

“WE ON HISTORY CHANNEL!”:  
THE REPRESENTATION OF HISTORY IN DOCUMENTARY FILM

by  
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## GLOSSARY

actualities – short films popularized by Auguste and Louis Lumiere showing actual events in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

edutainment – media meant to educate as well as entertain the audience.

## ABSTRACT

The representation of history in documentary film is problematic. Documentary's creative treatment of actuality and assumed fidelity to perceived truth is at conflict with the historian's pursuit of veracity. Ever since the dawn of photography, artists have manipulated images and compromised facticity in service to aesthetics and drama. This trend continued into the early days of cinema, as newsreel producers adopted a more liberal than literal ethos that persists in documentary to this day. Reality can never be shown just as it is even in the most simplistic treatments of the most banal subjects. The representation of history is not always as absolute as it may seem. Instead of ignoring or denying the authorship inherent in the representation of history in documentary film, filmmakers should embrace it and reflexively provide glimpses of the cinematic process that forms their particular construction of reality. I will argue that the best way to accomplish this goal is to employ the performative mode of documentary representation, which gives the viewer a context to think about the film as *a* version of history, not necessarily *the* version of it.

## INTRODUCTION

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In this essay, I examine the philosophical conundrums and practical challenges to the representation of history in film and provide a possible solution to the filmmaker's dilemma. I begin with an analysis of some controversial Civil War photographs by Alexander Gardner, whose manipulated images lead me into a discussion of truth and veracity, both of which lie at the heart of the problems with the representation of history in documentary film. Next, I cite some early examples of history in film, beginning with



Jules-Etienne Marey and Eadward Muybridge and continuing on to newsreels, which Theodore Roosevelt exploited to his political advantage. Finally, I relate my own experience with employing the performative mode of documentary to represent history in *The Great Delta Bear Affair*.

## TRUTH, VERACITY, AND THE CREATIVE TREATMENT OF ACTUALITY

The inherent truth claim of documentary stems from its assumed faithfulness to the historian Leopold von Ranke's dictum to record events "as they really happened." This position is dependent upon the documentarian's minimal intervention in his representation of reality. A totally objective representation is impossible, however, since subjectivity intervenes at the moment the filmmaker decides to press "Record." Most viewers are comfortable with this condition, but when the filmmaker takes more extreme creative liberties with his subjects, he risks the audience's rejection of his ideological message.

Alexander Gardner chronicled the carnage of war in his Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the American Civil War 1861-1865. The introduction to a 1998 Library of Congress feature entitled "The Case of the Moved Body" about a pair of his photographs reads:

Like other Civil War photographers, Alexander Gardner sometimes tried to communicate both pathos and patriotism with his photographs, reminding his audience of the tragedy of war without forgetting the superiority of his side's cause. Sometimes, the most effective means of elevating one's cause while demeaning the other was to create a scene – by posing bodies – and then draft a dramatic narrative to accompany the picture (Library of Congress).

Gardner's creation of scenes is best exemplified by William Frassinto's analysis of two of his photographs of dead Confederate sharpshooters. In "A Sharpshooter's Last Sleep (1863)," Gardner and O'Sullivan photographed a dead soldier as he was found in that location. But to create "The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter (1863)," Frassinto determined that Gardner moved that same soldier to a different location and

photographed him there. The first photograph depicts the soldier lying in a jumble of rocks, clothing, and other detritus. It is not an aesthetically pleasing composition. The second photograph shows the very same soldier propped inside a stony nook. Its stark imagery and clean lines create a visually compelling image (Tobias 1-2).

Tobias writes:

When Gardner and O’Sullivan dragged the body of the infantryman from the place where the soldier had actually fallen to another site in order to create a visual composition (and a fictional narrative) that would better dramatize the carnage of war, his picture became a liberal rather than a literal rendition of the scene ‘*as it actually was.*’ Gardner’s free translation of the scene may preserve its *general* meaning, but its uncertain fidelity to reality sacrifices some degree of facticity (Tobias 3).

Gardner’s creative treatment of actuality would have probably pleased John Grierson, the “godfather” of documentary film, even while it has vexed historians. Grierson recognized the paradox inherent in documentary when he defined it as “the creative treatment of actuality” (Ellis 4), thereby permitting diegetic elements in non-fiction if they are in service of what is perceived by the filmmaker as a “greater truth.” The documentarian’s creative pursuit of truth, however, is often at odds with the historian’s desire for veracity. Given Gardner’s *a priori* subscription to Grierson’s school of thought in his “liberal rather than literal rendition” of the battlefield carnage in his visual and written narratives, his work is a perfect foundation for a discussion of the representation of history in documentary film, many problems of which stem from the conflict between truth and veracity.

From Pontius Pilate at Golgotha to Robert Pirsig in Montana Hall, mankind has long been concerned with truth and reality. It was Plato, however, who first interrogated these

subjects critically and predated cinema by two thousand years in “The Allegory of the Cave,” when he described subterranean prisoners to whom “the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of images.” He noted that “the bewilderment of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into to the light, which is true of the mind’s eye, quite as much as of the bodily eye” (Plato 254-258). The best representation the camera may provide, therefore, is a shadow of the object being represented.

Besides the similarity of Plato’s cave metaphor to the extended cinematic apparatus (the cave itself as theater, the fire as projector, and the shadows on the cave wall as projected movie), “the essential point is that the prisoners in the cave are not seeing reality, but only a shadowy representation of it,” which neatly summarizes the conundrum of the representation of history in documentary film. Furthermore, “the importance of the allegory lies in Plato’s belief that there are invisible truths lying under the apparent surface of things which only the most enlightened can grasp” (Brians).

The unfortunate denizens of Plato’s cave grapple with ontological and epistemological challenges, just as documentary filmmakers and historians do today. “Ontology has to do with what exists, what is real. Epistemology has to do with knowing, how we can know what is real” (Wilson 2). In Plato’s cave, the prisoners can access the reality, or veracity, of the shadows, but not the underlying truth of the objects carried by the porters that were casting them.

Film scholar and anthropologist Robert Edmonds comments on the epistemological suggestions created by cinematic construction, noting that “Our ability to create

motivation in a film sequence has manifested itself in such a way that we now find a difference between veracity and truth where, in the dictionary, none exists” (Edmonds 21). Actually, however, in an amusing metadefinitional twist, Edmonds’ statement is truthful in philosophical spirit, but not veracious in its bibliographic reference: the two terms actually *do* have different definitions, but their differences may not be immediately obvious. Truth is defined as “the quality or state of being true.” Likewise, veracity is “conformity to facts; accuracy” (The New Oxford American Dictionary). Truth refers to the larger metaphysical meanings conveyed by a subject, and veracity to its immediate empirical information. In his photographs, Gardner reassembled the facts of the scene into a perceived truth motivated by his personal ideology. Although this tampering went undetected for over a hundred years, when it was finally discovered it diminished his work as unabashed propaganda and manufactured artifice of dubious historical record. The critical filmmaker must skillfully negotiate the potentially conflicting and subtly different notions of truth and veracity at the heart of the depiction of history in documentary film.

The nature of documentary, with its inherent truth claims and veneer of verisimilitude, subjects the mode to being held to greater scrutiny with regard to its facticity. Film theorist and historian Geoff Pingree observes:

Both documentary’s reputation and presumed influence as a ‘discourse of sobriety,’ to borrow Nichols’s phrase, depend heavily on our wishful belief, as spectators, that the mode is less clouded, less narratively ‘spun’ than other cinematic forms of portrayal, and is thus more reliable than most media representations (Pingree 39).

Pingree's "wishful belief" is for a documentary that treats actuality *less* creatively. His desire for a literal mode of documentary comes as no surprise given his training as a historian. Likewise, it opposes that of Grierson, who, as an avowed propagandist, embraced a more liberal mode of documentary. This dichotomy allows for little middle ground as Pingree notes "because of what they implicitly promise – to see the world as it is, unadorned – documentaries in effect compel us to judge them by the all-or-nothing standard of evidence that they provide – as either truth or lies" (Pingree 39). Therefore, he might scornfully view the Gardner photographs as inaccurate lies, while Grierson would perhaps applaud them as effective truths. Instead of only binary possibilities, however, critics and viewers should consider both conditions as a matter of degrees.

Images can be *iconic*, *indexical*, or *symbolic*. Considered on a continuum from most literal to most liberal, an iconic image is the most literal since it refers directly to what it represents. An indexical image balances literalism and liberalism, as it refers to a larger subject of which the image is a part. A symbolic image is the most liberal, since the subject and its meaning is an arbitrary intellectual or cultural convention (O'Connor 13). The filmmaker moves along this literal-to-liberal continuum as she applies technique to creatively treat actuality to varying degrees. At the literal end of the spectrum, the iconic image corresponds to the "trees" since it is the most objective and absolute rendition. It is also the most veracious since it conveys the most facticity. At the liberal end is the symbolic image and the "forest," which is the most subjective and relative. It is the least veracious, but possibly the most truthful. Taken to its extreme, the symbolic image is totally created or totally recreated. True objectivity of an iconic image is impossible,

since the moment a filmmaker makes a subjective choice to record something, he has diluted “authentic” documentary representation and moved away some degree away from the literal, objective end of the spectrum. Gardner’s elaborate staging and manipulation of his subjects place him near the symbolic end of the continuum. The prudent filmmaker finds a happy medium with indexicality, balancing a perceived truth and veracity to create his own version of reality.

Gardner’s seminal photographs – and the artistic license he exercised in manipulating them – are poignant emblems of the issue of truth and veracity. Historians such as von Ranke desire documentary photographs to be iconic images, which are literal translations of history “as it actually was.” However, the mediation of the photographer renders such literalism impossible, so most documentary photographs will be found closer to the indexical center of the continuum, balancing literalism and liberalism to varying degrees. Some photographs, by their dint of being staged or recreated, locate themselves on the symbolic end of the continuum. In the case of the Confederate sharpshooter, he only fell in one position at a certain location. “A Sharpshooter’s Last Sleep” is the only image with veracity; it has a high degree of *literal* indexicality that corresponds to the actual details of the man’s death. However, as a work of art and a conduit to the essential ‘truth’ that war is Hell, the *liberal* symbolism of “The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter” conveys that message more effectively through its recreation of a more aesthetically pleasing and dramatic composition. Did Gardner’s “exercise of artistic license . . . serve a defensible purpose”? Is this “creative treatment of actuality”? Does it matter if the dead soldier was artfully arranged to produce the second photo?

Historian Robert Brent Toplin defends filmmakers – and Gardner’s sacrifice of veracity – when he writes:

Critics of the movies sometimes become so finicky about details and ‘accuracy’ that they miss the filmmakers’ larger contribution. These critics fail to recognize that some degree of manipulation is inherent in filmmaking, and sometimes that exercise of artistic license can serve a useful and defensible purpose (Toplin 132).

All documentary filmmakers, but especially ones in the historical genre, should consider the theoretical and ethical implications of the Gardner case and find the acceptable “degree of manipulation” that resonates within themselves to guide their own individual creative treatments of actuality. As John Grierson espoused with his belief in the creative treatment of actuality, it can be virtuous to sacrifice veracity for the greater good of a perceived truth, but that position generates problems in the depiction of history in documentary film.

The filmmaker’s tenuous balance of truth and veracity in her creative treatment of actuality opposes the historian’s quest for perceived truth. In her effort to create dramatic narrative, the filmmaker often trades veracity for truth. Indeed, historian William Hughes notes that Grierson’s definition “should serve to put historians on guard concerning the difficulties inherent in using documentaries as visual records” (Hughes 57). Historians mistrust historical documentary because it loses facticity as it concedes veracity. Filmic truth is subjective, and so she constructs her movie in accordance to her own individual ideological worldview. Gardner, like Grierson, was a propagandist, so he employed visual and written diegesis to both chronicle war and support his side’s cause.



Filmmaker Alan Rosenthal emphasizes that a history program presents *a* particular view of history, not *the* definitive one (Rosenthal 299), which sums up the essential conflict between filmmaker and historian. Documentary film “shares with history a sober view of its own commitment to a dispassionate portrayal of the past” (Pingree 37), but this sober view is not necessarily self-aware. A documentary film is, to varying degrees, a creative treatment of actuality, so any *dispassionate* filmic portrayal or interpretation of the past is merely an illusion.

Film historian and theorist Roger Rosenstone recommends that we “be blunt and admit it: historical films trouble and disturb professional historians – have troubled and disturbed historians for a long time.” Rosenstone’s reasons for historians’ agitation include films’ inaccuracy, distortion, falsification, and romanticization of the past (Rosenstone 45-46). Historians, with their emphasis on facticity, are intolerant of any aesthetic that compromises veracity. This intolerance can result in their rejection of the document and subsequent oversight of any larger truth. Rosenthal notes from a practicing filmmaker’s perspective some of the production challenges that the historical documentary presents, including “interpretation, voice, and political viewpoints” (Rosenthal 298). The concerns expressed by Rosenstone and Rosenthal are subjective components of filmmaking that stem from historical filmmakers’ penchant for a liberal rendition of history. By taking creative liberties with their accounts of the past, like Gardner, they sacrifice veracity for truth. Gardner expressed a certain political viewpoint and truth of his own – the superiority of his side – when he rearranged the battlefield *mise*

*en scene* to his liking. In doing so, however, he located his work on the very precipice of the symbolic ledge of the literal-liberal continuum.

Some examples of protofilm, actualities, and newsreels demonstrate the varying degrees of truth and veracity in the depiction of history in early documentary forms.

## HISTORY IN EARLY DOCUMENTARY FILM

Early documentarians traversed the continuum of literal to liberal representations of history as they circumvented practical considerations of production and interjected personal statements of ideology. The newsreel producers began on the iconic side of the scale occupied by Muybridge, Marey, and Lumiere but quickly headed toward the symbolic end inhabited by Gardner “because truth, in their view, resided in the truthfulness of the *story* told by the film *as a whole*, and not in the photographic credentials of any one shot” (Pronay 100).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Eadward Muybridge and Jules-Etienne Marey took sequential photographs revealing previously unseen details of animal locomotion that were, at a most basic level, early movies. While there was obviously some subjectivity displayed on their parts by deciding what to photograph, their artifacts can be considered as objective as possible given their facticity. As a result, they reside on the literal end of the continuum.

Auguste Lumiere used his *actualities* to capture life as it was being lived in prosaic scenes. One of his most famous is *The Arrival of a Train at the Station* (1895). This one-minute film, consisting of one unbroken shot, is similar to the work of the early sequential photographers due to its facticity, so it also locates itself on the literal end of the scale. Lumiere’s seminal work spawned newsreels, which “may be said to have begun in France with Lumiere’s *Excursion of the French Photographic Society to Neuville* (1895)” (Ellis 7).

Ironically, however, the veracity of these pioneers' work led to the liberal representation of history by newsreel producers as "The creative predilection of the documentarians extended out of the detailed verisimilitude the photographic image offered; the illusion of motion on the cinematographic image permitting the recording of yet more of visible reality – more than was attainable in any other means of communication or form of art" (Ellis 45). The literal veracity of film enabled a liberal pursuit of cinematic truth as filmmakers began to see and therefore interpret the world in new ways.

The liberal manipulation of images reached an early pinnacle with the depiction of military conflict. Newsreels of the Spanish-American War (April-August 1898), in particular, were very popular in the early days of cinema, and they "settled the question, at least as far as the producers were concerned, whether film was a visual *recorder* of events, or whether it was a *reporter*, a teller of tales whose truthfulness depended entirely on the veracity of the bearer of the tale" (Pronay 99). Meanwhile, auteurs surrendered veracity, and the epistemologically questionable precedent set by Gardner became more and more sophisticated, as the unwieldiness and unreliability of early cameras compelled most filmmakers to give up the idea of the camera as a recording machine of life unawares (Pronay 99). The bulkiness of the cameras made them difficult to carry into the field. Their noisiness made them conspicuous to self-conscious subjects. They were also prone to jamming due to their imprecise gear mechanisms and the sticky nitrate-based film of the day. The production difficulties created by these primitive cameras led filmmakers to stage events themselves, so to speak, much as Gardner had done. They

began using shots taken in the safe periods before and after the military action; they substituted soldiers from one battle to stand in for another one; they presaged the Soviet montage theorists by using sequential editing to create stories; they mixed reenactments with “actual” footage; and they used models of people, war apparatus, and architecture. All this creative treatment of actuality eventually led to a 1900 article entitled “Sham War Cinematographic Films” (Pronay 99-100).

The cumbersome and unreliable nature of the motion-picture camera of this era made it impractical to carry out in the field to record actual military conflicts, but at least two production companies, however, did venture to Cuba. Edison (*U.S. Troops Landing at Daiquiri, Cuba* (1898), *Major General Shafter* (1898)) and Biograph (*Wreck of the “Vizcaya”* (1898), *Wounded Soldiers Embarking in Row Boats* (1898)) obtained some field footage of the war (Library of Congress), but for the most part, “the relative lack of dramatic footage incited hungry filmmakers to create their own documentary versions of the war, which proved to be more effective in rousing public sentiment than the staid footage of the homecoming parades” (Tobias 111). Vitagraph subscribed to the same liberal, less veracious philosophy of Gardner and Grierson to produce *Tearing Down the Spanish Flag* (1898), which Ephraim Katz noted as the first propaganda film. In it, an unseen hand lowers the Spanish flag from a flagpole and then raises an American one in its place. The flagpole happened to be standing on top of a Brooklyn tenement. Edison was so inspired by the effort that he duplicated it in *Raising Old Glory Over Morro Castle* (1899), adding an obviously fake drawing of a Spanish fort in the background. Edison also took Gardner’s work a step further and staged a Spanish execution of Cuban

Rebels in *Shooting Captured Insurgents* (1898). Albert Smith and J. Stuart Blackton created what is possibly the first special-effects film in *The Battle of Santiago Bay* (1898), when they recreated the U.S. Navy's defeat of the Spanish fleet in their bathtub, complete with cardboard warships, gunpowder, and cigarette smoke. (Tobias 111-113)

Despite – or perhaps because of – their residence near the very edge of the liberal side of the veracity and truth continuum, these early versions of journalism grew more popular with wartime reportage as “the subjects quickly became events of greater newsworthiness. Many newsreels featured heads of state and ceremonial occasions” (Ellis 7), and Theodore Roosevelt burst onto the international cinematic scene just in time to take full advantage of their potential for public and political image cultivation.

Roosevelt was America's first telegenic politician, as he clearly understood the power of the newsreel and the public's clamoring for this new form of “edutainment.” Library of Congress historian Veronica Gillespie writes:

It has been said that during the silent newsreel period no president was more photogenic than Theodore Roosevelt. He was unusually cooperative with motion picture photographers, often pausing in the midst of official ceremonies to face the camera, bow, wave, smile, gesture, or otherwise accommodate the cameraman (Gillespie).

Roosevelt first appeared on film in *Theodore Roosevelt Leaving the White House* (1898), which was shot shortly before he resigned his post as Assistant Secretary of the Navy to become a Lieutenant Colonel and leader of the Rough Riders in the Spanish-American War. In this film, he is clearly a man with a purpose – to lead a deadly band of warriors to a swift and vicious victory – and Roosevelt uses this opportunity in front of the camera to project that image to the public. In *President Roosevelt and the Rough*

*Riders* (1898), Roosevelt and his band gallop toward the camera before stopping to dismount and march off screen to his field headquarters. “These images of Roosevelt confirmed the impression that he was a man in command, certain of his duty, and fearless in the discharge of his orders.” Similarly, *Roosevelt’s Rough Riders* (1898) shows his detachment galloping toward the camera and off screen left, as if they were in a drill on parade grounds for a commandant. The images stir a romanticism for war and respect for the warrior chief himself, Roosevelt, even when viewed today (Tobias 93, 99).

One historian discusses the significance of the Roosevelt moving pictures when she writes that:

The collection is of indispensable value as primary source material to the historian, film scholar, educator, sociologist, political scientist, and indeed to anyone concerned with interpreting the human experience. These newsfilms reconstruct the past, ascertain the facts about people, places, and events, and authenticate customs, dress, manners, and artifacts of everyday living by supplying irrefutable historical evidence. Of far more than a transitory interest, the films reiterate that Theodore Roosevelt is ‘something more than a picture personality: he is a PICTURE MAN’ (Gillespie).

Gillespie’s claim of the irrefutability of the Roosevelt newsreels reflects an epistemological naïveté that ignores the early concern for veracity in the newsreel, which “was seldom considered for any believable and legitimate sense of history” (Landry 7). The extensive staging by producers such as Smith and Blackton, which sacrificed veracity for a version of their own propagandic truth, doubtless contributed to this dubious consideration. The French film critic Andre Bazin, “for one, is naïve to think that, because the camera records a real event, ‘it provides us with an objective and impartial image of that reality’ as ‘The *represented* is seen via a *representation* which,

necessarily, transforms it” (Bruzzi 12). Unavoidable mediation and resulting subjectivity by the filmmaker in the production process shifts her work from literal to liberal territory. The individual ideological positions influencing the filmmakers’ constructions of history become more obvious as the shift to the liberal interpretation of history becomes more pronounced.

I have discussed how the conflict between veracity and truth created problems in the depiction of history in early documentary film. The performative mode of documentary, however, offers an alternative to the ontological conflict. “Historical reality is under siege” (Nichols 2), and *The Great Delta Bear Affair* is storming the castle.



## THE GREAT DELTA BEAR AFFAIR

The Teddy bear is a beloved children's icon known throughout the world, but few know that its genesis was in the Mississippi Delta on a failed hunt by the twenty-sixth president of the United States. In the Fall of 1902, Theodore Roosevelt accepted an invitation by Mississippi Governor Andrew Longino to be his guest for a bear hunt. At the dawn of the 20th century, the black bear was plentiful in the Mississippi Delta, as opposed to the estimated population of seventy of the animals today. Holt Collier, an ex-slave whose exploits as a hunter could, without exaggeration, be favorably compared with those of Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, was enlisted to guide the President to a successful hunt. Collier served as a Confederate scout under Nathan Bedford Forrest and claimed to have killed over three thousand black bears during his lifetime.

Roosevelt, disturbed by the number of dignitaries increasing the size of his hunting party and thus decreasing his chances for success, insisted that he must see a bear to shoot on the first day. Collier guaranteed the President that opportunity and soon struck a trail on a large male bear. Once cornered in a slough by the dogs, the quarry fought ferociously, killing or wounding several of the pack. Collier, concerned for his dogs but not wanting to shoot the bear in deference to Roosevelt, waded into the water and struck the bear over the head, knocking it unconscious. Collier then tied the wounded animal to a tree and summoned the President to shoot it. Roosevelt refused, claiming that it would be unsportsmanlike and considered the hunt unsuccessful. A fellow member of the party

did not share Roosevelt's ethos, however, and stabbed the bear to death while it was restrained.

The national media caught wind of the story, and Clifford Berryman of the Washington Post drew the now famous cartoon depiction of the event. Berryman was a political cartoonist, so the refusal of Roosevelt to shoot a captive black bear was seen by some as a metaphor for his antipathy to the numerous lynchings still occurring in the South at that time.

Morris Michtom, a New York City merchant, saw the cartoon and asked the President's permission to call the stuffed bears his wife had made "Teddy bears." Roosevelt gave his permission and Michtom turned that idea into the Ideal Novelty and Toy Company. Thus the Teddy bear has been beloved by children and adults throughout the world for more than a century (Buchanon).

The Great Delta Bear Affair is the annual two-day festival in Rolling Fork, Mississippi, that celebrates Roosevelt's famous 1902 bear hunt in Sharkey County that led to the creation of the Teddy bear. It was first observed in 2002, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the hunt. Due perhaps in no small part, ironically, to Collier's prowess but primarily because of loss of habitat, the black bear was all but eradicated in Mississippi in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, the festival became an education and outreach project of the Bear Education and Restoration (BEaR) group of Mississippi, whose mission is to support the restoration and management of an ecologically viable and socially acceptable black bear population in Mississippi.

The festival resembles those of many other small towns, with its arts, crafts, and various amusements. It deviates from this norm, however, by adding an educational component to the fun. School children take field trips to the festival on Friday, during which time they attend educational talks on various elements of natural history, including Mississippi parks, wildlife, fishing, outdoor ethics, and the historic hunt. Saturday is the more festive day, with music, carnival rides, and vendors.

The organizers of the festival combine education and entertainment, but through what may simply be a condition of modern culture's emphasis on entertainment, history ultimately gets lost in a haze of corn dogs, chain-saw carvings, and Elvis impersonations. The festival essentially becomes a conflation of popular culture, popular history, and midway performances. The historic hunt of 1902 is the rallying point for today's festival, but it's safe to say that most citizens of today really don't care much about it except for its contemporaneous ability to entertain. As a result of this relative disinterest in history, most of the educational components, if not compulsory, were poorly attended. The exceptions were those which included a spectacle, such as the snake handler from the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks.

*The Great Delta Bear Affair (GDBA)* (2009) is my depiction of the historic Roosevelt hunt. It presents a more truthful depiction of history by embracing a postmodern aesthetic through the use of the performative mode of documentary. "Postmodern history weds theory and practice, the pulse of the past and ways of thinking about how that pulse means. It is always conscious of itself as a search for the past for present meaning" (Rosenstone 223). In postmodern history, the past is acknowledged as a reconstruction

according to the individual ideological filters of the historian. The self-awareness and reflexivity of postmodern history make it a good fit with the performative mode of documentary, which shares these traits in its illumination of the inevitable tradeoff between veracity and truth in cinema. “Performative documentary is a particularly apt choice in a time when master narratives, like master plans, are in disrepute. They invoke an epistemology of the moment, of memory and place, more than of history and epoch” (Nichols 105). Thus the mode enables *me*, in *my* depiction of history, to question reflexively *the* depiction of history in our culture.

Postmodern history and the performative mode arise as historians and filmmakers doubt the existence of absolute truths that correspond to literal representations of history, as in von Ranke’s injunction to write history ‘as it actually was.’ Film theorist Linda Williams “detects a loss of faith ‘in the ability of the camera to reflect objective truths of some fundamental social referent,’ a loss which she goes on to say ‘seems to point, nihilistically ... to the brute and cynical disregard of ultimate truths’” (Bruzzi 12). Doubtless this self-conscious search of the past for present meaning and loss of faith has given rise to the performative mode of documentary, which “marks a shift in emphasis from the referential as the dominant feature. This window-like quality of addressing the historical world around us yields to a variable mix of the expressive, poetic, and rhetorical aspects as new dominants” (Nichols 94). Performative documentary doesn’t attempt to hide the shift from literal to liberal in its representations. Rather, it underscores the fact that the enactment of documentary by both subject and filmmaker is an inevitable distancing mechanism from the most veracious end of the spectrum.

The historical emphasis on veracity in a traditional approach to history does film an injustice because it ignores film's capacity for creative interrogation of history and chooses not to acknowledge that facts are sometimes elusive and often not as objective as they might appear. It also neglects cinema's potential for art, whereby it stimulates salient thought on different levels through subtexts that have larger, perhaps more existential relations to the obvious and literal topic (Rosenstone 26). While *GDBA* is most particularly about Roosevelt's 1902 hunt, it also raises issues of race, class, culture, and conservation. Race and class are inextricably linked in the Mississippi Delta, with its long history of racial divide and massive concentration of wealth in the hands of a white landed gentry. The festival itself serves as a microcosm of popular culture with its food and fun. Today's scarcity of bears in Mississippi demonstrates a need for conservation given the fact that a century ago the President of the United States came there to hunt them. These cinematic subtexts enable a more symbolic treatment of a perceived truth.

Ideally, a historical film, Robert Rosenstone writes, will "Create a historical world complex enough so that it overflows with meaning; so that its meanings are always multiple; so that its meanings cannot be contained or easily expressed in words" (Rosenstone 238). *GDBA* accomplishes this multiplicity of meaning through its non-literal approach to history. A more prosaic style might concern itself with specific names, places, dates, and facts, much as a high-school history test requiring *the* right answers. My technique in *GDBA* is to raise questions, stimulate thought, and take a holistic look at the event itself. Rosenstone's lesson to the filmmaker, then, is to not go forth and create a video in the likeness of a journal article or a PowerPoint, which are

common *modus operandi* for documentary in general and the science and natural history genre in particular.

Conventional shows about history often employ impersonators and reenactments to depict historic events. German film theorist and cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer considered onscreen reenactments ineffective since everyone watching knew it wasn't really the past, but just an *ersatz* rendition of it. (Rosenthal 25) That is certainly true in the case of most reenactments, since the audience may not be consciously aware of them and so cannot reflect upon them with a critical eye. In the performative mode, however, the reenactments are self-conscious and ironic, and pointed out via various reflexive or referential techniques in order to stress a conscious response in the audience that yes, this is a reenactment. This condition is very different than the covert one described by Kracauer, since "performative documentary uses performance within a non-fiction context to draw attention to the impossibilities of authentic documentary representation" (Bruzzi 153). Performance in this mode points out the inherent *inauthenticity* of documentary.

My approach to *The Great Delta Bear Affair* arose from my belief that history is a construction, and so it follows that its cinematic representation is also subjective. My on-camera presence is a self-reflexive gesture that reveals my authorship of this historical account. *GDBA* employs a three-act structure, but unlike conventional Aristotelian narrative, does not embrace a paradigm of problem, complication, and resolution. Rather, the three acts of *GDBA* interrogate history as the artificial, the authentic, and the constructed.

In the first act, I introduce Theodore Roosevelt and Holt Collier. Case Hicks is an experienced Roosevelt living historian and a network administrator from Colorado. Ollie Morganfield has performed many times as Holt Collier and is a day laborer at the nearby Theodore Roosevelt National Wildlife Refuge Complex. I clearly identify Hicks and Collier as impersonators in a reflexive nod to the illusion of historical reenactments and the chimera of re-enactors. This self-awareness is a strength of the performative mode and assuages Kracauer's concern over re-enactors.

By juxtaposing spectacle with substance, this act attempts to replicate the dizzying array of distractions going on during concurrent attempts at education. The mode employed masquerades as observational, as I try to give the viewer a sense of Rolling Fork in this particular moment in time. Fairly quickly, however, my cinematic eye wanders to more appealing sights when according to the conventions of direct cinema it "should" be paying more attention to the more somber proceedings at hand. I show a good example of this phenomenon in the sequence with the national anthem, which shows how the saccharine flavors of the sideshow distractions are more delicious than the bland main stage attractions.

In the beginning of this sequence, my camera follows the color guard to the stage, and on the way, we glimpse an Elvis impersonator waiting in the wings! What in the world is *he* doing here, and in my movie? Elvis serves a couple of purposes. First, the link between him and the *ersatz* Roosevelt and Collier is apparent, in that they are both "fake." Second, and perhaps most importantly, as an ironic counterpoint, he is an example of the distractions going on concurrently with attempts at history. Elvis, the

very embodiment of wretched excess and hedonistic pleasure, overwhelms any desires of education and patriotism. Elvis is the profane to Teddy's sacred.

The profane subsumes the sacred not only in the experience of the random festival participant but also in that of the filmmaker. "In Durkheim's theory, the sacred represented the interests of the group, especially unity, which were embodied in sacred group symbols, or totems. The profane, on the other hand, involved mundane individual concerns" (Pals 99). The profane in this case – the carnival sideshows and gustatorial pleasures – are overwhelmed by the sacred – the national anthem, the flag, Theodore Roosevelt. There are many competing attractions for the audience's attention, and most of them are more interesting than some kid singing the song they play before football games or some guy in funny little glasses talking about a bear hunt from ancient history.

As the singer takes the microphone, we see him singing in a wide shot, as one might expect from a crowd POV. That vantage lasts for about eight bars, before my cinematic eye roams (through editing – not a single take) to hot-dog stands, kids jumping in moon walks, and the color guard placing the flag in front of the stage. I am more captivated by the glint in the stainless pot on the sergeant's head than the singer, or the song that is supposed to be the more traditional focal point. Finally, about three quarters of the way through "The Star Spangled Banner," I regain my focus and return to a shot of the singer, this time a medium one with "Holt Collier," beside him. After another few bars, however, I once again become "bored" with the vocalist and pan slightly so that just Mr. Morganfield and the Mississippi state flag are in frame during the big finish. With this shot I contemplate the irony of a man celebrated in the White House but marginalized in



the white Delta. The voices of the re-enactors in this act mimic the racial dichotomy. “Theodore Roosevelt” speaks incessantly while “Holt Collier” scarcely utters a word.

Another example illustrates the fact that the schoolchildren seem to experience the same distractions as I did. A highlight of the day is the children’s informal session with “President Roosevelt.” Mr. Hicks lectures in what I would call a grandfatherly presidential fashion, weaving his account of the hunt together with lessons on outdoor ethics, civics, racial tolerance, personal responsibility, and good citizenship. However, the children are easily distracted, and it’s unclear how much if any of the message they receive. One of the most captivating moments of the film, and the one which indeed closes the first act, is when “Roosevelt” wraps up his talk by thanking the children for coming to see him, effectively dismissing them. The children immediately turn their attention to my camera, doing all the things to be expected from children in a camera’s presence: they jump up and down, wave madly, yell, jostle each other for position, ask me what channel I work for, guess the answer without waiting for one from me, and just generally ham it up for a chance at a few seconds of video immortality. It’s all good fun, but it’s just that, until one little boy turns to his friend in one of those serendipitous moments that makes filmmaking such a joy, and says with great satisfaction, “We on History Channel!” The boy’s statement, viewed uncritically, is simply cute. In the context of the representation of history in documentary film, however, it takes on another meaning. By guessing he was on a local television news spot but finally concluding he was on the History Channel, he thus traces the evolution of the historical film from Lumiere to Eisner. The seminal output of Lumiere situates itself firmly as a literal

interpretation of history due to its veracity and high degree of facticity. Conventional documentary programs of the little boy's generation, however, have followed in the footsteps of Gardner to move to the liberal, more symbolic representation of history. They often use cinematic wizardry in their interpretations of history to emphasize dramatic arc over factual minutiae. *GDBA* also pursues a symbolic truth of mine, but it does so by reflexively revealing the authorship involved in my rendering of the historic hunt.

In the first act I employ a masquerade of the observational mode, but I manipulate time to give the impression that Elvis is singing while Mr. Hicks gives his lesson to the children, which was not, in fact, the case. Writing about Albert Maysles' *Salesman* (1968), Stella Bruzzi notes the link between the Maysles and Kuleshov: "What matters above all else is that a sequence of shots *appears* to be logical, not necessarily that it *is*; the issue is whether or not this is appropriate to a piece of direct cinema, to which the answer has to be no" (Bruzzi 70-71). From a critical standpoint, I see no problem with my similar conceits in *GDBA* since the third act self-consciously demonstrates this is not direct cinema. Therefore, I sacrifice veracity in service of a broader truth, which is that history gets lost somewhere between the fried pickles and the Porta Potty.

I have made the case for the first act of *GDBA* that history is artificial, both as a representation at the festival and in my film. The second act is history as "authentic" but it is *my interpretation* of an ahistorical Delta. Literary theorist Roland Barthes considered nature as myth – "an accepted story of the way the world is," but he also saw a need to consider it as historic in order to connect it to cultural and social ideals

(Evernden 23). Consistent with this paradox, I apply extensive cinematic technique to construct a mythic nature that stands in sharp contradistinction to the cultural place of the festival. This act, following the first act's clash of the sacred and profane, takes us away from the madness of the festival to the peace of the land. We hear no voices in this act except for those of nature, as heard from the trees, animals, wind, and water. We hear choirs of birds, crickets, frogs, and cicadas serenading us with their dulcet tones instead of a cacophony of humans serving up flaccid Beatles covers. We get a sense of place of "This delta, he thought. This Delta. *This land which man has deswamped and denuded and derivered in two generations....* No wonder the ruined woods I used to know don't cry for retribution! He thought: The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge" (Faulkner 364). The Delta that McCaslin remembers before its spoilage is the same one I construct to serve as an elegy for what was, but is now largely absent from the Mississippi Delta. The "reality" of the situation is that after the great flood of 1927 farmers cleared most of its majestic bottomland hardwood forests for agriculture. I use mostly anachronistic spaces, however, to move toward the symbolic side of the continuum and create a truth of a Delta largely untouched by man as it was before Roosevelt hunted there. Certainly my judicious selection of mostly anachronistic spaces is not as egregious as Gardner's blatant fabrication of the *mise en scene* in his photographs, but it is a subjective manipulation of reality nonetheless. Mediation by the filmmaker necessarily moves the filmmaker away from a literal treatment, and his application of technique moves him nearer to the symbolic side of the scale. I frame shots of the Little Sunflower River in a way that doesn't show the trash littering it. I use

digital sound libraries of frogs, crickets, and birds in lieu of the field sound that included loud mufflers and screeching tires. By emphasizing the illusion of an ahistorical Delta, I sacrifice veracity, to some degree, to dramatize my perceived truth of the contrast between the cultural artificiality of the festival and the natural “authenticity” of the land.

History in the first act of *GDBA* is as a symbolic construction of the artificial, and the second act is history as a symbolic creation of the authentic. Both acts emphasize truth over veracity, but this philosophy is not evident until the third act of the film. I also locate this act on the symbolic side, but in doing so, I signal its surrender of literal facticity in a couple of ways. I use images of the re-enactors and myself performing our respective roles to provide a self-reflexive view of the spaces in between truth and veracity. I also employ a highly stylized recreation of the historic hunt. The third act demonstrates how “the conventional documentary disintegrates through the course of the film and the performative one takes over” (Bruzzi 155). It fully embraces the performative mode hinted at in the earlier acts, and obliterates rather than skirts the illusion of an absolute history. By accentuating the re-enactors’ performances and injecting self-reflexivity, I point out that this movie is a construction of *a* greater truth of *mine*, which is that the Roosevelt hunt has been mythologized into an economic development tool that largely ignores the ecological state of the black bear and socioeconomic status of the black man in Mississippi.

Near the beginning of the third act of *GDBA*, in a poignant reveal, we return to the festival, where Mr. Hicks steps out of character during a presidential speech and relates how proud he is that Muddy Waters’ nephew, Ollie Morganfield, is “our Holt Collier.”

The look on Mr. Morganfield's face is clearly one of pride and quiet dignity, and we see him in a different light after this revelation. He performs three roles in *GDBA*. First, he is Ollie Morganfield, the re-enactor. Next, he plays Holt Collier, the fabled hunter and guide. Finally, he is the nephew of Muddy Waters. By playing these three parts, he represents a microcosm of the conflation of history, culture, race and class at the Great Delta Bear Affair. The film's explicit identification of his manifold roles "uses performance within a non-fiction context to draw attention to the impossibilities of authentic documentary representation" (Bruzzi 153).

The movie is not self-reflexive to this point, so I wanted to signpost its arrival in order to make it appear more intentional and less haphazard. I accomplished this goal by showing a series of production stills. In them I'm shown filming various aspects of the festival, including the re-enactors, and in the final image I have my arm around "Holt Collier" in a clearly posed photo. There are two categories of performative documentary: those featuring performative subjects and those featuring the self-reflexive intrusion of a performative filmmaker (Bruzzi 155). The first category demonstrates that acting moves documentary away from the veracity of the literal side of the continuum toward the symbolic side. The second points out how the filmmaker's application of technique has the same effect. Through the second act, *GDBA* falls only into the first category. In the third act, it ventures into the second.

In the next scene I go to the field with the President and his guide, but this time, Ollie Morganfield, the Holt Collier re-enactor, asks me how the shot on the bridge turned out. I then direct the actors to "look serious" and show all the footage from me setting up the

shot. Finally, the scene ends with my phone alarm going off and me saying “That means it’s time to go, Case.” Obviously the revelation of this “behind the scenes” filmmaker intervention is not typical documentary fare. It highlights the production process behind my version of a historical document and the illusion of literal representation in documentary. If Plato’s prisoners could see this scene, they might have a whole new perspective on their situation.

The next sequence of the movie is a highly stylized rendition of the historic hunt. In it I depict “Roosevelt” and “Collier” in the field using “silent” black-and-white footage over an antiquated projector sound. This obvious application of cinematic technique points out my liberal representation of the hunt, and also dovetails with the hunt’s representation in a local tourist attraction and the famous Berryman cartoon. After leaving the field, I show an image of a hokey tourist attraction that is basically an illustration of the climax of the historic hunt on a life-size wooden sign. Tourists are supposed to put their heads in the cutouts on the sign to superimpose their faces on the illustrated bodies. The sign shows Roosevelt and two (black) guides, and not surprisingly given our location, it is the two guides that have their faces omitted. When I cut from this sign to my own stylized version of the Berryman cartoon, I illuminate the subjectivity apparent in the different representations of that iconic scene. Veracity, unlike Rosa Parks, takes a back seat to my perceived truth of racial marginalization.

## CONCLUSION

The primary goal of *GDBA* is to tell *my* story of Teddy Roosevelt's famous Mississippi bear hunt. I achieved this objective to some degree, but not necessarily by the standard of a conventional historical documentary. Due to my emphasis on truth instead of veracity, I don't spoon-feed the viewer many "pub facts" to take away. Instead, I liberally construct my perceived truth of the mythologization of the hunt as a regional economic development tool that largely ignores the marginalization of both the black bear and black man in the Mississippi Delta. As a result of the high degree of interpretation required to receive my symbolic message, however, I'm doubtful it gets across to the average viewer. I consider the film a storytelling success as an academic exercise, but if a filmmaker wants to be didactic it's probably better to take a prosaic approach to a more literal representation of history.

A secondary goal of *GDBA* is to illuminate the relative truths subjectively represented in historical documentary. I achieved this goal by deftly applying the performative mode to illuminate the links between "Theodore Roosevelt," "Holt Collier," the "documentary filmmaker," and our respective interpretations of history, but again I'm doubtful of its reception by an uncritical audience.

As a work of art demonstrating my shrewd application of theory to craft, I consider the film a clear success. As a movie capable of educating as well as entertaining a general audience, I deem it an abstruse failure. Perhaps that's because I didn't balance

truth and veracity as well as I should have. As Nigel Tufnel philosophized in Rob Reiner's *Spinal Tap* (1984), "There's a fine line between clever and stupid."



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