively more accessible and conventional way. This more constrained approach still uses a recognizable palette and the music of Phillip Glass to create an "Errol Morris Film."

While no one volume can offer a compressive commentary on a filmmaker like Morris, I was surprised that there is no discussion of the critical contribution that Morris has made to our understanding of the use and meaning of reenactments. From *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) to *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008) the often controversial use of reenactments is one of the defining characteristics of his work.

In a short review it's not possible to consider the work of all twelve contributors. Let me make note of a few more. Diane Stevenson's brief essay, "Coincidence in Ross McElwee's Documentaries," concisely charts the confluence of McElwee "the actor, the participant in his own life," and "McElwee the filmmaker, the writer, the narrator" (65). Intriguingly she positions him in the tradition of Southern comedy and Southern gothic writing. This could certainly merit further development.

Both William Rothman ("Sometimes Daddies Don't Talk about Things like That") and Marian Keane ("Reflections on *Bright Leaves*") offer a detailed explication of McElwee as he tells us in his voice over that he is, 'Playing with exposure, depth of field and mirrors....' (115) Rothman makes it clear that he is delighted that his "reading of this passage and others in the film, resonates so harmoniously with Marian Keane's in this volume" (115). I'm not so sure about the benefits of repetition.

All-in-all, despite quibbles and qualifications, I believe that this book is a valuable resource for students, scholars and filmmakers. I recommend it to anyone interested in thoughtful considerations of three unique documentary voices. For me it's Marian Keane who best sums up the charge that these documentary filmmakers give to us. Though speaking directly of McElwee, I think this keen observation also applies to Rouch and more often than not to morbid Morris. "All I know is this: If each of us undertook every day, in each encounter, to find something of value in everyone we meet, as Walt Whitman did, and as Ross McElwee does, our world would be changed and deepened" (82). Or for those with a less sanguine view of the human condition, as 70's radio commentator Scoop Nisker regularly told his listeners, "If you don't like the news, go out and make some of your own." The best filmmakers and the best scholars make news by letting us see the world with fresh eyes.

MARK FREEMAN
San Diego State University