

# A Battle for Public Mythology

## *History and Genre in the Portrait Documentary*

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This article treats the term portrait documentary in its broadest sense. I do not, as some do, distinguish between the biographical documentary and the there-and-then-“impressionistic” portrait documentary. To me the thematic question of personal identity is at the core of the genre – the focusing of life aspects and character traits of a person, famous or non-famous, living or dead – not narrative formats in themselves.

In this attempt to outline the sub-genre and its implications for history and textual mythology an obvious starting point is therefore the crossing between two predominant factors in cultural history. On one hand the 18th century idea of personal freedom, promising individuals a liberation from powerless anonymity by defining themselves beyond class and family. On the other hand the simultaneous breakthrough of a modern mass mediation of this idea. A crossing that is often associated with the “age of modernity”.

In terms of genre history the portrait documentary thus has its roots in cultural discourses associated with a secular, bourgeois and realistic assertion of individuality that broke through in the 18th century. Along the dual development of a more independent type of artist and the mass distribution of printed portraits, popular novels and biographies the balance of power shifted in this period from subject to artist, printer, and publisher. Instead of reproducing a highly standardized image of distant, monarchical power, painters and engravers included a whole new galaxy of bourgeois, self-made heroes, at once realistically individualizing and symbolically emphasizing their impact to a wider public<sup>1</sup>. In the same spirit the novel, exemplified by 18th century-writers like Defoe and Fielding, and its non-fiction equivalence, the biography, rejected the metaphysics and allegorical anonymity of the Renaissance and the Baroque in order to portray psychologically interesting characters, stressing by so doing causality, chronology, likelihood and the one-to-one relation of reader to subject.

The dialectics between the freedom of the individual and the pressure of the surroundings, between man as a dynamic subject and as an object of others is the thematic cornerstone of the novel and makes it historically – beside the press – the great liberal bourgeois medium. Both the novel and the press are grounded on the humanistic notion of man and society as objects of public interest and rational investigation. What makes them and later mass media genres like photography, popular magazines, film and television “modern” is not only, in principle, their unwillingness to take anything for granted apart from an optimistic interest in the individual. What makes them modern is also this very individualism paradoxically exposed to the multiplying effect of the mass media themselves: individuality on the assembly line, as stereotyping, as *fame*.

A remarkable trait in this media development has been the ever growing tendency towards mediated, psychological intimacy. From the 20th century personal problems and private feelings have not any longer been restricted to fiction as we have come to know it from novels, Hollywood movies or soap operas, but have become (especially after the Second World War) part of the public agenda of “real life” too. The reflexivity of modern life, as it has been interpreted by Anthony Giddens – the fact that all social practice is being constantly revised in the light of new information about this practice – is thus applicable on the present trend of endless, personal “revealing” of recent authorities and past heroes of public life. It is even this aspect, in combination with the “globalizing” (Meyrovitz) and “narcissistic” (Lasch) effect of the media / media-user relation, that in many ways seems to confirm Jürgen Habermas and Richard Sennet’s darkest statements on the downfall of a sober public discourse.

Today’s marked prevalence of the portrait documentary in commercial and public television must be seen as a result of these trends, but I also think it must be seen as a prime example of their paradoxical character. As an exponent of what in Bill Nichols’ term is called the discourse of sobriety the documentary genre is generally considered on the opposite side of Richard Sennet’s “tyranny of intimacy”. It is regarded as pro-society, pro-facts, pro-arguments, and in general as apsychological, non-individualistic, non-subjective, non-fiction. No wonder then – uniting diverging tendencies as sobriety and intimacy, biographical facts and psychological speculation, empathetic respect and voyeurism – that the portrait documentary has become popular!

Though not until fairly recently and not in a unambiguous way. Historically speaking it has thus been an essential part of documentary’s public image only to relate to individuals as types, as *representatives* of specific cultures, groups or public functions in society. Personality in the “modern”, psychological sense – the more or less complex character as we know it from novels, dramas and written biographies – does not play any significant role in the documentary until the 1960’es. Thus let me state three main reasons for this remarkable “delay”.

One has to do with practical and technological conditions. In this perspective the heavy and inflexible camera and light equipment of the thirties and forties are in themselves factors to consider if one is to comprehend the apersonal character of the subject matter in the first “golden age” of non-fiction film. These technical shortcomings could not in a striking way be compensated through the traditional means of fiction film without somehow betraying the credibility and specific fascination of the genre. Nevertheless especially problems with lip-synch drove documentary filmmakers to treat the scattered segments of their films containing dialogue in an extremely concise way, heavily coaching subjects and using studio facilities as a necessary evil (as in Watt & Wright’s *Night Mail*, 1936, or Flaherty’s *Man of Aran*, 1934)<sup>2</sup>.

The other main reason for the lack of “character study” in the documentary tradition is the central one: ideological resistance. One factor in this connection has to do with the very premises of journalistic discourse. Although being an only “lightweight” equivalent to the daily newspaper, the newsreel (as later television news) is historically attached to the sobriety of *public concern*: the neutral or consensus-oriented focus on matters of common interest in society. Like contemporary tabloid papers and popular magazines newsreels such as *March of Times* and *British Movietone* paid much attention to famous individuals in politics, royalty, entertainment and sport. By so doing they were, however, also highly restricted by the narrow time slots, the respect of authority and the serve-the-public minded news criteria of this movie house variety of reportage.

The newsreels offered glimpses and *image*, not portraits. They offered individuals as news, as facts: not the “real” Franklin D. Roosevelt behind “the mask”, but the American president journalistically documented as he makes a speech or pays a visit to a foreign country.

The most heavily marked ideological factor in this regard is however linked to the norms of officially funded documentary film production, as we know it from the griersonian tradition. In all from working methods (the flight from the studio) to subject matter (the working class), from purpose (public education and social agitation) to justification (the artist as a political actor) Grierson and the British documentary film movement put *society as a collective* in focus<sup>3</sup>. Not leader figures and celebrities, as the newsreels did, but types in the broadest sense: the Man of the Masses (as we also know it from otherwise diverging filmmakers like Vertov and Riefenstahl) or at best the curious exception (from Flaherty’s *Nanook*, 1922, to Jacopetti’s *Mondo Cane*, 1963).

Thus paying tribute to the 19th century tradition of naturalism and socialism the ideal of the British movement seemed to be the highest possible degree of “representative” depiction. The griersonian belief (in contrast to the “romantic” films of Flaherty) in mediating an image of ordinary people “in a not exactly dehumanised way, but a sort of symbolic way”, as Edgar Anstey once put it, would even become the subject of later scruples<sup>4</sup>. Pat Jackson: the documentary “showed people in a problem, but you never got to know them (...) You never heard how they felt and thought and spoke to each other, relaxed. You were looking from a high point of view at them”<sup>5</sup>.

Following as a consequence of the other two main reasons (technological conditions and ideology as it has been summed up here) the third main reason for the lack of marked individuality in documentary has to do with norms concerning narrativity and aesthetics. Brian Wilson in his important study, “Claiming the Real”, is making a needed point emphasizing the often ignored quality of narrativity in documentary films. As in the case of his emphasizing the “individualizing” strategy of the groundbreaking “social victim”-film, Anstey & Elton’s *Housing Problems* (1935), it is however also urgent in this connection to emphasize how general principles like narrativity and “individualization” in the documentary has been worked out in distinctly different ways (and less distinct) than in the genre’s fictional counterpart. People in *Housing Problems* are “individualized”, but not in the Hollywood way: the “problem” is bad housing (not the acts of a villain), the “victim” is a group of fellow citizens (not a captured woman) and the rescuing hero is not a single man (and due to Winston’s political criticism not the people in distress themselves), but the promise of institutional intervention from the British Gas Council!

The more or less discrete heroizing of (public) institutions, nations, groups of people and professions in classical documentaries furthermore has its marked implications for the general aesthetics of the genre. Oral documentary rhetoric as it is used in Pare Lorentz’ *The Plow That Broke The Plains* (1937, “Wheat will win the war”) and *The River* (1937, “Poor land makes poor people”) does not imply any spoken utterances beneath Voice of God. The almost geometrical, ichonographic symmetry of *Führer and Volk* in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* (1935) does not leave room for the intimacy of revealing point of view-shots or flashbacks on the side of its sole protagonist. Plot lines, dialogue, actors, colors and costumes: the whole vocabulary of mainstream fiction film is adapted for the idea of the dynamic and sometimes psychologically interesting individual. Documentary’s vocabulary, as we know it from the classical works, is not. Until the 1960’s one could even say: on the contrary.

## A Turning Point: the 1960s

Definitely the 1960s represent a breakthrough towards a more psychologically individualized and socially graduated perception of human subjects within documentary. Thus new handheld synch cameras developed for television news from the mid-fifties had by 1960 a revolutionizing effect in the hands of Direct Cinema-directors like Drew and Leacock, Maysles and Wiseman or Cinema Verité-people like Rouch and Marker. "It is life observed by the camera rather than (...) life recreated for it", as the film critic James Blue summed it up<sup>6</sup>.

On an ideological level the new technology not only opened up for aspects of private intimacy (making the immediacy of real tears or outbursts a trade mark of the new documentary's blend of empiricist proof and voyeurism). It also went hand in hand with the aggressive curiosity of the 1960s anti-authoritarian movements. Independent film and TV-program makers approached institutions by not going from the outside in (as the *Industrial Britain*-heritage did at best), but by going from the inside out. Most often, to use Direct Cinema as an example, with a "critical" result: by not showing Society Taking Care Of The Mentally Sick, but insane George being bullied around in a state hospital bath (*Titicut Follies* by Wiseman, 1967), by not showing A New Dawn For Middle America, but the curious bible seller Paul Brennan with a squeezed foot in the door opening (*Salesman* by the Maysles, 1969).

The same firmly individualizing strategy was used when people in high office were challenged by the new documentarists. In *Primary* (1961), Leacock and Pennebaker's groundbreaking study on the rivalry between Humphrey and Kennedy, the filmmakers desisted from voice over-lecturing and turned instead attention towards details of flickering sensuality: Humphrey's insinuating pattering around voters, the nervous twisting of hands by Jackie Kennedy. In films by Emile de Antanio characterizing details like these were even integrated in a politically goal-directed, satirical "demythologization". By insinuating the suspicious and ridiculous character traits of Joseph McCarthy (*McCarthy – death of a witch hunter*, 1964) and Richard Nixon (*Millhouse – a White Comedy*, 1971) or contrasting their oral statements with real-life-footage he succeeded in negatively identifying a whole political system with some of its very front figures – newsreel journalism turned upside-down.

In a larger context what the breakthrough of the 1960'es meant was first of all, I think, a heightened sense of *front region* and *back region* in contemporary society. Thus an emblematic figure in this regard, apropos d'Antanio, is Richard Nixon: a politician with a sophisticated PR-use of modern media – generally putting back region aspects of his life (personal deeds, background and family) in front, while ironically falling on the same grounds. As a political phenomenon he – and the intensive media coverage he was subjected to – not only made topical the old sense of the word "public" (the domain of institutionalized political power) and the newer one ("open" as opposed to "private"/"secret"). Nixon also reminds us of the breakdown of both senses of the word by the fateful blurring of back region and front region on an institutional as well as a personal level<sup>7</sup>.

The "character question" and "the public's right to know" seemed after Watergate to be notions of a piece – as it had been earlier to some degree with larger-than-public-life-figures like Hitler, McCarthy or Hemingway and as it later would become with the heavily media covered cases of the Kennedy's, a Pablo Picasso, a Michael Jackson, an O.J. Simpson or a Bill Clinton. If Nixon's fate in many ways indicates the fall of public

man, to quote Richard Sennett, it also indicates the definitive rise of public "portraying".

### The Concept of Mythology

A main premise in connection with media's "portraying" is a notion of an equally vague character, namely "mythologisation". Nevertheless "mythologisation" is in my view a key epistemological factor if one is to comprehend the genre history, as it up to a crucial point has been laid out above, and a typology of the portrait documentary, as it even more sketchily will be laid out in the following.

According to this view the very dialectics of the portrait documentary has to do with the interplay between two apparently incompatible aspects. On the one side the "strict facts" of a person (without which the subgenre would lose its constituting prestige and at best turn into a biopic or docudrama). On the other side the genre's more or less conscious use of mythological explanation, of "mythologisation". To my purpose mythology might thus be summed up in this general definition: an interpretive framework of common, cultural references and thematic codes, incarnated in master or model narratives of more or less fictitious character, through which Man in Society is made comprehensible and relevant to a public.

Emphasizing in this way the impact of mythology also implies an emphasis on theory and textual analysis at the relative expense of an analysis of empirical verification (à la: "the portrait documentary X on person Y differs factually from A's autobiography, but is close to the written biography B that however is inconsistent with information gained from sources C and D"). This presentation neither can or will rise above questions of truth and verification, but put in general questions like these are, I think, better answered on a level of principle than on a level of normative empiricism.

Thus what is striking if one is to establish a brief outline of the portrait documentary is in my view its highly standardized patterns: the predictability of its thematic main explanations of a life, its cliché-mediations of types and professions. This standardization is explainable on many general levels – for instance practical (under what conditions is the person in question "accessible"?) or economic/institutional (how are formulas working in accordance with the "assembly line" budgets/working methods of television?). The standardization aspect is further explainable on ideological levels in its broadest ("what is individuality?") as well as in its media and genre specific terms (see the parts above).

In all of this the portrait documentary – in order to manage, pay off, make sense – leans on mythology. What is interesting in this connection is therefore not only the notion in its at once broadest and most scientifically "local" sense – Lévy-Strauss or Roland Barthes' idea of mythology as a basically "empty" case of random, ideological projection. On a concrete level the phenomenon first of all covers the constant recycling of classical or trivial myths and mythological notions in (un)popular culture. The stories of sharply outlined figures – Madonna as Narcissus, Garbo as Cinderella or an All-American bible salesman as *The Death of a Salesman* – are as such, in an ironical way or not, helping us to "understand our culture and ourselves", as it is often explicitly claimed in the documentaries themselves. Or with the (popular) psychology of C.G. Jung or Rollo May: myths are the metaphorical expression of the basic, unconscious experiences and identity formation of human beings, connecting and reconciling through identification the stages of our own lives. Like modern myths Madonna, Garbo

or the Maysles' salesman give human or society related conflicts a direction, sometimes even seem to release them through the force of example.

Or to be precise: the force of *mass mediated* example. "Portraying"'s intermingling of general communication principles on the one side and the mechanisms of media and genre on the other has been described in an exemplary way by Leo Braudy: "To be talked about is to be part of a story, and to be part of a story is to be at the mercy of storytellers – the media and their audience. The famous person is thus not so much a person as a story about a person – which might be said about the social character of each one of us"<sup>8</sup>.

### **A Rough Typology: Heroes, Villains, Complex Characters, Open Texts**

What then are on a more concrete level the master, or at least some highly standardized, stories of the portrait documentary throughout time? In order to give an answer of some general value I think it is appropriate to temporarily disregard otherwise relevant angles such as the portrait documentary's standard models of social understanding (sociological, historical, psychological etc.), its dramaturgy models (from Great Man-narrative to *verité* or "Citizen Kane-puzzle") or its models of reception (empathy, voyeurism, moral judgment etc.). Instead a fruitful starting point is, I think, at the very core of classical mythology: Who is good? Who is bad?

Thus what is at once self-evident and striking is the fact that a large majority of portrait documentaries until the 1960s (and a majority since) are about *heroes* – plus a few *villains*. From the birth of Western culture, incarnated by Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and later the beginning of the modern age (when the printed praising of 18th century monarchs were illegally supplemented by pamphlets and caricatures) a public of readers and viewers has been supplied with personal emblems of heroism and villainy – alternatives to follow or avoid among common people including the famous *in spe*. Leo Braudy: "Since fifth-century Athens, fame has been a way of expressing either the legitimacy of the individual within society or (in the Christian and spiritual model) the legitimacy of the individual as opposed to the illegitimacy of the social order"<sup>9</sup>.

No wonder then that the documentary genre, historically the very exponent of public enlightenment and political correctness, would in a more explicit way than its fictional counterpart expose the audience to proper role models. As in the works of the Antiquity the typical documentary portraits before and (to a lesser degree) after the 1960s are thus dedicated to the *most important achievement* of an individual. In this tradition both the celebrity and his or her portraying subject share the ideals of community and undying fame: warfare feats, political leadership, records in a generous competition. There is in this general sense a distinct connection between otherwise diverging documentaries as, say, Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* (1934), Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (1935), BBC's *The Complete Churchill* (1991), CNN's special *Colin Powell – a general's general* (1993) or Leon Gast's *When We Were Kings* (1996, on Muhammed Ali). In this understanding *Triumph des Willens* is thus in many ways a prime example of classical Roman-style role modeling while for instance *Colin Powell – a general's general* is Roman *fame* with a marked democratic twist: the African-American warrior is first of all portrayed as a product of The American Dream.

Consider the two last-named subjects, Hitler and Powell, in respectively a British WW2-compilation documentary and an Iraqi TV-documentary: the same footage and propaganda stereotypes turned upside-down as it has been seen (what *Triumph des Willens* is concerned) in Frank Capra's *Why We Fight*-series, 1942-45, or in the classi-

cal documentary pamphlets by Erwin Leiser (*Mein Kampf – Hitler's Rise and Fall*, 1961) and Paul Rotha (*The Life of Adolf Hitler*, 1961). In both the hero portrait and the villain portrait footage in this authoritarian tradition is indeed, as Barthes might put it, empty cases of random, ideological projection. Whether the person in question has been a way of expressing the (il)legitimacy of the individual within society (as in the above mentioned examples) or the legitimacy of the individual as opposed to the illegitimacy of the social order (as in Robert Epstein's gay-documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*, 1984, or in Jon Blair's *Anne Frank Remembered*, 1995) the distribution of positive and negative character traits is here strictly centralized.

It is therefore also strictly contextualised: in *The Life of Adolf Hitler* for instance the rottenness of Hitler's closest affiliates is through *Voice of God* emphasized by their alleged homosexuality. All differences apart what thus unites the cinematic cases of Paul Rotha (*Hitler*) and Robert Epstein (*Harvey Milk*) is not their view on homosexuality, but their belief in the didactic force of positive and negative examples. In this respect the two directors represent a high degree of consistence between left-wing documentaries in the thirties and forties and in the seventies and eighties. In both cases the perception of individuals is first of all subjected to political strategies and propagandistic persuasion (from Shub's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, 1927, and Iven's *Borinage*, 1933, to Kopple's *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, 1976, Field's *Rosie the Riverter*, 1980, or Rafferty, Loader & Rafferty's *The Atomic Cafe*, 1982).

In the case of hero and villain portraits we are in other words far from the aesthetically and existentially open-ended essayism of French Cinema Verité (for instance Rouch and Morin's *Chronique d'un été*, 1961, or Marker's *Le joli mai*, 1963). Here, as to an even higher degree in the self-reflexive and performative portraits and (auto)biographies of the eighties and nineties, documentary at long last seems to reach a level of artistic complexity that is equivalent to the modernistic tradition of fiction. Thus what in the eighties and nineties is in focus is not necessarily "better" in itself, but it is qualitatively different: another main category of portrait documentaries stating their subjects as neither heroes or villains, but as *open texts*. In for instance Peter Greenaway's *Darwin* (1994) or Mark Rappaport's *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (1992) the subjects in principle seem open for *any* public or personal projection. Not only is the filmstar and AIDS-victim Hudson, according to Rappaport's film, perceivable as both straight/macho *and* gay in the sublime shallowness (i.e. ambiguity) of Hollywood genre formulas – it is all up to the eyes of the beholder. In accordance with Rappaport and Greenaway's films Hudson and Darwin are at once perceivable as anti-establishment *and* pro-establishment, as both sovereign as characters *and* all-accessible as icons. Thus in the post-modern mirror cabinets of *Darwin* and *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* the two modern icons are "owned" by nobody and anybody while for the same reason set free through the unrestrained interpretations by Greenaway and Rappaport.

It is in other words the distinctly personal character of these highly stylized artfilm documentaries of the 1990'es that frees them from the good guy/bad guy predictability of the traditional portrait documentary. Their post-modern insight – a person is what you make of him or her – does not however imply that they are pointless or without substance in their reality-references. On the contrary their emphasizing of the portrait subjects as open texts seem to put a few things straight in a genre so heavily burdened by mythological projections. We all must, they seem to say, re-interpret individuals of public or private history in order to identify what is present with what is past, and what is private with what is public.

For finally the mainstream BBC or PBS-portrait documentary – placed between the old-time propaganda/educational documentary with its tabloid equivalents and the documentary avant-garde as it is referred to above – an adoption to modernist criteria of “psychological depth” has been important means to gain journalistic and artistic respectability; especially since the 1980s. One of the arch-myths of personal transformation, The Prince in The Frog, that so perfectly had suited the talent-before-birthright-dogma of 18th century’s France and America, is in many of these documentary portraits supplemented with another popular myth: Mr. Hyde in Dr. Jekyll. The truly *individual* individual combine “a vision of wholeness”, as Leo Braudy calls it – larger-than-life talent and charisma in one – with the opposed or contradictory traits of an “interesting” character<sup>10</sup>. These *complex characters* thus make up the fourth and final category in this rough typology.

In films and programs like these the classical character traits of good and evil, so predictably distributed in countless documentary odes and pamphlets respectively, are given full attention according to the concept of two-in-one. Examples stretch from early TV-programs like *See It Now: McCarthy* (1954, front versus back personality), CBS’ *Stravinsky* (1966, the artist between The Old and The New World) or *The Ups and Downs of Henry Kissinger* (1975, the underdog and star) to recent programs like BBC’s *The Comeback Kid Clinton* (1994, the Frog turned Prince), BBC’s *The Peter Sellers Story* (1995, Jekyll and Hyde turned actor), Lennon and Epstein’s *The Fight Over Citizen Kane* (1996, Orson Welles and Randolph Hearst as Ying and Yang) or the Danish TV2-production *Røde Ruth* (1994, Brecht the idealist as a womanizing parasite).

In spite of the positive possibilities of anti-authoritarian demystification and breakdown of taboos the mainstream documentaries of this kind not seldom seem to emphasize the dirty little secrets at the dispense of a the proclaimed general perspective. Speaking in general and in terms of reception they rely on the voyeuristic satisfaction of being behind the scenes, to rip away the veil of official stories and discover the supposed real truth, to control rather than be controlled. To be, in yet other words, *the one who knows* whether this knowledge is gained through commercial “tabloid TV” (Oliverly & Harrys’ *Hollywood Heaven: Tragic Lives, Tragic Deaths*, 1990, with lively enactment’s!), or through the public service equivalence of “tabloid TV” (BBC’s *Diana – a Celebration*, 1997) or through independent art films like the Maysles’ *Grey Gardens* (1976, high society eccentrics on *creep show* display). For the same reason (apropos models of social understanding) portrait documentaries, voyeuristic or not, are often utilizing certain lightweight key-notions of socio-psychology and psychoanalysis in combination with (apropos dramaturgic models) the “Citizen Kane character-puzzle”. Recent examples are Zozarinsky’s *Citisen Langlois*, 1994, on the film archivist Henri Langlois, Broomfield’s *Heidi Fleiss Hollywood madam*, 1995, or Pietrowska’s *Sex, Lies and Jerzy Kosinski*, 1995 (on the Polish-American author).

Sometimes key-explanations of this kind purely seem to have come about as a narrative emergency solution (as in Maben’s *Helmuth Newton: Frames From The Edge*, 1988, claiming the Lolita-in-the-closet secret of it’s photographer-subject in order to end the film). In other cases they are arranged as the final point in a climax-construction of artfully mystifying hints leading to *the* answer to the character riddle. An example is Dan Säll’s *Greta Garbo – fresterska och clown*, 1985, symbolically disclosing its subject’s hidden dream of playing a woman in a man’s clown dress. Another example is the final redemption of the escape-*Leitmotif* in Mishan and Rothenberg’s *Bui Doi – Life Like Dust*, 1994, a highly stylized portrait of a traumatized, Vietnamese refugee/LA-

gang member. The latter example is furthermore representative of a distinct trait of the post-war documentary in general and the portrait documentary in specifics: in all its “political correctness” *Bui Doi – Life Like Dust* seems to victimize its human subject through the heavy underlining of *victimization* as the dominant mode of social understanding.

In character studies like these we are certainly witnessing marked elements of “fiction”, “tabloid journalism” or “performative documentary” – and all in a blur with “facts”! Though there is a decisive difference between the empirical status of “Rhett Butler” and Franklin D. Roosevelt or even “James Foster Kane” and William Randolph Hearst, the often disputed ontology of documentary is admittedly even more vague in this subgenre variety. Plot and characters are undoubtedly “taken from real life”. But “the facts” are mixed with appropriate fictional props so that the story line turns out simple, dramatic and climatic (or complicated, introvert and “lyrical”), yet still identifiable as a matter of public concern, just indignation or human interest.

Thus in the portrait documentaries of heroes, villains, complex characters or “open texts”, attempting to provide visual evidence of life patterns, character traits and emotional impulses, the subjects are indeed at the mercy of story-tellers. More so than in documentaries on for instance animal behavior or airplane construction, but in principle just as much as when each of us leaves a room full of slightly gossiping colleagues or old friends.

### **The Battle for Public Mythology : Aspects of History and Sociology**

It is the same elementary mechanisms of general communication principles and medium that provide some of the background for the, in my view, most remarkable aspect of the portrait documentary as a historical and genre related phenomenon. It deals namely in a mass mediated and factual way with what matters most for all of us while at the same time is the most subjective to each one of us: the personal impression of the Other. In practice, whether it is focused on people in public office or the man next door, the portrait documentary is consequently *a battleground for public mythology*. Underneath the “factual” supertexts of great or ordinary men and women there is always, I want to argue, a subtext of negotiation and quarrel: who is good? Who is bad? What is (extra)ordinary? What *is* a remarkable achievement?

Thus, as it has been suggested in this presentation, one obvious answer to the last question is this: what is considered remarkable varies over time. The celebrities of the Antiquity were few and distant achievers of physical deeds and immortal glory in public service. The documentary tradition represents at once a follow-up and a departure from this conceptual starting point. In the thirties, forties and fifties newsreels and the publicly sponsored documentaries considered achievement as a part of a public culture while at the same time claiming collectivism and the outstanding individual as a harmonic entity. The trendy portrait documentaries of the sixties turned this upside-down, as it further has been indicated above, by revealing a discrepancy between society and individual. The public definition of achievement, as it was made topical in the films of the sixties, was relativised, pluralised, made unglamorous or gaining distinctly different kinds of glamour. The seventies in documentary history in many ways represented a return to the ideal of collective achievement claiming the force of didactic example through the centralizing voice of “talking heads” for instance. Whereas finally the self-reflexive and postmodern portrait documentaries of the eighties and nineties put an

ironical question mark to the whole idea of individual sovereignty through achievement.

Thus today there is not, even discounting any postmodernist excess, the public consensus of earlier times about what constitutes a remarkable achievement or even proper behavior. Figures of public life are trivialized to the point where it seems enough to be famous for being famous. Likewise the ever-expanding need for fame in the mass media creates one fifteen-minutes-celebrity after the other<sup>11</sup>. Who is to be “portrayed” or not is more than ever an object of discussion and power struggle in editorial offices all over the world.

A second possible key answer to the question of achievement is equally relative: the character of “remarkable achievement” and its mediation depends in each case on the subject’s *social status and role*. Thus in terms of general sociology every social status (defined as a position occupied by an individual in a social system) and its dynamic, social mediation through role has a cultural history of its own. The status of the politician for instance in this historical understanding indeed varies from the role performance of Hitler to the same of Nixon, but the mythological mass mediation varies, often conflicts, accordingly: from Paul Rotha’s classical villain’s portrait (the above mentioned *Life of Adolf Hitler*) to the more or less “psychologically penetrating” one by for instance de Antanio (the above mentioned Nixon portrait *Millhouse*), Marilyn Mellows (*Nixon*, 1991, the Thames TV-series) or Oliver Stone (*Nixon*, 1995, the docudrama).

Likewise there is a gulf of conflict and ambivalence between the romantic depiction of the artist as a persecuted genius in Curt Oertel’s classical *The Titan – the Story of Michelangelo* (1939, or Jørgen Roos’ *Mit livs eventyr*, 1955, on Hans Christian Andersen) and the post-modern, romantic-ironical vision of the artist (and of artistic professions and role spectra) as we find it in Thomas Gislason’s *Fra hjertet til hånden/ Heart and Soul* (1994). The last-mentioned film, about the dynamically alienated Danish poet and filmmaker Jørgen Leth, is in principle equaled with Wender’s *Lightning over Water* (1980, on the filmdirector Nicholas Ray), Skjødts Jensen’s *It’s a Blue World* (1990, on the Danish painter Hans Henrik Lerfeldt) or with Longfellow’s *Our Marilyn* (1988, on Marilyn Monroe). But their postmodern, ambiguous it’s-all-in-the-image(es) attitude is also recognizable in more mainstream oriented artist portraits like Keshishian’s *Truth or Dare: In Bed With Madonna*, 1990, or Zwiggoff’s *Crumb* (1994, on the cult cartoonist).

Finally, keeping the sociological perspective in focus, I want to argue that the act of portraying and being portrayed involves a decisive element of *status and role interaction*. In this respect the portrait documentary seems to both make topical and relativise a main thesis of sociology: “Although every status set includes a large number of different statuses, we certainly do not pay attention to all of them, or even several of them, at once. In the typical social situation, only one or a few statuses are actually relevant and identify our current position”<sup>12</sup>. Thus the portrait documentary is – as opposed to the typical social situation – at the same time subjected to the (in principle) grand plurality and (in practice) narrow selectivity of “portrait angles“. This is also what constitutes the hidden power play behind any documentary portrait: the often diverging considerations to personal and/or institutional positioning of subject and viewer, the subject’s possible resistance or cooperation in the process, the compromises made by the film or program makers to make the portrait factual yet fascinating, multi-faceted yet immediately comprehensible, “exotic” yet relevant – and saleable – to a broader public.

Let me sum up this point through a concrete example. Referring to the above mentioned Nixon-portrait by Thames Television the series' highly standardized prelude enumerates through talking head-sound bites, stemming from "experts", a number of Nixon's characteristics. In sum the high level of mythological generality of these "expert"-statements legitimizes the TV-series' fascination with its subject: the worth of his political achievements (China), his Americanism ("He was the American model, but also the American nightmare"), the most general and most intimate keys to his character ("a blend of good and evil", the very close relationship to his daughter). What really constitutes our reception of this portrait subject – critical distance, ambivalence, empathy – is, however, summed up in the *in medias res*-opening of the first program in the series (repeated in the third and last part): Nixon giving his tearful farewell speech to the White House staff. At this low point in his career – and high point of tragedy – the president seems to embody the myth of hybris-stricken Oedipus – falling on the grounds of not looking reality in the eyes, of not having control over his own political destiny and private mythology (as also heavily emphasized in the docudrama by Oliver Stone Nixon is pathetically waffling about the loss of his mother).

All of this in Mellowes' TV-portrait certainly gives us a voyeuristic thrill. It seems relevant too and very well done, but at the same time painfully predictable. Referring to the sociological statement above Mellowes' *Nixon* provides us with a broad range of "Nixon"-statuses (such as that of "president", "politician", "husband", "son", etc.). But at the same time the series seem to insist that the more you focus on the highly "private" statuses the closer you get to the ultimate truth of an "official" individual's interaction with the world (as if Nixon "the crook" in his suspect methods substantially differs in comparison with many of his predecessors and descendants!). As many recent scandals in public life indicate there seems to be no end to the media personification of all general (in this case: political and highly institutional) questions, of the anecdotal focus on private life as *the* public issue.

Or is there? Thus in the best of the current portrait documentaries the most "self-evident" – that is hidden and often, "backstage", highly disputed – choices of the subgenre are often strikingly put in play. The mythologizing *that's why's* are replaced with the *de*- or *re*mythologizing *why's* and *who's* of creative self-reflection: Why basically is this person chosen – or this status aspect of a person? What considerations to "facts", "entertainment value" or "general perspective" are governing this specific portrait mythology? Who on a level of aesthetic vision and ethics *owns* the image of the portrait subject – the person who portrays? An institution he or she represents? The subject itself? An institution he or she represents? The public in general?

To return to an earlier example of distinction and resemblance in one: the Riefenstahl's and the Rotha's may have much in common what documentary mode is concerned (from *Triumph des Willens* to *The Life of Adolf Hitler*). But putting pragmatic questions like the above stated to their respective work – as some of the most creative of the 1990's' documentary portraits do to their own agenda – will definitely place them in opposite corners of the battle for public mythology.

### **Problem and Solution in One: Two Concluding Text Readings**

The general questions raised above are, to make the final examples, in different ways illuminated in two remarkable films of the nineties: *Die Macht der Bilder (The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl)*, 1993) by Ray Müller and *Nobody's Business* (1996) by Alan Berliner. They are both aesthetically quite simple films, far from the

arty extravaganza of for instance *Darwin*, *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* or *Fra hjertet til hånden/Heart and Soul*. Thus as a career biography *Die Macht der Bilder*, to begin with, consists of the standard mix of archive footage and interviews, including Müller's own long and pushing inquiry about Riefenstahl's role as a filmmaker in The Third Reich. Admittedly the film also has its share of the portrait documentary's usual illnesses. As Ruth Starkman points out in a recent article the film in part looks like a shaky compromise between a critical investigation of Riefenstahl's nazi-past and an otherwise respectful all round survey on her talents as a technically brilliant auteur<sup>13</sup>.

It is however in my view the more or less deliberate laying bare of this "internal" battling for mythological status that distinguishes the film – including the almost physical quarrels between the competing portrait makers, Müller and 92 year old Riefenstahl, in "hidden camera"-scenes revealing their divergent perceptions of the film's subject! Riefenstahl not only in many ways conquers the film (the nazi aspect remains a marked, but isolated third of the three hour long film), but Müller also in part turns this what-she-is-best-at-wins aspect to the paradoxical benefit of the film. Thus his own fundamental ambivalence towards his subject is summed up at the end of part one when Riefenstahl is "caught on the run" at the editors table, going through technical and stylistic details in *Triumph des Willens*, euphoric at the sight of the wonderful black and white effect of kicking nazi-boots marching towards us on her monitor! What in other words might be the problematic bias of the film – a certain overweight of *one* social status of its character, the talented craftsperson, *the pro* – in this disclosure-through-situation scene serves an important point in itself. It puts an at once sharp and general light on the grotesque, social aspect of "purely professional" fetishism: to Riefenstahl Nazism is still first and simply *Bilder*. In this lies, the film seems to claim, the true horror of her example.

Whereas Müller's film to an explicit and fascinating extent is part of the problem Alan Berliner's *Nobody's Business* (1997) could be considered, to quote the old 68-slogan, as a part of the solution. Or maybe, in a specific sense, on the contrary: the father and son interview-dual between Alan, trying as a family member and documentary maker to get hold on his father's (and thereby his own and their shared) life story and character, and Oscar, rejecting the son's approaches as "nobody's business", is a film that offers no solutions to anything. On the contrary it is – through the interactive dramaturgy of question and answer – an at once hilarious and dialectically clear study in the never-ending struggle of opposed interpretative projections.

In this understanding *Nobody's Business* is in itself an example, elevated by self-irony, of the surveying eagerness of any ambitious documentary film. By from the start putting us in the questioning position of Alan we – I! – on the one hand gain sympathy for Oscar's level-headed "I'm just an ordinary guy"-objections as opposed to his son's well-meaning attempts to seize him through documentary's models of social understanding. Models such as history (Oscar's status as the son of an emigrant), ethnical background (his Jewish roots), genetic heritage (although Oscar admits a certain resemblance to Alan), psychology (Oscar's suggested father complex, the impact of divorce and family breakdown) and first of all the portrait-ontology of the *ordinary man* (the unique individual behind *the salesman*). On the other hand however the film is also a touching testimony, especially when the conversation turns more concrete and confidential, of the personal costs – the inevitable loneliness – of Oscar's defense mechanisms and sarcastic pessimism (that also touches Alan on the raw). In all Oscar's insistence on what might be considered *his* personal mythology: the all-American, ahistorical pride of a self-made man.

Thus exposing the ever fragile and life important interaction between interpreter and interpreted *Nobody's Business* is to me an uplifting, contemporary example of a general portrait documentary ideal, the union of intimacy and general perspective. Whereas Ray Müller in *Die Macht der Bilder* momentarily, as indicated above, serves the classical art ideal of stating the general from the particular, Berliner, in a paradoxical way (and to the reluctant satisfaction of his father?) goes the other way round. The film in sum, as Bill Nichols has stated in another context, “brings the power of the universal, of the mythical and fetishistic, down to the level of immediate experience and individual subjectivity”<sup>14</sup>.

In that respect this film also represents a point of much needed self-reflection in a genre history of apersonal, total solutions in the one end and tabloid psychology or atomizing, personal avantgardism in the other. *Nobody's Business* offers no good guy or bad guy, no Best Achievement or Inner Truth, no prince in the frog or Jekyll in Hyde. It even resists the non-committal put-anything-in-the-box attitude of the post-modern portraits. What the film offers, beside its sober generosity, is however room for the mystery, a sense of the unspoken and interminable, in inter human relations. The very sense that sometimes elevates our everyday life-existence, but so often has been betrayed by the matter of mythological fact.

## Notes

1. The general point of “modernity” being made here stems from a variety of sources, first of all Thompson, Braudy, Giddens and Dahl.
2. These practical aspects are further discussed in Wilson, pp. 54 ff.
3. The specific summing up of the four main griersonian aspects is drawn from Wilson, p. 26.
4. Sussex, p.18.
5. Ibid. , p. 76.
6. James Blue: “Discussion with the Maysles”, *Film Comment* vol. 2, no.4, p.22; quoted in Wilson, p. 149.
7. The brief reflection on the notions of “front”/“back region” and “public” draws on Thompson, pp. 118 ff., pp. 235 ff.
8. Braudy, p. 592.
9. Ibid., p. 585.
10. Ibid., pp. 6 ff.
11. This point is fully developed in Braudy, pp. 607 ff.
12. Johnson, pp. 279 ff.
13. “Mother of All Spectacles. Ray Müller’s *The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*”, in *Film Quarterly* vol. 51, no. 2, Winter 1997-98.
14. ““Getting to know you...”. Knowledge, Power, and the Body”, in *Renov*, p. 188.

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