

Perspective

A Historian's Perspective on Archives and the Documentary Process

CLIFFORD M. KUHN

Abstract: The respective processes employed by film documentarians and print-based historians in presenting the past are in many ways distinct. Nevertheless, film makers and print-based historians are increasingly engaged in a dialogue with each other, a dialogue that involves archivists as well. While there exist problematic aspects of the use of archival materials in film, there are also documentarians who are appreciative of archives and sensitive to issues of historical context and specificity. The making of a recent film, *The Uprising of '34*, provides a model for the creative interaction between film makers and archival materials, and suggests ways to strengthen the relationship between film makers, print-based historians, and archivists.

About the author: Clifford M. Kuhn is assistant professor of history at Georgia State University, where he also directs the Georgia Government Documentation Project, an oral history project and archives on the state's political heritage. He is the principal author of *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914–1948*. This article is based on a paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists held in Washington, D.C. in September 1995.

THE PROCESSES EMPLOYED by film documentarians and by print-based historians in presenting the past are in many ways distinct from each other. Not only do they involve different media, each with its own attributes, but also different professional training, different techniques, different approaches, and, frequently, different audiences.¹ Yet to some degree these distinctions are beginning to blur, as conventions of historical presentation change. Print-based historians as a group are perhaps becoming slightly more film literate and appreciative of non-print historical materials. The past decade has certainly seen a growing number of academically trained historians moving into film—for instance, the historians associated with Blackside Productions. At least some documentarians are conscientiously mining archival sources in very creative ways; carefully sifting evidence, revealing their process, and paying close attention to historical context and historiographical issues. They are not simply synthesizing the work of print-based historians, they often are paving new historical ground themselves. This evolving relationship between print-based historians and documentarians is not exclusive; it inherently includes archivists as well.

First, however, the differences and tensions. Historians trained in print culture are comparatively logical and linear in their exposition. They generally state a central thesis and support it with an accumulation of evidence, often based on months, if not years, of archival research. In so doing, they lay bare their methodology, influences, and sources, providing footnotes so that their readers, usually fellow professional historians, can follow their tracks. As a rule, they stress multiple causation, locate their work within ongoing historiographical debates, and place specific events and developments in a larger historical context over time and space.

In contrast, the strength of film as a medium is precisely its emotional power and immediacy. Film imparts a sense of reality and authenticity, of “being there,” at its best convincingly evoking the ambiance, the “feel” of a given time and place. In its multiple layers of expression, film clearly conveys more information than print or sound, as in the case of oral history interviews, for instance. Film is also particularly well-suited to a narrative presentation, to the telling of stories with a coherent beginning, middle, and end. And, of course, film is a more modern medium than print, more flexible, more multi-dimensional, and no doubt more readily received by people reared in a “post-literate” culture.

Yet many of these attributes of film are closely connected to its more problematic qualities at each step of the process, at least in the eyes of many print-based historians and, I might add, archivists. The difficulties often originate with the available documents themselves. There exists an inherent tension between what is historically accurate or sig-

¹My thinking on this subject has been informed by the following: Robert A. Rosenstone, “History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History on Film,” *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1173–85; David Herlihy, “Am I a Camera? Other Reflections on Film and History,” *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1186–92; Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1193–99; John E. O’Connor, “History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past,” *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1200–1209; Robert Brent Toplin, “The Film Maker as Historian,” *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1210–27; Dan Sipe, “Media and Public History: The Future of Oral History and Moving Images,” *Oral History Review* 19 (Spring-Fall 1991): 75–87; and, in particular, Gordon Bynum, “The Future of History: The Role of the Visual Culture in Shaping a ‘New History’,” unpublished seminar paper, Georgia State University, 1994. In this article, I am not referring to audio documentaries, feature-length films on historical subjects, or contemporary documentaries—all of which warrant scholarly treatment—but rather I am confining my remarks to history-based documentary films.

nificant and what works best visually. Many artifacts of print culture simply cannot be easily translated to film; they are too lengthy, too dry, too visually unappealing, too particular, too factual. While social historians may glean tremendous meaning from census materials and probate records, for example, it is doubtful (although not impossible) that these documents would make good film. Accordingly, film makers tend to employ more visually moving, evocative documents—in particular photographs, newsreels, and other historical footage—and oral history interviews. Each of these sources, however, presents a host of interrelated methodological and ethical concerns.

By its very nature, film is a shorthand medium. In order to quickly, compellingly convey the flavor of a particular time and place (and admittedly often because of exigencies of time and money), film makers frequently select photographs largely for their generic, iconographic qualities. They might present on-screen images of the rural South, industrial workers, or turn-of-the-century eastern Europe, for instance, without considering the specific history of the chosen photographs. This is perhaps especially true when presenting a before-and-after situation, with the photos primarily serving as a historical backdrop to set the stage for later events and developments. In addition, the photographs selected may well be images that intended audiences have already seen before and will readily recognize, thus further augmenting their apparent authenticity and advancing the film's narrative.

Consequently, photographs used in film are often removed from the circumstances in which they were created, in short, from their historical context. The film maker usually is not especially concerned with the specificity of a given photograph—the reasons why it was taken, the setting, the individuals portrayed, how the photograph was composed, cropped, captioned, or used—all important issues to both historians of photography and those historians who draw upon photographs in their work.² As a result, much of the very integrity, power, and meaning of the original photograph gets lost in its presentation on film. Furthermore, the images the audience sees are often false and misleading. To cite just one of many possible examples, a film I recently saw included a photograph purporting to represent a sharecropper's shack during the boll weevil days of the early 1920s, with a tractor in front—some twenty years before tractors actually appeared on the scene in the South.

Even more than photographs, newsreels and other historical film clips powerfully impart a sense of historical texture and atmosphere, of "being there," a strong message of authenticity that is central to much documentary expression. Yet, as with photographic materials, newsreels, television news stories, and other historical footage also are problematic.³ To begin with, much newsreel footage is of public events, where those involved may have realized they were being filmed, and acted with the camera in mind. Newsreels, television stories, and similar sources tend to portray dramatic events, rather than the long-term developments and processes leading up to such moments. Far from being "objec-

²The evolution of documentary photography is discussed at length in Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary in America 1890-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). For an investigation of the complexities and ambiguities of historical photographs as a source, see Eric Margolis, "Mining Photographs: Unearthing the Meaning of Historical Photos," *Radical History Review* 40 (January 1988): 32-50. In a recent review, film maker George Stoney writes, "It is this specificity of image that can give even the most ordinary of photographs power and poignancy—if the context is known and preserved." George C. Stoney, "Preserving the Past," *Southern Exposure* 22 (Spring 1994): 61.

³For one discussion of some of the issues involved in presenting newsreels in documentary film, see Judith Helfand, "Sewing History," *Southern Exposure* 22 (Spring 1994): 41-44.

tive," these sources are constructed historical documents themselves. As with photographs, who and what gets filmed and with what intention, the accompanying narrations, framing and captions, and what gets edited out all have significance. Indeed, as demonstrated effectively in the *Eyes on the Prize* series, often the outtakes are at least as revealing as what people see in movie theaters or on television. Of course, all of these considerations and decisions are made outside of the knowledge of the audience, who is led to believe that what it is seeing is the complete, objective reality, and who does not have the wherewithal to critically evaluate the actual sources.

As mentioned before, oral history interviews on film certainly provide greater information than they do in print or audio.⁴ In addition, due to the subjective, personal nature of oral history, film interview excerpts do much more than simply provide information; they are often what really drives a documentary, what it hinges upon—the most dramatic, most engaging, most revealing, most empathetic portions of the whole film, connecting the past to the present. They also offer a powerful and important reminder that how people remember has a significance as well as what they recall.

Yet, oral history on film contains problematic elements, too. Because of their privileged position within a given documentary, interviewees can easily appear to the audience as authoritative, as epitomizing the historical story of which they were a part. However, we don't know on what basis they were actually selected for the film, whether they were typical, atypical, archetypical, or stereotypical. There exist numerous documentaries in which interviewed individuals hold a special position in the events described, a position which no doubt colored their recollection and interpretation of those events, but which is never revealed to the audience. We don't know about the nature of their memories, as imparted to the interviewer: whether, for instance, these memories are self-serving, malleable, counterfactual, idiosyncratic, or guarded. We also don't know to what degree the edited oral history excerpts seen on screen were true to the integrity of the whole interview with the individuals featured, to the full corpus of interviews conducted by the film maker and others, to the entire array of available historical documents, or to the existing historical literature.

As we have seen, the very sources used in documentary films often raise concerns among historians and archivists, centering around the issue of decontextualization. This issue becomes even more pronounced in the way these sources are employed in the actual production of a documentary. A film can contain rapid cross cuts, fades, pans and dissolves; heavy manipulation of images; reenactments; an evocative musical score; special effects and authoritative-sounding narration, all of which may serve to detach historical sources from their original context. In film, time is often compressed; sequence disrupted; specificity of dates, names, and places lacking; and historical complexity, contradiction and gaps unaddressed for the sake of a coherent narrative. Film is also a comparatively ephemeral medium; unlike the printed word, it leaves relatively little time or space for

⁴For oral history and visual media, see Sipe, "Media and Public History;" Michael Frisch, "Oral History, Documentary, and the Mystification of Power: A Critique of *Vietnam: A Television History*," in Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 159–78; Sonya Michel, "Feminism, Film, and Public History," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, edited by Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 293–306; Jo Blatti, "Public History and Oral History," *Journal of American History* 77 (September 1990): 615–25; and Pamela M. Henson and Terri A. Schorzman, "Videohistory: Focusing on the American Past," *Journal of American History* 78 (September 1991): 618–27.

reflection, verification and weighing of evidence, or debate, all central to the historian's craft.

Having spent all this time discussing some of the problematic aspects of documentary film from a historian's perspective, I wish now to highlight some recent efforts where documentarians have endeavored to respectfully use archival sources, and tried to pay close attention to historical context and historiographical debates. Arguably the leader in fostering appreciation of the role of archival materials in documentary film is Ken Burns, director of the acclaimed *The Civil War* television series, which first aired on PBS in September 1990. In their decision to use authentic materials, Burns and his associates consulted with over eighty archivists to locate numerous letters, diaries, lithographs, handbills, paintings, and other primary documents from the period. They also filmed and creatively used thousands of photographs, with compelling impact. "*The Civil War* injected life into these visual documents," recently wrote film historian Robert Brent Toplin, "by examining them as an art historian would scan a painting. With considerable sensitivity, the camera read messages from the pictures, focusing on specific elements of the images while words, sounds, and music provided accent."⁵

Burns certainly benefited from repeated consultations with prominent scholars in the field, and immersion both in the historical literature and the archival sources. After the second of three preliminary screenings for consulting scholars, historian William McFeely later recalled, "It was astounding how much history Burns had assimilated, how much research he had done, how rich were his findings in the way of photographs and letters and diaries." In McFeely's words, Burns was on his way to becoming "a stunningly able creative historian" in his own right.⁶

Other historians, however, have criticized Burns on a variety of counts. Some have attacked him for over-emphasizing the strictly military aspects of the war (for which there existed bountiful photographic and other archival materials, of course), to the relative exclusion of the war's causes and enormous social consequences, its attendant political and economic history, and class, race, and gender dynamics. For all its skillful and innovative technique, *The Civil War*, in the opinion of some critics, ultimately offers a rather conventional, celebratory interpretation of both the war and its aftermath.⁷

In addition to differences of interpretation and emphasis, certain historian-critics have pointed out various errors of fact in the series, including Burns's occasional use of photographs out of their specific historical context. Sometimes this practice seems essentially innocuous and inconsequential, as with the juxtaposition of an 1862 photograph of Abraham Lincoln with a discussion of Lincoln in 1864; other times, however, the dissonance between photograph and narrative is more pronounced and of greater significance. In a session at the fall 1993 meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference and elsewhere, archivists also have occasionally voiced criticism of Burns's use of historical

⁵Robert Brent Toplin, "Introduction," in *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond* edited by Robert Brent Toplin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), xx; C. Vann Woodward, "Help From Historians," in Toplin, *Ken Burns's The Civil War*, 9.

⁶William S. McFeely, "Notes on Seeing History: The Civil War Made Visible," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* LXXIV (Winter 1990): 666-71. Also see David Thelen, "The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns," *Journal of American History* 81 (December 1994): 1031-50.

⁷See, for instance, Leon F. Litwack, "Telling the Story: The Historian, the Filmmaker, and the Civil War," in Toplin, *Ken Burns's The Civil War*, 121-40; Eric Foner, "Ken Burns and the Romance of Reunion," in Toplin, *Ken Burns's The Civil War*, 103-18; Karen Everhart Bedford, "History on the Screen: Who Speaks for the Past?" *Current*, 3 May 1993.

photographs. Clearly, Ken Burns is deserving of the acclaim *The Civil War* and his other documentaries have won. Yet it is telling that even in such a comparatively well-researched and well-funded effort, the issue of decontextualization still exists.

I would like to describe in greater detail the making of another recent film, *The Uprising of '34* by George Stoney and Judith Helfand, a project, I might add, that I have had the distinct privilege to be associated with.⁸ A study of the causes and consequences of the 1934 general textile strike, *Uprising*, which aired on PBS in June 1995, has advanced the documentary process in a variety of ways. It is an outstanding example of close interaction between the film makers, historians, archivists, activists, and members of the communities affected by the strike. The film makers creatively used a diversity of archival materials which in turn proved crucial to the very making of the film, and to the rectifying of long-standing misapprehensions about southern workers. By this attentiveness to historical context, and through the use of multiple voices and analyses, they have presented a sophisticated, complicated story which, while not without its own problematic elements, does not sacrifice power and forcefulness.

Uprising, which was directed by Vera Rony at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, had its origins in the mid-1980s in a consortium of trade unionists and historians who were interested in gathering and presenting material about one of the South's most significant strikes, yet an incident which had been repressed in memory and omitted from most history texts. In the 1970s and 1980s, interviewers for the University of North Carolina's Southern Oral History Program (SOHP) had asked Piedmont textile workers about the strike, only to be met, for the most part, with silence. (As one of those interviewers, I can recall the legacy of shame and a sense of violation that the strike had left.) This silence in turn led SOHP researchers to search for archival materials about the event. What they found instead at the National Archives, in Record Group 398 of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), was a remarkable and heretofore neglected collection of letters that mill hands had written to Franklin Roosevelt and the NRA about the effects of the textile industry code adopted in 1933. These letters subsequently proved critical in the writing of the prize-winning book *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*.⁹

Aware of the letters from reading *Like a Family*, and through the encouragement of Southern Oral History Program director Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, film makers Helfand and Stoney utilized the letters in a number of ways. Along with other documents—photographs from the Bettman Archives and elsewhere, newsreel footage, lists of union locals, and labor board case files—the letters served to open doors, stir memories, and challenge received historical wisdom in numerous southern communities where the strike and its larger context had long been forgotten or repressed. In various settings, the film makers painstakingly attempted to find the actual authors of the letters, more commonly finding their relatives or acquaintances who would then read them on camera. (The letters themselves were also filmed and featured in *Uprising* as well.) In particular, the letters proved crucial in documenting the involvement of the small number of African-American textile workers who were essentially absent from strike photographs and newsreels, yet who in their letters protested their exclusion from the first—and therefore precedent-setting—in-

⁸Much of what follows stems from my own observations of and involvement with the project, as well as a telephone conversation with Judith Helfand, 8 August 1995.

⁹Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et. al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), xv, 291–302, 305–18, 320–27.

dustrial code established under the NRA, and who formed “colored” locals in the months before the strike. In contrast to other sources, most notably the newsreel footage, the letters illustrated the process of insurgency, of people finding their own voice, that evolved well before the strike itself.

The letters thus fundamentally challenged the newsreel footage of the strike, obtained mainly from the Fox Movietone Collection at the University of South Carolina. True, the newsreel footage, like other documents, helped authenticate the strike and open up discussion in communities where it had occurred. Because of its visual power, it also led the film makers to seek narrators from places where newsreel footage had been shot. To illustrate the relationship between the past and present, and to draw attention to the sources themselves and the film makers’ process, they also filmed workers actually viewing newsreels of the strike.

Yet the newsreels also contained considerable limitations. The newsreels only documented the strike in certain locations; for instance, there existed no footage of Alabama and Tennessee at all. More importantly, they tended to support the simplistic notion equating unions with strikes, violence, and mayhem, to the exclusion of showing the process of grassroots resistance and organizing that preceded the strike. As Judith Helfand has written, the film makers’ greatest challenge was thus “to keep the newsreels from defining what is history.”

Accordingly, the film makers sought to find people actually featured in the newsreel footage, to find out “what times were like from their point of view, from the other side of the newsreel cameras.”¹⁰ In Newnan, Georgia, after a lengthy convoluted search involving newspaper clippings, the local bail bondsman, and the showing around of newsreel footage, they finally encountered Etta Mae Zimmerman, who had been arrested during the strike and, with others, detained at Fort McPherson, outside of Atlanta, where she had been captured on newsreel. While Zimmerman, now quite elderly and infirm, was not the most voluble of narrators, she did make clear to the film makers that union members and activists had been scattered in the aftermath of the strike, often blacklisted from where they had worked, if not the textile industry altogether.

This realization in turn led the film makers to more thoroughly explore and directly address the fear that accompanied the strike and its aftermath. It also helped prompt them to explore another key source, hundreds of grievances filed by the United Textile Workers (UTW) with the NRA, located in Record Group 402 of the NRA records at the National Archives, to reinstate workers who had been blacklisted. These case files provided rich narratives of the strike in numerous local situations. They often were written on union letterhead, which furnished additional information about various locals and their officers, as well as good visuals. They served as surrogate telephone directories, enabling the film makers to track down union members and leaders who had been dispersed from their communities in the wake of the strike. For instance, working directly from the blacklists found in the archives, the film makers were able to locate five members of one Knoxville, Tennessee local alone.

As with the other documents, the film makers showed the actual blacklists in the communities where they originated. For many workers, seeing the blacklists and the case files was accompanied by what Judith Helfand has called “a sense of awe;” the documents both validated their experience in the strike as being important enough to be preserved,

¹⁰Helfand, “Sewing History,” 42.

and showed that the union hadn't deserted them to the degree commonly believed.¹¹ As with the letters to the NRA and Roosevelt, the blacklists were both filmed and read aloud on camera by blacklisted individuals as well as their friends and relatives, in order to show specificity, the impact of the strike on actual flesh and blood people. In addition, while discussing the blacklists at the 1991 Southern Labor Studies Conference, the film makers learned for the first time that UTW attorney Joe Jacobs, whom they had already filmed, had been instrumental in filing the appeals of blacklisted workers with the NRA; this in turn led to further interviews with Jacobs.

Both on and off camera, the film makers creatively employed a wide array of other archival materials as well. For instance, by reading *Davison's Textile Blue Book*, a listing of all cotton mills, they were able to identify the original names of plants that had been re-named, sold or gone out of business since 1934. Mere lists of union locals served in community settings to challenge assumptions about southern anti-unionism, and were displayed in the film to illustrate the widespread nature of the strike. For the first part of the film, to depict life and work in the mill villages, Helfand, Stoney, and editor Suzanne Restock effectively intersplined film footage from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the H. Lee Waters Collection at Duke University, and elsewhere with photographs and oral history interviews to show workers' agency and complexity, and provide an antidote to traditional, two-dimensional portrayals of down-trodden lintheads.

Uprising, the movie, is also only part of an ongoing process. From the outset, the film makers perceived history as an organizing tool to address concerns of the present and future as well as the past. This, as should be obvious by now, did not imply taking a simplistic, didactic approach at all. Rather, it meant that the film makers served as facilitators in countless workshops, senior centers, schools, trade union leadership development sessions, and other settings, where they used the documents themselves to help enable people to talk about long-suppressed events and feelings, and to foster discussion about history and memory, community and democracy. In some places, the impact of this process has been extraordinary. As a direct result of the film, a woman in Honea Path, South Carolina, where six strikers were shot in 1934, launched a successful crusade to erect a memorial to the slain workers, unveiled on Memorial Day of 1995. In Chattanooga, Tennessee, high school social studies teachers have begun an ambitious, multi-faceted project centering around the strike, which will include oral histories, an exhibit, plays, and a trip to Washington, where students will visit the archives to handle and evaluate the material themselves. Thus, in a way, *Uprising* has gone full circle, back to the archives.¹²

Professional historians and documentarians also need education in documents. As we move into the twenty-first century, historians have the obligation to learn to critically use and evaluate photographs, newsreels, oral history interviews, television news clips, and other audio-visual materials, along with print culture items, in their work. They need to consider such items as a document's *raison d'être*, its elements of design, its subjects, its intended audience, its actual history after production, and its meaning. If they include photographs in their books, they should be conscientious in seeking images that are fresh, and that interact with the written text in diverse and creative ways.

¹¹Helfand, "Sewing History," 43.

¹²The *Uprising* materials themselves—tapes, transcripts, and other documents—have been deposited with the Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections, Georgia State University. For another case study of collaboration between an archives and a film documentary project, see Theresa A. Strotzman, "Making the Documentary 'Remembering Los Alamos: World War II,'" *Sound Historian* (Fall 1994): 58–66.

If they are serious about doing good history, film makers cannot simply pluck photographs, newsreels, and other documents out of their historical context; to do so is fundamentally misleading, whether intentionally or not. Furthermore, not only is this practice unethical, it may also lead to poorer films. Indeed, a case can easily be made that the more specificity and context a film has, the richer and more powerful it tends to be. Documentarians also need to be as open-minded as possible in considering archival sources which might be used in a visual medium; as we have seen, even lists of names can be effectively utilized if "set up" well.

To further ensure authenticity, film makers must be aware of the existing pertinent historical literature and debates. They should also enable others to review their methodology, at the very least by donating their raw tapes and other related materials, including a written review of their process, to an appropriate repository. This is perhaps especially true for those film makers (and historians) who employ oral history, which by its very nature is dialogic and democratic.¹³ Film makers can also develop auxiliary guides, multimedia projects, and other efforts which both reveal their relationship with their sources and foster enhanced appreciation of the subject matter.

It is the professional responsibility of archivists to have a pro-active relationship with any documents which might possibly be used in film. Like film makers, archivists should be open-minded and creative in thinking about which materials in a collection could work in a visual medium. In order to preserve the integrity of photographs, moving images, and other documents as much as possible, and to help ensure accuracy and authenticity in documentary presentation, they should describe their non-print materials in as detailed a fashion as possible. The more ways the materials can be described, both individually and collectively, the more ways they can be used, and the less chance that they will be misused or abused. Archivists can also issue guideposts for researchers on how to use various non-print materials, emphasizing the importance of presenting documents within their historical context, and should directly interact with documentarians about their projects. None of this of course guarantees either good history or good film; however, I have no doubt that many of the problems of documentary expression will be substantially reduced if we—film makers, historians, and archivists—follow these guidelines and continue to engage in dialogue with each other.

¹³For an elaboration of this point, see Ronald J. Grele, "Why Call it Oral History? Some Ruminations From the Field," *Pennsylvania History* 60 (October 1993): 506–9.