Deconstructing the Documentary

Sarah Barbour
Asian Educational Media Service

(When this paper was presented at the 2001 ASIANetwork conference, clips from three documentaries were shown in order to illustrate some of the points. This paper describes what was seen and heard, but obviously much of the impact will be missing. Please see the bibliography at the end for more information about each film.)

Following is a list of titles of documentary films and CD-ROMs about various parts of Asia:

The Dragon Lord's Guide to Nara, Japan
Mini-dragons Series
Mini-dragons II series
Heart of the Dragon Series
Rise of the Dragon
Will the Dragon Rise Again?
The World of the Dragon
Imprisoned Dragon: The Last Chinese Emperor
Bhutan: Land of the Thunder Dragon
The Dragon Wore Tennis Shoes
Slaying the Dragon
Vietnam: Land of the Ascending Dragon
Dragons of the Orient
Dragon's Tongue: Communicating in Chinese
China: Unleashing the Dragon
Beyond the Nine Dragons: Discovering the Exotic Cultures of the Mekong Delta

None of these documentaries are actually *about* dragons. The dragon is a convenient shorthand for the exotic Orient that can be used to market almost any place in Asia, from Japan to Bhutan and beyond. Film makers and distributors work in a very competitive market and, not surprisingly, resort to catchy titles whenever possible. I do not mean to disparage the content of these particular documentaries—I think that some of them are very good. What I want to do is point out how these titles color the films themselves. Before we have actually seen the documentaries, the perception of these far-away places as exotic, romantic, and above all, different, has been created or reinforced.

Viewing a documentary film critically is no less important than reading a text critically. Because Asia is so distant, geographically, culturally and linguistically, from what most American students are familiar with, documentaries can be extremely useful in providing a visual context for what students are studying. But even well-made and well-intentioned documentaries can reinforce stereotypes, oversimplify complicated situations, and essentialize other cultures.

Especially when viewing a documentary about a subject we are unfamiliar with, it is easy to simply accept everything as "Truth." "Documentary" is understood to be the opposite of "fictional." Often, an authoritative voice tells us what happened and whether it was bad or good; often we are confronted with a series of "experts" with impressive credentials who tell us what to believe; and of course, there are these visual images, the pictures that are worth thousands of words. The camera never lies, right?

In fact, the camera itself rarely does lie, at least directly. Although it is technically possible to manipulate video images in all kinds of ways, most documentary filmmakers don't have the time or money to do so, nor is it necessary. The narrative is expressed directly, through voice-over narration or expert opinion, or indirectly, through editing, camera angle, and composition. Getting your students to understand the ways in which their thoughts are molded and their feelings manipulated by these techniques is the first step in building critical awareness.

The use of narration in documentaries is problematic. On the one hand, viewers usually need an explanation of some kind in order to understand what they are watching. On the other hand, documentaries are rarely more than an hour or two long and background information is almost always simplified. The narrator usually speaks with so much authority that it is easy to be lulled into taking what he or she says at face value. Even if the information in the documentary is accurate (and you should never assume that it is!), it will almost certainly be part of a larger, more complicated picture.

Editing is a subtler means of telling a story. A story about editing, familiar to film students everywhere, goes back to the early parts of this century when Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein spliced a shot a man's face to a shot of a plate of food. When he showed this clip to people they were moved by the actor's portrayal of hunger. Eisenstein then spliced the same shot of the man to a shot of a child's coffin. This time, his audience was deeply moved by the actor's expression of grief. Audiences have become more sophisticated since then but so has the art of editing. Just like the feature filmmaker, the documentary filmmaker makes judgements about what to show, what not to show, and how to put his or her images together for comprehension, for efficiency, and for emotional impact. This isn't necessarily "good" or "bad"—it's just how you make movies—but it is something that documentary viewers should be aware of.

***Battle for Vietnam* clip, 1997**

Narration: "Vietnam was a country divided in two by war. North Vietnam was Communist, their Viet Cong army was supported by Russia and China. The South was democratic and backed by the United States. When the Communist Viet Cong successfully infiltrated South Vietnam, the U.S. forces stepped in."

Visual: Walter Cronkite talks about the war. Cut to a map of Vietnam. First North, then South Vietnam are high-

lighted as the narration mentions them. Cut to Walter Cronkite again.

Oversimplification is a frequent problem in documentaries. Most of the film revolves around the Tet Offensive and the effect it had on American morale and this is about all the background this film gives us on how the United States got involved in Vietnam in the first place. Even if you consider the information given indisputable, it is unlikely that you will get anything approaching the whole story in a fifteen-second clip. And, to my mind, the information given is highly suspect: We hear that "Vietnam was a country divided in two by war." It is a dramatic statement but not a terribly informative one. We are not told who fought in this war, or when. We are not told that, technically speaking, Vietnam was divided into two by the Geneva Accords of 1954 in which American politics played an influential role. We are told that South Vietnam was Democratic, but no mention is given of the South Vietnamese government's less-democratic policies.

Also, note that this clip is bracketed on either side with statements made by Walter Cronkite, who was for many Americans the voice of authority on the Vietnam War. By juxtaposing his image with this narration, the filmmakers have given their fifteen-second summary of the war more authority than it might have had on its own.

Story of Noriko, Faces of Japan series clip, 1986

Narration: "Noriko Ohtsuka is a young woman in a society still bound to ancient customs. In Tokyo, she wages a modern struggle to forge a career for herself. At home, she encounters obligations and rituals unchanged in centuries. The ways in which she sets about achieving her goals are as distinctive as the traditions she must overcome."

Visual: Noriko wearing a Western-style blazer, talking to another young woman. Cut to Noriko in a traditional tatami *room, being dressed by two older women in a formal kimono.*

Here, the narration is a bit subtler, though certainly questionable. The implication seems to be that Japan was absolutely static for centuries until Noriko started looking for a job. Indeed, there seems to be a tendency among filmmakers to imply Asia did not change or evolve until (suddenly, in the 19th century) it "made contact" with the West and began to absorb Western values and philosophies. Even more disturbing to me is the statement that Noriko must *overcome* the traditions of her country in order to achieve her goals. We are not told which traditions are holding her back, if it's all of them or just a few, but clearly, these traditions are portrayed in a negative light. They are preventing Noriko from having a career, from achieving her goals, from being, in short, more like us.

The editing reinforces the narration. We see Noriko first in Western clothes, then in a kimono. This is, incidentally, a recurring theme in documentaries about Asia and you will often see images illustrating it: computers juxtaposed with rice fields, ancient temples with bullet trains. These are fascinating contrasts and they are easy to find and exploit, but only rarely do filmmakers go to any effort to point out that these contrasts are not unique to Asia but exist everywhere.

***Hearts and Minds* clip, 1972**

Shot of horse-drawn carriage moving through a Vietnamese village. Shot of water being drawn from a well.Shot of Vietnamese schoolchildren in uniform walking through a village.

Cut to Randy Floyd: "Almost everybody has blown off firecrackers. The thrill you get when you see something explode as a child or even as an adult, almost. You put something in a can and watch the can blow up or blow up in the air."

Cut to aerial view of bombing Randy in voice-over: "And the excitement, the sense of excitement, you know, especially when you're getting shot at, is just incredible."

Cut to Lt. George Coker: "You get in there, have a real good mission, hit your target right on. You find out later that your target was totally destroyed—it wasn't one of these misses or almosts. You got it—bang! It's down. And come back, make a carrier landing recovery. That's fantastic. To say it's thrilling—yes, it's deeply satisfying."

Cut to shot of bombs exploding on the ground.

There is no narration in this film at all. Its impact is derived entirely from its choice of images and interviews and in the way those are edited. (In fact, if you want a really powerful example of editing, I highly recommend watching the entire movie sometime.) In this sequence it is pretty clear who the bad guys are in the minds of the filmmakers. We see a pastoral Vietnamese village, we see Vietnamese children, we listen to two pilots talk about the satisfaction they took in dropping bombs, and then we see those bombs exploding on the ground. These shots may have been taken decades apart from each other but a link has been created in our minds between the village children and the bombs. We see what the pilots, from their great height, did not see.

Documentaries can be a wonderful addition to classes about Asia. However, taking into consideration the politics, the marketing, the unconscious assumptions and stereotypes, is essential. Some documentaries are better than others; some are more obviously flawed than others. But all become better teaching tools when students learn to view them critically.

Video references:

Story of Noriko (color, 15 minutes). 1989. Part of the *Faces of Japan* series. Green Mountain Television. Distributed by ITS, Inc.

Hearts and Minds (color & black and white, 112 minutes). Rainbow Pictures.1974. (No longer in distribution.)

The Battle for Vietnam (color & black and white, 30

minutes). Transatlantic Films. 1997. Distributed by Ambrose Video Publishing.

For a good introduction to film studies, please see: Gianetti, Louis D. *Understanding Movies*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2001 (9th ed.).

Sarah I. Barbour is the program coordinator for the Asian Educational Media Service (AEMS). She can be reached at aems@uiuc.edu or at 1-888-828-2367.

Bringing the Classroom to Art: Art History and Modern Culture in Japan

Lisa Bixenstine Safford
Hiram College

Bringing art into the classroom is a useful tool when teaching in such disciplines as history, religion, communications and literature, not to mention art history. It provides a means to make history and ideas come to life, and become manifest in human experiences both quotidian and extraordinary. This is usually accomplished by introducing slides, videos or picture books into the class experience. Those who are fortunate to live in the Cleveland area, such as myself, benefit from the unique opportunity to bring the classroom to a very fine and fulsome collection of art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, which serves as a wonderful teaching tool about Asian culture. My suggestion, however, is to remove the classroom even further from the home base, board a plane to the country of origin, encounter culture and utilize art in teaching first hand. This is precisely what I and a colleague did in March and April of 2001 when we took ten students to Japan for a month to learn in an interdisciplinary course the ideologies and institutions of Japan, with a heavy emphasis on art as an entrée into Japanese culture.

The interdisciplinary nature of our enterprise was the product of our very diverse disciplines. My colleague is a professor of communications and business management and I am an art historian. Together we created a three-course sequence, called a collegium at our college, which blended our interests and expertise. Our students completed courses in Japanese art history and communications between cultures with an emphasis on Japan—one very past oriented, the other focused on the present—before we left Ohio. In Japan the third course was called Ideologies and Institutions of Japan and through it we sought to combine, to apply, and to expand on the two preliminary courses.

Art monuments served to identify and clarify many of these ideologies and institutions. We began with an historical perspective, looking first at the monuments of early Japan in Nara and Kyoto. Visits to Buddhist temples, especially the enormous Nara Todaiji, enabled students to see the significance that Buddhism played in the development of Japanese identity. Clearly, the institution of Buddhism by the 8th century was immense, bolstering the political power of the early emperors and establishing a power base of its own, which the movement of the capital to Kyoto (Heian-kyo) at the end of the century was intended to dissipate. The size of the structure alone can convey this, as well as the Buddha statues within. In addition, students saw there the way that temples and shrines were used by adherents and the familiar role that they play in the lives of people. The students knew the Indian source, which had been filtered through China and Korea, and this established the Asian roots of Japanese culture. And a brief walk to the Kasuga Taisha Shrine of the Fujiwara family allowed us to compare Shinto and Buddhist architecture and practices.

In Kyoto, where most temples were relegated to the outskirts of the city, students could perceive approaches to worship that stressed remote, removed, and esoteric practices of later eras. A study of gardens (via a guest lecturer) and an experience of a tea gathering allowed us to see the importance of the aesthetic components attached to temples, and especially to the ideology of Zen. At the Nijo Palace we encountered the political division of Japan that began in the Kamakura age, one that gave rise to a ruling shogunal institution supporting the now impotent emperor. Architecture sustained the secrecy and inaccessibility of the supreme command, while screen paintings symbolized the shogun's authority using forms drawn from nature. Walking through the building and around the grounds allowed students to imagine the Kyoto of the middle ages.

Our assignments for students encouraged the imaginative faculty. We gave each student the task of role playing "A Day in the Life" of some personage, famous or not. One was an emperor, one his empress; one was a Shinto priest, one a Buddhist; one was a samurai, one a farmer, another a merchant, another an actor, and so on. Their research was undertaken before we left and also from our travel reading list, especially Junichiro Tanizaki's (1932) *In Praise of Shadows*, C.J. Dunn's (1967) *Everyday Life in Traditional Japan*, and Ivan Morris's (1994) *The World of the Shinning Prince*. These projects were presented to the group at an appropriate site with as much creativity as students could muster. Some created a drama that they presented on the Shinto stage at the Hida Historical Village in Takayama (a reconstructed village consisting of 18th and 19th century farmhouses), a particularly apt location to learn of the farmer, the Buddhist priest and the merchant. Our shogun did her presentation at the Himeji Castle.

Other assignments took advantage of the unique opportunity of being there. Students each gave researched historical background for one site visit (The Golden Pavilion or the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, for example) and were assigned a "culture hunt" requiring them to find monuments on their own and engage in activities that required cultural interaction. Our purposes were ambitious, as we stated in our syllabus: To appreciate Japanese patterns of behavior and to recognize the ideological and institutional foundations of these patterns; to apply interdisciplinary models of analysis to patterns of behavior and develop explanations; to develop