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***Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*. Elizabeth Cowie. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011 (217 pages). ISBN: 978-0816645480 (hc), 978-0816645497 (pb).**

A Review by Amy Parziale, University of Arizona (USA)

Recording Reality, Desiring the Real analyses documentary media through the lens of psychoanalytic, deconstructionist and semiotic theory. This book has as its assumed audience a well-read and intellectually engaged readership, a fact that comes as no surprise to anyone already acquainted with Elizabeth Cowie's previous work, particularly her 1997 book *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*. As noted by Jeffrey Gieger, "Cowie's work … brings theory and astute critical practice to bear on documentary texts while underlining their social and interpersonal nature" through a consideration of the "citizen-spectator" who participates in the film experience as a situated and desiring subject (Geiger). *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* explores the documentary in its myriad forms, including direct cinema, docudrama and reality television. The various chapters are held together by a continued investigation into tensions between reality and fiction, factuality and spectacle within documentaries and how these tensions affect spectator identification through the very construction of documentary evidence.

Concerns with documenting reality and issues of manipulation are as old as the cinematic form itself. As Cowie acknowledges in her Introduction, "[W]hile cinematography … opened up new opportunities for visual pleasures as both knowledge and spectacle, the recorded visible came to be divided between the objective and intellectual appraisal of empiricism's gaze and a pleasuring eye in a subjective and experiential engagement with the seen and, with synchronous sound after 1926, heard" (2–3). Documentaries and citizen-spectators share the same paradox. One's senses allow one to know the world but sensory perceptions can deceive, just as the eye cannot see between frames in film but instead believes in their continuity. Cowie connects this paradox to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory: "[The] gap in representation between the reality presented and the reality absent [in documentary film] introduces the real in Lacan's sense of an unrepresentable that is nevertheless apprehended" (10). By exploring the potentially contradictory elements of documentary through complex Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Cowie emphasises both spectral and spectacular elements of documentary filmmaking as well as its political and historical engagement in social realities. While at first *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* seems to reiterate this point and its theoretical foundations, the repeated references to the constructed nature of documentary and the sustained theoretical discussion open up the connections between chapters as well as the differences between each iteration of these ideas. That *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* often depends upon theory rather than evidence to

substantiate its claims is an interesting incongruity, given the book's focus on the relationships between documentary evidence, reality, and the citizen-spectator. Cowie references numerous documentaries in each of her chapters, but more close readings of particular scenes may have assisted readers to better understand her examples, particularly those who are not familiar with the films to which she refers. While similar claims about the construction of documentaries, their relationship to socio-political realities and the blurring of the line between fiction and nonfiction have been made previously by film scholars—including Bill Nichols (1992, 1995), Brian Winston (2000, 2008), Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, Louise Spence and Vinicius Navarro, Dai Vaughan, Carl Plantinga (1987, 1997), and Nöel Carroll—Cowie's contribution is her sustained and nuanced use of psychoanalytic theory in her quest to consider what kind of speaking subject, citizen-spectator and reality emerge in documentary films.

The first chapter of *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* examines the tension between the fictional and nonfictional elements of documentaries through Lacanian psychoanalysis and Peircian semiotics. Cowie argues that a film "becomes documentary in that it is narrated through selection and ordering, in an emplotment [sic], but thereby gives rise to an anxiety about what is lost of the real in this process of meaning making" (21). From this consideration of the construction of reality in documentaries, Cowie moves in the second chapter to an extended analysis of how such films give voice to everyday life as an emotional and sensory experience while simultaneously signifying as historical information and fact. She takes as her point of reference how labour, in particular, gets represented in early documentaries, using Foucault and Rancière to examine British documentaries about work and workers, including *A Day in the Life of a Coalminer* (Kineto Production Co., 1910), *Coal Face* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1935), *Enough to Eat?* (Edgar Anstey, 1936), *The People Who Count* (Geoffrey Colyer, 1937), *Five and Under* (Donald Alexander, 1941), the social research of Mass Observation, and Ruby Grierson's films.

Chapter Three, "Documentary Desire: Seeing for Ourselves and Identifying in Reality", focuses on spectatorship and identification through Freud, Lacan and Deleuze. Cowie analyses *Disaster at Hillsborough* (Yorkshire Television, 1990), *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (Spike Lee, 2006), and *Capturing the Friedmans* (Andrew Jarecki, 2003) utilising the lens of Lacan's four discourses, particularly the hysteric and analyst. "Objectivity opens onto subjectivity through our imaginative capacity as we slip between identification and disidentification and, perhaps, back again" (91). This examination of viewer identification allows Cowie to transition into her fourth chapter, which explores the spectacle of the real in two war trauma documentaries: *War Neuroses: Netley, 1917, Seale Hayne Military Hospital 1918* (Pathé, 1918) and *Let There Be Light* (John Huston, 1945). Through reference to Lacan's conception, Cowie suggests that "[t]he real in each film is not narrated as such but can be apprehended in the discontinuities we can come to understand between the shown the spoken [sic] and between the discourse of medicine and psychoanalysis" (124). Cowie furthers her argument into the ethics and politics of such representation, and continuing to focus on the spectator, in the fifth chapter she illustrates "the surreal of reality" in documentaries through the work of filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch. "[S]omething slips as we try to 'make sense' of what we see and hear, and a little bit of the real appears, undoing subjectivity as unified, engaging our imaginative remaking of our understanding in a seeing differently, a seeing anew" (137).

In her final, and perhaps most provocative, chapter, "Specters of the Real: Documentary Time and Art", Cowie argues that it is the issue of time that makes documentary a political art form. Through the theories of Derrida, Deleuze and Bakhtin and the films *Maelstrom: A Family Chronicle* (Péter Forgács, 1997), *Portrait of My Mother* (Milica Tomić, 1999), *Post-Partum Document* (Mary Kelly, 1973–1979), and *The Nightcleaners Part One* (The Berwick Street Collective, 1975), she comes to the conclusion that "now" time, which "just is", collides with the "past remembered" of historical reality to create a time in which spectators can see the past as present anew (155). Cowie concludes emphasising that "an ethical position … is not without risk, for it brings us up close to the real ... Neither form nor content, as either art or politics, can ensure such an encounter; instead it surprises us in the gaps of documentary's representation as it engages us in its art of reality and spectacle of the real" (186).

Recording Reality, Desiring the Real will undoubtedly become required reading for anyone considering documentary filmmaking or the application of psychoanalytic theory in film studies. While some sections may have benefited from more detailed explication and close textual reading, Cowie's theoretical exploration of the many paradoxical components of documentaries and documentary spectatorship in *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* stands out as a major contribution to film studies.

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