



**Sherry B.
Ortner**

Screening Social Justice

**Brave New
Films and
Documentary
Activism**

Screening Social Justice

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Screening Social Justice Brave New Films and Documentary Activism

Sherry B.
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To Tim and Gwen
With love as always

In memory of my dear cousin
Richard Ortner

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Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.

REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVIST ANTONIO GRAMSCI

Life's a bitch. You've got to go out and kick ass.

POET MAYA ANGELOU

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Preface

This study is based on ten months of fieldwork at an independent film production company called Brave New Films, which makes critical films designed to get people politically activated. I conducted fieldwork at the company's office/production site, and at live screenings of their films, between May 2019 and March 2020. As they were making a film about voter suppression during my fieldwork, with implications for (among many other things) the upcoming presidential election, I planned to continue the fieldwork through the election in November 2020. But the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown went into effect in March, the work of the company was disrupted as people shifted to working at home, and I was unable to continue the fieldwork at the office. At the same time, and for the same reasons, live screenings were suspended, so that part of the work was truncated as well. And, like everyone else, I had no idea when all this would return to "normal." So I decided to write this short book based on my existing data.

The writing of the first draft took place between March 2020 and February 2021, a period that covered the final year of the increasingly out-of-control Trump presidency; the ongoing, and also apparently out-of-control, COVID pandemic; and the shocking events following the election, including the violent storming of the Capitol by right-wing extremists on January 6, 2021. The work on the book revisions took place between February and September 2021. Trump was out of office, but the far right continued

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to threaten in many arenas. Among other things they militantly resisted vaccinations, masking, and indeed any and all rational public health measures, thus prolonging the pandemic. People continued to get very sick, and to die, in large numbers, but even for those who managed to stay healthy, life at every level—home, work, school, friendship, kinship—continued to be massively disrupted. Meanwhile enormous fires raged out of control in my home state of California, and extreme weather conditions battered other parts of the country.

It all has felt, and continues to feel, like we are looking at the front edge of the apocalypse, and I have allowed some comments on this to intrude into the text. Beyond the comments, the whole mood of the text is colored by these events, and it has been an effort to continue to believe that we can save the present world, no less make a better one. Thus I have to remind myself at every turn of the epigraphs for this book, Antonio Gramsci's maxim "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will," and Maya Angelou's pithy comment "Life's a bitch. You've got to go out and kick ass."

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PREFACE

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Acknowledgments

I am incredibly grateful to all those who facilitated this project. For valuable background conversations and/or emails in the early stages, I thank Johanna Blakley, Violaine Roussel, William Roy, and Edward Walker.

Huge thanks to Barbara Boyle, who made the initial contact with Robert Greenwald for me and got me in the door.

Deepest thanks to Robert Greenwald, who not only let me in the door at Brave New Films but also gave me several key interviews, included me in several meetings, and allowed me to eavesdrop on conversations during production. He also informed the staff that I had his support for the project, which opened the rest of the doors at the company.

Thanks to Jill Ettinger for very kindly coordinating my schedule of meetings with staff people, and thanks to all those staffers for their thoughtful interviews: Laurie Ashbourne, Casey Cooper Johnson, Danielle Cralle, Jill Ettinger, Justin Harrison, Kimber Kissel, Justin Mickens, Jim Miller, Anne Phillips, Chris Rogers, Omar Samad, Tahil Sharma, and Devin Smith. Special thanks to Anne Phillips, Laurie Ashbourne, and Jim Miller, who kindly made themselves available for follow-up interviews.

Many thanks to the fellows and interns who gamely submitted to individual and/or group interviews: Francisco Aviles Pino Jr., Serena Francisco, Tatyana Garnett, Maya Hernandez, Noely Mendoza, Naomi Miyamoto, and Josué Muñoz.

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Many, indeed most, of the people I interviewed at Brave New Films, whether regular staff, fellows, or interns, have in one way or another moved on or up. I still think about them all, wonder what they're doing, and hope things are going well for them.

And so we move on to the writing of this book, and all the help and support from friends and colleagues that went into it.

For early feedback, I thank my terrific colleagues in Culture/Power/Social Change (CPSC), our interest group in the Department of Anthropology at UCLA. I presented a very early and still very fuzzy version of the introduction and received—as always—super-sharp comments from the group. I scribbled down a few names at the time—Hannah Appel, Lieba Faire, Akhil Gupta, Gail Kligman, Peter Kurie, Purnima Mankekar, and Alex Thomson—but I know there were others as well, and I'm sorry about those names that are missing. A big collective thanks to the group that has been my intellectual lifeline since I came to UCLA.

For all their extremely smart, honest, and insightful feedback on the full manuscript, I thank my friends and colleagues Philippe Bourgois, John Caldwell, Robert Greenwald, Laurie Kain Hart, Gail Kligman, Peter Kurie, Abigail Stewart, and Timothy Taylor, and two very knowledgeable anonymous readers for Duke University Press. I am, as always, especially grateful to Tim Taylor, as he was both my first and last reader, and made a huge difference at both ends.

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For technical support, I thank Maya Gutierrez, who did an excellent job of transcribing interviews and film transcripts.

And finally, thanks yet again to Tim Taylor, for sharing with me *la belle vie* of good food, wine, conversation, movies, gardens, friends, and love.

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Introduction

There is a very long history of connection between “powerful texts” and radical social movements. By “powerful texts” I mean texts, whether print or visual, that not only circulate widely but also have the capacity to inspire us to imagine better worlds and to draw together social groups, communities, and networks of people to try to bring about change. They have this capacity because they claim to represent “truth” in some form, and because their truthfulness is widely accepted.

Studies of the role of the Bible in the English Revolution of the seventeenth century (Hill 1972), or the role of newspapers in the American and French Revolutions of the eighteenth (B. Anderson 1983; Habermas [1962] 1991; Eley 1992), emphasize the ways these texts were read and discussed in collective contexts, whether religious congregations or urban coffeehouses, and opened up vistas of alternative ways of organizing social life and political authority. The Bible and newspapers may appear to be very different things, claiming very different kinds of “truth.” But they had in common the capacity to engage people at both the level of intense social intercourse and the level of powerful ideas and meanings. As a result, people came to see themselves as parts of new collectivities, to feel that the world could be changed for the better, and—under the right circumstances—to act on those feelings.

Closer to the present, and closer to the subject of this book, we may consider Liberation Theology and the development of “Base Ecclesial Communities” (BECs) in Latin America. The analogy is very close to the English example (see Hill 1993), involving the reading and (re)interpretation of the

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Bible in small local groups and congregations, with an explicit commitment to favoring the poor and challenging the structures of power (Gutiérrez 1973). Drawing parallels between their own lives and biblical stories, and rereading the Bible in terms of its more radical implications, people in these groups came to see themselves as politically empowered actors. In the Brazilian case, for example, the BECs played an important role during the period of extreme military repression in the 1960s and '70s. Among other things, they "offered a proven consciousness-raising methodology and a participatory form of education to train local informed citizens, many of whom later became grassroots activists" (Vásquez 1998, 52).

The arguments in all of these cases are, needless to say, vastly more complex, but the general point is that what I am calling powerful texts have historically played a significant role in the formation of radical and even revolutionary politics. Accepted as capturing some important form of truth (transcendental truth in the case of the Bible; objective and pragmatically useful truth in the case of newspapers), they have served as inspirations and catalysts for the formation of intensely engaged social groups and networks. People not only read them; they talked about them, argued about them, and sometimes used them as a basis of radical action.

The present book is an ethnographic study of Brave New Films (BNF), a nonprofit company that makes documentaries intended to inspire and provoke progressive political activism. They use their films as would-be "powerful texts" that embody a certain form of truth-telling, and that ideally serve as inspiration and organizing tools for the pursuit of social justice. Brave New Films also relies heavily on a system of in-person screenings, in which people can discuss and debate the issues of the films and can ideally develop courses of action to bring about progressive social change. Although the historical and cultural contexts are very different, and although we are looking at film rather than print media, it is not much of a stretch to say that BNF seeks to put in motion the same kind of dynamic just sketched for those earlier social movements.

I will look at Brave New Films partly through their films, and partly through their on-the-ground production, distribution, and organizing activities. I situate the company within the spectrum of alternative and radical media, especially but not exclusively within the terrain of documentary film, which has a long history of activist filmmaking. The overall argument of the book is framed in terms of the production of what media

scholars Paula Rabinowitz (1994) and Angela Aguayo (2019) have called “political agency.” I will explain this idea more fully below, and throughout the book, but the central point is to ask how different aspects of Brave New Films’ work seek to shape and develop people’s capacity and inclination to act in the public sphere on behalf of issues of social justice.

I begin from the assumption, associated particularly with the work of Paulo Freire ([1970] 2000, 2004), that people on the outside or underside of power are unlikely to do this spontaneously. The reasons vary by social location: the impoverished peasants and urban slum dwellers whom Freire worked with saw themselves weak and powerless; more privileged groups may think that many problematic social issues do not apply to them; and both groups are likely to think the system is very hard to change anyway. Thus a sense of political agency, including the idea that the system is in fact changeable, must be cultivated, and this cultivation process is the lens through which I will view the work of Brave New Films.

I will elaborate more on these themes below, but before I get to that I must confront the relationship between this book and real-world events during its making.

Engaged Anthropology and the Real World

We live in frightening times. The research for this book was conducted mostly in 2019, during the penultimate year of the presidency of Donald Trump, whom it is hard not to see as at least a protofascist. Among other things, throughout his presidency he had been actively seeking to subvert the democratic process and the rule of law and to encourage the rise of white supremacist and other movements of hatred and violence. The drafting of this book was mostly done in 2020, when Trump was increasingly unhinged and the COVID-19 pandemic was raging, in large part because of Trump’s (non)decisions and (in)actions.

More frightening still is the realization that Trump as an individual is only the tip of an iceberg. Right-wing extremism has been growing at both the top of the class structure—among individual billionaires and among the leaders of the Republican Party—and throughout the rest of the system—in the form of (among other things) unruly gangs of white thugs, showing up at demonstrations armed and in battle gear, and

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displaying hateful insignia like swastikas and Confederate flags. One public joining of those two social levels was the right-wing storming of the US Capitol in January 2021, which was egged on by Trump and a significant number of Republican legislators and left several people dead.

In this same period, however, we have also seen the emergence of extraordinary mass resistance movements, including—to name just a few prominent examples—*#BlackLivesMatter* and all the other groups fighting against white supremacy and racial violence; Occupy Wall Street and all the other groups fighting against economic injustice and inequality; and an updated/upgraded feminist movement, starting with the massive Women’s March in January 2017, and including its most recent avatar, *#MeToo*, fighting against patriarchal violence and gender inequality.

In relation to all of this and to ongoing violent racist policing, anthropology as a discipline has increasingly taken the “engaged turn” (Hale 2008; Low and Merry 2010; Abu-Lughod 2019; Ortner 2019), the attempt to integrate scholarship and a commitment to social justice. This involves both the critical study of the workings of power, inequality, and violence—what I elsewhere called “dark anthropology” (Ortner 2016)—and the study of various forms of opposition to power, from “everyday forms of resistance” (Scott 1985) to organized social movements (Juris 2008; Graeber 2009; Appel 2014; Shah 2019; and see chapter 3). Engaged anthropologists have challenged the idea that rigorous scholarship and a commitment to social justice are mutually exclusive, and they are increasingly using their scholarly work to not only describe the world but also critique it and perhaps help to change it for the better.

I have done work on both sides, as it were, of the engaged turn. With respect to issues of power and domination, I have done extensive work on patriarchal power, most recently as it intersects with capitalism (2014) and racism (2020). With respect to oppositional activism, I have written on “resistance” from a theoretical point of view (1995, 2006), as well as documenting Sherpa strikes and other forms of resistance throughout the history of Himalayan mountaineering (1999). Most recently, in counterpoint to the discussion of “dark anthropology,” I looked briefly at some of the newer work by anthropologists on social movements, which I will discuss more fully in chapter 3.¹

In the present work I look at oppositional politics from another angle, namely, from the point of view of an organization that is dedicated to

generating political activism, to making it happen. As any political organizer knows, mobilizing people to act against power is no easy thing; it requires a good deal of creativity and multiple strategies. Brave New Films tries to do this with documentary film, and the point of this book is to understand how they (try to) do it.

My approach throughout is thus classically ethnographic, in the sense of trying to understand BNF's work from their internal point of view, rather than from some external critical perspective. While one could certainly develop a variety of critiques—of the company founder and president, Robert Greenwald; of the films; of the whole BNF operation—that would be part of a different kind of project. The present book extends my interest in forms of resistance in general, and the use of film and media for this purpose in particular.

Film and Social Activism: A Brief History

There is an ongoing debate, dating at least to the Cold War in the 1950s, over whether it is a good idea for filmmakers to incorporate their own political perspectives in their films. On the whole, the culture of filmmaking in the United States, even including a significant segment of alternative or independent filmmaking, has leaned strongly against it. The idea is that the American public does not like to be told what to think. The ideal film, in this view, presents the audience with a range of information and positions and allows viewers to come to their own conclusions. Anything that is “too political,” that is slanted too far in one direction, will be described as having too much “message” or “agenda” and risks being labeled “propaganda” (Ortner 2013a). This view is institutionalized in an endlessly inventive range of wisecracks: Movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn famously said, “If I wanted to send a message, I’d call Western Union.”² Questioned about the political implications of his film *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), Tommy Lee Jones said, “If I wanted to make a political statement, I’d run for Congress.”³ Film scholar Bill Nichols said about political documentary in general, “If you want to influence legislation, hire a lobbyist” (2016a, 225).⁴ Filmmaker Michael Moore said, “If I wanted to hear a sermon, I’d go to church” (in Nick Fraser 2019, 222). And so on.

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I mention all this as contrastive background to the fact that Brave New Films is, by almost any measure, “very political.” Further, by “political” in this book I will always mean politics that are basically “on the left” unless otherwise specified. There is also a smaller but not insignificant body of right-wing documentary filmmaking—both historically, as in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), and currently, as in Dinesh D’Souza’s *Obama’s America* (2016). But right-wing film and media are beyond the scope of the present book, except insofar as they are targets of Brave New Films’ critiques.

There are certain limits on the degree to which, and the ways in which, Brave New Films can be “very political.” In particular, because of their nonprofit status (more on that in a moment), they cannot endorse any candidate in the sphere of electoral politics. Other than that, they manage to find ways to express strong political opinions and commitments without violating that status. For example, as Jim Miller, who was executive director at the time of the research, explained, there are different accounts in the budget with different tax statuses, C3 and C4. He clarified further: “C3 is tax deductible, C4 is not tax deductible. On the C4, you can be more overtly political. You can do more overt advocacy. You still can’t say, vote for or against somebody, but the line is different. The line is kind of gray, so every piece of work that we do, we run by the lawyers, to make sure that we are doing it correctly” (interview, June 24, 2019). In other words, by working the options, Brave New Films is able to mount strong and explicit critiques of virtually any aspect of injustice when and how they see fit.

In doing this work, they join a long lineage of “committed filmmaking” (Waugh 1984) that began in the 1920s and is represented almost entirely by documentaries. This is both an exciting story in itself and a necessary backdrop to understanding where they are coming from. I thus offer here a very brief history of activist filmmaking over the course of the twentieth century, drawing primarily on work in cinema and media studies. Most of the sources for this part of the history were compiled in the 1980s and ’90s, responding to a surge in documentary filmmaking in the 1960s and ’70s (Rosenthal 1980; Waugh 1984; Steven 1985; Rabinowitz 1994; Winston 1995).

The story starts in the 1920s, with filmmakers Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein in the Soviet Union, and Joris Ivens in Europe, all of whom were inspired by early communist dreams of the future. Ivens in particular made films intentionally meant to activate audiences: “After informing

and moving audiences, [a film] should agitate—mobilize them to be active in connection with the problems shown in the film” (quoted in Nick Fraser 2019, 96). Ivens’s most famous film, *The Spanish Earth* (1937), about the Spanish Civil War, is said to have “raised enough funds to send eighteen ambulances to the Spanish front” (Waugh 1984, xxii). In the United Kingdom, John Grierson launched what came to be called a Griersonian “school” of filmmaking, focusing, among other things, on the physical labor of men within the disappearing traditional occupations and growing industrialization of capitalism.⁵ On the American side, filmmakers of that era were “document[ing] as forcibly as possible the social struggles of the thirties: foreclosures, evictions, strikes” (e.g., *Native Land* [Hurwitz and Strand, 1937–41]; see Rosenthal 1980, 9–10).

The radical filmmaking of the 1920s and ’30s was cut off by World War II, as both Hollywood and the documentarians were recruited to make films supporting the war effort and the nation (Combs and Combs 1994). It was further cut off by the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his witch hunt for communists, both real and imagined. Its resurgence begins in the late 1960s, with (among other things) the founding of the filmmaking collective Newsreel, which made films specifically “to organize and mobilize working class and Third World peoples,” to serve as “direct organizing tools” (Nichols 1978, 10; [1972] 2016; Renov 2004).

The 1960s and ’70s saw an enormous growth and diversification in documentary filmmaking, a good part of it “political” in the sense discussed here. Radical filmmaking flourished in Latin America, Africa, and other parts of the global South, contributing both important films and new theoretical perspectives. These converged in what Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino called “a Third Cinema” (1976), described as “independent in production, militant in politics, and experimental in language” (Shohat and Stam 1994, 261). Solanas and Getino made one of the major films to come out of that era, *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), about neocolonialism and resistance in Argentina. Others included *Memories of Underdevelopment* (Gutiérrez Alea 1968) from Cuba, *The Battle of Chile* (Guzmán 1975) from Chile, and in Africa, the work of Ousmane Sembène of Senegal (e.g., the feature film *Xala* [1974], discussed in Gabriel 1985).

In the United States, too, filmmakers were responding to the political turbulence of the times: the Black urban uprisings of the 1960s, the

Vietnam War, the emergence of the New Left and the women's movement, and more. At one level there is a continuity of subject matter; the primary target is generally the state, whether the colonial state in the European context (e.g., Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, 1966), or the imperial state (e.g., Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig*, 1968) in the American context.⁶ There is also a continuity with films about working-class/labor issues (e.g., Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, 1976). At the same time there is a blurring—thanks to the women's movement—between the personal and the political, and we see the strong emergence of documentary that seeks to show what goes on behind closed doors, whether institutional (e.g., Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies*, 1967) or familial (e.g., Craig Gilbert's *An American Family*, 1973).

The 1980s and '90s saw the beginnings of the independent film movement, including both narrative and documentary film. It was during those decades that the effects of neoliberal economic policies and corporate globalization were beginning to make themselves felt. Plants were closing, jobs were drying up, and the economy began a process of polarization in which the 1 percent got richer, the poor got poorer, and the middle class began to disintegrate. In this context, along with the proliferation of high-quality work on race (e.g., Spike Lee's *Four Little Girls*, 1997) and gender/sexuality (e.g., Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning*, 1990), we see the beginnings of the current stage of political documentary filmmaking, with a stronger focus on the dynamics of macro power—capitalism, corporatism, militarism, political subversion, and so forth. Key films in that genre in that late twentieth-century period included Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989), in which Moore revisits his hometown of Flint, Michigan, where the closing of a General Motors plant had thrown thousands of people out of work; Barbara Trent's *Panama Deception* (1992), which exposes the real material and political reasons behind George H. W. Bush's invasion of Panama; and Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick's *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (1993), which explores issues of bias and ideology in the press.

More recent work on activist documentary will appear in later chapters, including work by scholars in the ongoing "Visible Evidence" series on documentary film (starting with Gaines and Renov 1999), and a new wave of studies incorporating the impact of the internet on documentary activism (Marcus 2016; Aguayo 2019; Borum Chattoo 2020; Fallon 2019).

For now, I continue the overview of documentary history into the twenty-first century, with an emphasis on the conditions surrounding the founding of Brave New Films.

The Golden Age of Documentary

The period since the turn of the twenty-first century has been called “the golden age of documentary” (Kellner 2010, 30; McEnteer 2006, xiv). For one thing, it appears that more documentaries have been made in these decades than ever before. Although this is difficult to quantify, documentary scholar Caty Borum Chattoo provides some fairly telling numbers for at least the early part of this period: “Between 1996 and 2002, about 15 documentaries were released in US theaters each year, a number that tripled in 2003, reaching 50 [per year] in 2004” (2020, 49). In addition, documentaries began to receive much greater popular reception, as measured by both box office takes and awards. James McEnteer notes that “eight of the 10 top-grossing documentaries of all time were released” in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and most of those were “political” in one sense or another (2006, xii). These included Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), about gun violence, which also won an Academy Award, and Davis Guggenheim’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), about global warming, which won an Academy Award and also garnered a Nobel Peace Prize for its star, Al Gore. The top film in this group was Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), about Bush’s invasion of Iraq, which won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival—that is, the top prize in all categories, not simply among documentaries. *Fahrenheit 9/11* earned \$120 million in domestic gross, still a record for a documentary film.

It is relevant to note here that documentary film has always been the least popular form of cinema. It has always garnered very small audiences, as many people find it boring and didactic, or partisan and propagandistic. Many (non)viewers are not simply uninterested but actively turned off by the genre. The explosion of documentary production and reception in this period is thus all the more remarkable.

There is general agreement that the conditions that fostered this development were related not only to the immediate political situation but also to the longer-term deterioration of the mediascape in the United States—

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the shrinkage of the print media, the rise of Fox News and other right-wing media, and the overall entertainment-ization of television news.⁷ As film scholar Douglas Kellner put it, “The Golden Age of Documentary was fueled in part by the bankruptcy of corporate news and information in the United States, in which a small number of corporations controlled the major television networks, as well as important newspapers and Internet sites” (Kellner 2010, 53). As documentary filmmaker Morgan Spurlock said, “The news we get from the TV, magazines, and newspapers is all watered down. Especially TV. . . . They’re pulling a curtain down in front of our eyes and we’re starved for information” (quoted in Mackey-Kallis 2008, 160).

The sheer absence of reliable information is part of the problem; another is the lack of a critical perspective on what is going on. Kellner’s point is not simply that the media are not telling us enough, but also that they fail to take a critical, or even skeptical, perspective, and that they accept the official stories handed out by the administration or others in powerful positions. Writing about the Bush-Cheney era (2000–2008), he says, “The magnitude of social problems generated by the Bush-Cheney administration propelled documentary filmmakers to fill the gap provided by the conformity and complicity of corporate news media” (2010, 53). Or, as media scholar James McEnteer put it, “As mass media fail—now more than ever—to fulfill their watchdog role over public officials and policies, the importance of documentaries committed to telling the truth increases” (2006, 61).

At the same time, documentary film itself was evolving. As just sketched, it has a long history of committed/critical/activist filmmaking. Yet that was only one piece of the documentary spectrum, which included the traditional ethnographic film, as well as a kind of glossy/descriptive perspective on a wide range of other “general-interest” subjects (e.g., nature, travel). The explicitly critical/political film was in a minority, especially after World War II and during the McCarthy era, when such work was labeled unpatriotic. The majority position (with exceptions, of course) was neutrality: to avoid taking explicit, partisan positions on whatever the subject might be.

But this began to break down in the 1960s and ’70s, in relation to the Vietnam War and the emergence of identity-based politics—the women’s movement, the Black Power movement, and the gay rights movement. As has been widely noted and discussed, American culture and politics have

become increasingly polarized around those issues, and this polarization soon made itself felt in electoral politics and the mediascape. The ultra-conservative Fox News soon emerged in this context. But an increasing number of documentary filmmakers also began to come out of the closet, as it were, and to take explicitly critical partisan positions on many issues. As one documentary filmmaker said, “The pose in the documentary world used to be, we’re filmmakers and we’re not out to change the political landscape. But Michael Moore unmasked us. We *are* out to change the political landscape” (Michael Paradies Shoob, quoted in Mackey-Kallis 2008, 159). And thus, as Douglas Kellner put it, “documentary filmmakers became the muckrakers of the time, exposing multiple injustices and social problems and speaking truth to power” (2010, 59).⁸

All of this began to come to a head beginning in the year 2000. In the closing decades of the twentieth century there was a great deal of anxiety about the millennial instant, that actual point of turnover from the twentieth to the twenty-first century. There were wild theories about how, at midnight, clocks and elevators would stop, computers would crash, planes would fall from the sky, and so forth. None of this came true, of course, and the whole idea of the turn of the millennium as an apocalyptic moment quickly faded away. Yet perhaps an argument can be made that the year 2000 was in fact an apocalyptic year in a different and less mystical sense, as the launching point of a disastrous sequence of political events: the controversial (to say the least) presidential election of 2000, the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, and George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003. With respect to Iraq, in turn, the invasion, the occupation, and the continuing military conflict became, for several observers, the twenty-first-century version of the Vietnam War (McEnteer 2006, xvii; Gaines 2015, 415).

Like the Vietnam War, the Iraq War triggered massive on-the-ground protest, including worldwide demonstrations in 2003. It is estimated that there were almost three thousand protests across the globe, with a total turnout of 36 million people.⁹ Specifically with respect to the case at hand, the invasion triggered an enormous response among artists in general (Roussel and Lechaux 2010) and filmmakers in particular. In *Cinema Wars* (2010), Douglas Kellner devotes an entire chapter to films about the Iraq War, including more than thirty documentaries and another nine pages on Hollywood fiction films. Not all of the documentaries are antiwar.

Some are right-wing propaganda films meant to justify the war, and some take the point of view of the American soldiers on the ground and thus maintain neutrality. Yet others take the point of view of the Iraqis, who in the early stages of the war tended to be ambivalent about the Americans, although as things progressed they became increasingly critical and angry. But within this mix a few extremely critical films came out not simply against the war and its terrible violence and destruction, but also against the Bush administration and the defense contractors like Halliburton that made and sustained it, which brings us back to Brave New Films.

Brave New Films

Robert Greenwald was an active player in the growing political movement(s) of that time. Born and raised in New York, the son of professional parents, Greenwald had had a successful career in film and TV and had many contacts in the entertainment industry. During the run-up to the Iraq War, he and actor Mike Farrell formed a group called Artists United against the War, which acted as a kind of booking agency for anti-war celebrities to speak out against the war on high-visibility TV shows (Roussel and Lechaux 2010). He also made a life-changing decision to quit commercial entertainment and to commit fully to making critical political documentaries. The first of these that he directed was *Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War* (2004), about how George W. Bush and company fabricated the “evidence” that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, then coerced members of his administration, as well as much of the media, into endorsing his claims.¹⁰ Greenwald made a second movie about the Iraq War two years later, *Iraq: The War Profiteers* (2006), about the outsourcing of many of the military functions to private contractors, who sacrificed the well-being of both the troops and their own employees for the bottom line of financial gain.

It was during this period that Greenwald began developing the company that became Brave New Films. Greenwald’s vision for the company was innovative at many levels, including both production and distribution. On the production side, one of the main innovations was speed, as he was committed to making films that were closely responsive to ongoing current events. In his first five years of this work, he executive-produced

two full-length films (*Unprecedented* [2002] and *Unconstitutional* [2004]) and directed four more (*Uncovered* [2004], *Outfoxed* [2004], *Wal-Mart* [2005], and *Iraq for Sale* [2006]), which is a remarkable record. As he put it: “Remember, back then, people weren’t making politically timely documentaries: ours was really one of the first where we said, ‘We’re not going to do a documentary 10 years from today, we’re doing it *now*, we want it out *now* and we want to affect the political dialog *now*’” (quoted in Haynes and Littler 2007, 26–27).

I want to emphasize the importance of this passion for timeliness. Much of the writing about Brave New Films, both journalistic and academic, emphasizes the originality and uniqueness of the company’s distribution model, and I will get to that in a moment. But I think this sense of urgency, of needing to jump into the fray and start *doing something now*, is also a central part of the company’s culture and identity. It accounts for the speed with which Greenwald embraced the internet and was willing to adjust his filmmaking practices to its strictures. And it accounts for the company’s determination to document even the smallest of victories in relation to the subject of any particular film as evidence that they are making a difference *now*. While Brave New Films does offer a broad, long-term “vision statement” (which can be found in their annual reports)—“Our vision is an open democratic society that encourages rigorous debate, opportunity, and justice for all”—much of their energy goes into films and related media campaigns that, as we will see, are also emphatically designed to produce concrete outcomes in the present.

The next question was how to get large numbers of people to see the films, and the company undertook a series of experiments in distribution. These began with *Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election* (2002), which was directed by some of Greenwald’s friends. He said he and his friends “literally sold DVDs at a table outside the screenings” and would sometimes make a few hundred dollars, which seemed like a lot at the time: “I was beside myself. I was like, ‘This is amazing.’” Next he directed the first of the Iraq War films, in partnership with the activist internet organization MoveOn.org. At first they were selling DVDs to the MoveOn membership and others, but then Eli Pariser, the wunderkind executive director of MoveOn at the time, suggested that they hold screenings at house parties, which they began to do with great success. Then a staff member, Jim Gilliam, approached Greenwald and said, “There’s this new thing called YouTube, where you can post clips of your movies for free,”

and they tried that. “Two days later,” Greenwald went on, Gilliam “walks in and shows me on his computer, 7,320 views.” And Greenwald said, “Holy shit, if that were a theater it would be jammed!” And finally he took the quite radical step of deciding to make all of their films available for free: “I wanted to go more radical because I felt that our job was to reach people.” Gesturing to the low popularity of documentary film, he said that charging money “limits your audience. Who is going to pay you to go to a documentary on a difficult subject?” (interview, May 15, 2019).

Greenwald had started the company as a conventional filmmaking enterprise, involving the standard strategies of searching for investors and a distributor, but was becoming fed up with scrounging for commercial backing, and more and more excited about the new distribution strategies. *Wal-Mart* was the turning point: “*Wal-Mart* was the full-tilt model: with *Wal-Mart* we planned the strategy a year in advance; we hired an organizer before I’d shot one frame of film; and even when we got offers to distribute it commercially, we turned them down, because by now we were firmly committed to this alternative method of distribution which had such a great effect” (quoted in Haynes and Littler 2007, 27).¹¹ This, then, is the model for Brave New Films today, and it is unique. All of their films are available for free on the internet, and they make virtually nothing from the films themselves. They operate like any nonprofit, raising money from grants and donations. At the same time, they devote at least half of their operations to generating screenings, partly through individuals and groups signing up via the BNF website, and partly by partnering with other nonprofits that in turn make the films available for screenings through their own networks.¹²

Political Agency

The main point of this book is, as noted earlier, to understand the ways in which the work of Brave New Films can be seen as cultivating “political agency” through its films and outreach. “Agency” refers to the human capacity to take intentional action in the world, both within and against (but never outside of) the constraints of society, culture, and history. It is a highly contested concept within the social sciences, and I have discussed some of those debates elsewhere (Ortner 2006). One of the issues

concerns whether arguing for the (political) value of agency may appear to endorse and even celebrate a (neo)liberal model of the individualistic, Western-style social actor, pursuing his or her own agendas relatively free of social constraints.¹³ This is certainly one of its implications, and agency in this sense can be seen as a form of privilege associated with status and power.

But the meaning of the term changes when it is set in a context of collective political action, and this is how I will be using it in this book. I draw inspiration on this subject from the work of Paulo Freire ([1970] 2000, 2004) and his discussion of *conscientização*, commonly translated as “consciousness-raising.” Freire defines *conscientização* as the process by which oppressed people may become not merely objects on whom history does its work, but “subjects of history” who seek to both understand and change the world (2004). The core of the process is small-group discussion, and the outcome involves not only increased personal understanding of one’s oppressed or exploited situation, but also an awareness of being part of a larger class or collectivity with whom one shares a similar positionality. In other words, there is a process in which individuals develop what we would call “agency”—a disposition to act for change, a sense of empowerment to act for change—but it is a social process on behalf of a social goal.

Freire was writing about impoverished peasants and urban slum dwellers in Brazil in the late 1960s and early ’70s. His own work was geared toward secular education, but his strategy of using small-group discussions for political consciousness-raising was picked up by the hugely influential religious/political movement called Liberation Theology in Latin America in that era (Vásquez 1998) and thus received widespread application and recognition. Within that same period as well, and apparently independently, the nascent feminist movement in the United States was developing the idea of “consciousness-raising groups” as a tool for political organizing and potential action. The radical feminist group Redstockings put out a manifesto espousing essentially the same principles as Freire’s concept of *conscientização*: “Our chief task at present is to develop female class consciousness through sharing experience and publicly exposing the sexist foundation of all our institutions. Consciousness-raising is not ‘therapy,’ which implies that the male-female relationship is purely personal, but the only method by which we can ensure that our

program for [collective] liberation is based on the concrete realities of our lives” (Redstockings 1969). Consciousness-raising groups, seen as “the backbone of the Women’s Liberation Movement,” sprang up all over the country (Chicago Women’s Liberation Union 1971). I do not mean to suggest that the gender oppression of mostly middle-class, mostly white women in that era was equivalent to the class oppression of very poor and subjugated Brazilian peasants and slum dwellers. But both movements, as well as all the politically critical filmmaking just discussed, were part of an era of widespread radicalization (“the Sixties”) that drew in many people who were in some sense ready for, and open to, the kind of political consciousness-raising just described.

A variant of the consciousness-raising process was the reading group, where a group of people seeking to develop their own political thinking devoted themselves to reading some relevant texts or bodies of literature. We saw this earlier, in the context of the discussion of “powerful texts,” with respect to BECs (Base Ecclesial Communities) in Latin America, reading, debating, and rethinking the Bible in politically critical terms. The Black Panthers in Oakland, California, began reading Marxist literature in that era (*The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* [film], 2015), and there were no fewer than three Marxist-Feminist anthropology reading groups in New York City when I was living and working there in the 1970s. Full disclosure: at that time I belonged to both a consciousness-raising group, composed of young women anthropologists, which we called the Ruth Benedict Collective, and the Marxist-Feminist III (Uptown) reading group.¹⁴

The outcome of the consciousness-raising process, in whatever form, is ideally the production of what I am here calling “political agency,” which includes both a heightened awareness and understanding of oppressive political realities and a heightened inclination or disposition to act against them. The idea of political agency in this sense is already part of some theorizing about activist documentary film. For example, historian Paula Rabinowitz, in the introduction to her study of the history and politics of American documentary, virtually echoes Paolo Freire: “The subject produced and provoked by documentary . . . is a subject of (potential) agency, an actor in history” (1994, 8). And in her study of “documentary resistance” (the book’s title), Angela Aguayo makes the production of political agency a central theme, tying it particularly to the formation of

collective identities among marginalized and subordinated groups in the contemporary United States (2019).

This book uses the case of Brave New Films to extend our thinking on this complex and important subject. I begin with a brief chapter situating Brave New Films within the larger American mediascape, and particularly within the world of “alternative media,” media that positions itself against the mainstream media and the official versions of reality that they promulgate. Following that, I address the political agency question from three different perspectives. Chapter 2 provides an overview of BNF’s output of film and video with respect to the portrayals of American politics they provide. The emphasis in the chapter is on the films as vehicles of truthful representation of reality, and on the point that the films are meant to create clarity and understanding—what I call “critical agency.” Chapter 3, titled “Networked Agency,” focuses on how Brave New Films is part of a world of social justice organizations, and on how the films circulate both “horizontally,” through that world, and “down” to the grass roots through screenings. Chapter 4 looks deeply at one film, *Suppressed*, that was being made and circulated during my research. The chapter, titled “Affective Agency,” focuses on the way the film appeals to feelings of both compassion and anger, and the way it “comes alive” for audiences during screenings. Together the three chapters seek to open up for the reader the capacity of these films to contribute to the production of political agency.

Winding its way through the chapters in different ways is the importance of truth to the process of political awakening and mobilization. Truth is central to the documentary project, and at the beginning of chapter 2 I address some of the debates and trade-offs over truth-telling within the documentary world. This discussion in turn underpins the substantive work of all of the chapters. Chapter 2 continues with an overview of BNF films, their approaches to truthful filmmaking, and their efforts to uncover not just factual truths but the deeper truth of the systemic nature of capitalism, racism, and (proto)fascism in the twenty-first-century United States. In chapter 3, about Brave New Films in the world of social movements, I build on the point that the films circulate in different activist contexts as “powerful texts,” powerful because they are understood and felt to be true. And in chapter 4, about how *Suppressed* touches and provokes audiences emotionally, we learn ethnographically that this works in part

because audiences are responding to what they feel is the honesty and credibility, the truthfulness, of the people who speak in the film.

In chapter 5 I turn to the question of impact. Although all BNF films are meant to contribute to the formation of political agency in general, each one also has its own specific focus, the specific form of injustice it seeks to challenge. Thus we—and the filmmaker—must also ask whether and how a given film brought about some of the specific changes it sought to make. I will answer this question at multiple levels, from the most concrete (e.g., specific pieces of legislation) to the most abstract (e.g., the expansion of activist publics). In this context I also return to Brave New Films as part of “alternative media” and ask about their success in challenging the versions of reality put out by the mainstream media. I will end by proposing that, alongside all those things, one of the most important forms of impact generated by Brave New Films and all the other work of the documentary movement may be the remobilization and revalidation of the importance of truth-telling itself.

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Notes

Introduction

- 1 I use the terms *resistance* and (involvement in) *social movements* in free variation. One could tease out some distinctions between them, but I haven't found it necessary for purposes of this book.
- 2 The quote is also attributed to playwright Moss Hart.
- 3 I have searched for this quote extensively and I can't find the reference. But it must be out there somewhere—I can't have made it up.
- 4 The exact quote is "If maximum social impact is to bring about needed legislation, why not spend money on lobbyists rather than films?"
- 5 Grierson professed to be "on the left," but his films have been heavily criticized for avoiding any political critique (Winston 1995; Nick Fraser 2019). Nonetheless, the sympathetic focus on workers of all kinds in those films fit in with the growing (left) insistence on the centrality of labor, and the humanity of workers, in the industrialized capitalist system.
- 6 As film buffs will immediately know, *The Battle of Algiers* was not a documentary, but it aspired to be as true as possible to the historical facts, and it borrowed many stylistic devices from documentary film.
- 7 There were also important technological developments that increased both the portability and the quality of equipment and thus facilitated increased production.
- 8 One could also look at the outcome of this process as the creation and self-creation of a self-conscious documentary "scene" that set itself apart not only from the mainstream media (see the next chapter), but also from the wild and seemingly undisciplined proliferation of do-it-yourself nonfiction video on the internet. Thanks to John Caldwell for emphasizing this point.

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- 9 “Protests against the Iraq War,” Wikipedia, accessed August 29, 2021,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protests_against_the_Iraq_War.
- 10 *Uncovered* appears to have been the first anti-Iraq War film to come out after
the invasion. Wanting to respond quickly, Greenwald brought out a short ver-
sion in November 2003, only eight months after the March invasion (*Uncovered: The Whole Truth about the Iraq War*), and a longer version (*Uncovered: The War on Iraq*) the following year (Kellner 2010, 60).
- 11 Their commitment to this model has meant that their films are often un-
known, even within the relatively small world of documentary film fans, as
the films do not appear on TV or in theaters. But, as I will discuss in the final
chapter, their “impact” does not depend on widespread recognition.
- 12 See also the videos *Citizen Tube Interview* (2008) and *Our Story* (2015).
- 13 For non-social-science people reading this book, the “actor” of social theory
is a generic term for a social person in the abstract and is not to be confused
with actors in the film or stage sense.
- 14 Deborah Gordon writes about the Ruth Benedict Collective briefly in *Women Writing Culture* (1995).

1. Brave New Films in the Mediascape

- 1 One level I will not address in this book is the level of individual independent
filmmakers. Some have been mentioned already, particularly if they made an
award-winning film (e.g., Michael Moore, Charles Ferguson). Independent
filmmakers were covered extensively in *Not Hollywood* (Ortner 2013b), but
here I mention a few favorites among documentarians, along with Moore and
Ferguson—Emile de Antonio, Kirby Dick, Ava DuVernay, Alex Gibney, Spike
Lee, Lucy Walker—as they are part of this book’s larger context.
- 2 The study of ethnographic film would go on to develop and evolve in important
ways, beyond the scope of this book. To follow this thread see, e.g., Barbash and
Taylor 1997; Rouch 2003; Banks and Ruby 2011; and MacDonald 2013.
- 3 For an excellent recent example see Rouse, Jackson, and Frederick 2016.
- 4 By now they seem to have developed a more conventional hierarchical organ-
ization, but they describe themselves on their website as “a collaborative
community.” It is hard to know more about how they operate without doing
the ethnography.
- 5 The fellows are paid. The interns are covered by scholarships awarded through
their home colleges or universities.
- 6 Some of the coproducers are on the regular staff, while others may be hired on
a contract basis for a particular film.