Review of
Documentary Film Classics
by William Rothman
(New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997),
xv + 218 pages

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When Marx admonished us, in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, to change the world rather than to interpret it as philosophers do, he got it right about philosophy; for as Wittgenstein was later to insist, when philosophers behave properly, drawing our attention to the nuances of our working languages, the things of which we were speaking remain as they were. Wittgenstein tried hard, as Stanley Cavell has long insisted, to show us how to acknowledge that we are speaking in 'perfect logical order' whenever we deliberate about the things with which we are working and thus interacting genuinely. However imperfect our conversations about them may otherwise be, they are, contra the claims of the pseudo-scientists of positivism and their mimics, logically impeccable. If, therefore, we are as philosophers to learn how better to think of our encounters with things, of whatever kind and by whatever means, we must begin by respecting – and hence learning to think within – the languages through which we work with them.

Small wonder that Cavell and his students, William Rothman among them, have for so long been fascinated by how we encounter things by means of films as evident in our working discussions about them, for, whether as observers or filmmakers, we encounter things by means of films only through screenings of them. If, as Wittgenstein insisted, philosophers should help us to learn how to distinguish things from one another, thus enabling us to acknowledge them more accurately, then, as Cavell and his students have recognized, distinguishing cinematical encounters from others, and from each other, requires that we address two working questions central to the philosophical enterprise, namely, how do we acknowledge things differently when we encounter them screened? and why are the differences important?

William Rothman, in two previous studies devoted to the work of Hitchcock and, as he called it, to The "I" of the Camera, attended almost exclusively (as his mentor has done) to our encounters with things by means of enacted films. He thus concentrated upon a central aspect of those questions, namely, when we see and hear things by means of films of actors acting, how is our acknowledgment informed by how the actors themselves acknowledge the presence of the camera recording them, for their acknowledgment is achieved (almost always, and remarkably so) as they pretend, while

[1] Includes many black-and-white illustrative frame enlargements.

pretending to be someone else, to be unaware of the presence of the camera recording them?

Rothman has now written a book that, in my judgement, surpasses the others in both cinematical and philosophical importance, for the prior provocation is compounded when the questions are asked of films made as 'documentaries'. As Rothman has realized, if the questions are intriguing of how, and to what effect, Lillian Gish acknowledges the presence of the camera recording her under Griffith's direction when enacting True-Heart Suzie, the differences accumulate into fascination when asked about Mary Ann Fischer, the object of Richard Leacock's camera in A HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY, or of the fever victims peering into Luis Bunuel's camera in LAND WITHOUT BREAD (people 'caught in the act', as we say), much less of Nanook, or Marylou or Bob Dylan reacting respectively to the cameras of Robert Flaherty, Jean Rouch and Drew Pennebaker in NANOOK, CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER or DON'T LOOK BACK, human beings acting out portrayals of themselves whose nuances were often determined as much by themselves as by the filmmakers.

Pointedly, how are we to acknowledge the acknowledgment of the presence of the camera by the young girl, peering directly from the nearly closed door of a freight car into the lens of a camera operated by an unknown Nazi cinematographer assigned to record the departure of a train about to take her and others to a concentration camp, encountered by us when screening the duplicated footage used by Resnais when making NIGHT AND FOG, recognizing, as we do so, that were it not for the Nazi cinematographer having compelled the child to acknowledge the presence of his camera and himself, Resnais would have been prevented from enabling us to acknowledge her now as she was then, each of us in sequence using her acknowledgment as a means toward ends of our own that postdate her very existence on this earth?

To those who have never struggled to learn how better to make films, and thus how better to think through the working language that permits filmmakers to distinguish how we may better encounter things by means of them, the above questions may seem superficial. If, after all, films are misconstrued as 'texts' that only refer to things, each manifesting the same insurmountable gap as the others between whatever it is that we are encountering by means of them and whatever we may think we are thereby encountering (the child in the freight car, for example), then the working differences between Flaherty, Bunuel, Resnais, Rouch, Leacock and Pennebaker, however intriguing to connoisseurs, must be philosophically irrelevant.

Those who know better, however, will welcome Rothman's book, for an extended commentary upon a sampling of documentary films accepted as central to understanding the evolution of the traditions of such filmmaking, discussed in historical

order and with special attention to the commonality of the endeavors of their makers despite evolving diversities of construction, has been long overdue. Unsurprisingly so, for such a book could have been fashioned only by an author who has long pondered the complex histories of both film study and philosophy, reshaping and tempering preliminary conclusions within the fires of sustained reflection upon the evolution of both traditions.

Filmmakers and philosophers ought therefore to find Rothman's book of uncommon use, for although focusing upon only a half-dozen films (NANOOK OF THE NORTH, LAND WITHOUT BREAD, NIGHT AND FOG, CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER, A HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY and DON'T LOOK BACK), the six have been selected for their unusual pertinence in coming to understand the evolving intersection of documentary filmmaking and philosophy. As Rothman remarks in his introduction and confirms throughout his commentaries, he found himself focusing upon these films to the exclusion of others as his understanding deepened of the philosophical continuity of the questions driving their makers. (He was thus able to purge much chaff from the wheat, including the myth, once pervasive among some of his acquaintances in Boston, that showing the tools of filmmaking within a film (cameras being operated by cinematographers, for example, or sound booms intruding into the scene) would somehow blunt its philosophical mysteries – as if, by adding more things to whatever one was seeing by means of a film, one could reduce the mystery of how one could by means of screening it be seeing things at all).

Most wondrously, Rothman, unlike so many commentators who comment upon only those events in a film that confirm their predilections (and only under a description that compounds the bias), traverses each of the films from beginning to end, giving the reader a whole against which to measure any part of his discussion – whether cinematical or philosophical. Good thing, too, for Rothman within the text alludes only infrequently, and then only in passing, to the philosophical importance of his approach and conclusions, again following the notable example of his teacher, Cavell. Rothman's book is hardly, therefore, a work for those wanting, for themselves or their students, a short-cut to profundity – some kind of quick-fix through film to philosophy in six easy lessons. Philosophical enlightenment, here as elsewhere, will accrue incrementally only to hard work and may be difficult thereafter to articulate to others (or even to oneself). But for those willing to persevere, pondering tough rather than trivial questions, Rothman has written one of the few books about documentary filmmaking that will repay recurring attention.

Whether one agrees with this or that detail of Rothman's conclusions, therefore, is insignificant to his achievement, for he has addressed so attentively the range of responses that we could or should have to the events that we encounter when

witnessing the films that his opinions about them, rather than being self-serving, redirect our attention to the events as encountered by the author rather than to the author himself, deepening at once our own encounters with them, the author and his conclusions. (His essay on Bunuel's LAND WITHOUT BREAD, for example, could serve as a model of how to think carefully, profoundly and with philosophical provocation about how we encounter such films.)

Some weeks ago, a noted experimental filmmaker, well trained in philosophy, asked me over lunch what I had been doing. When I replied, "Reading a new book on the documentary by William Rothman", he exclaimed excitedly, "What a wonderful book!". We spent much of the remainder of the hour deliberating upon aspects of it, disagreeing with each other and with Rothman about this or that, stretching the arguments to encompass other films, etc., presuming unequivocally that it was, indeed, a "wonderful book". As the remarkable philosopher Ira Gershwin once remarked, 'Who could ask for anything more?'.