



DOCUMENTARY MEDIA

HISTORY, THEORY, PRACTICE



BRODERICK FOX

ROUTLEDGE



Documentary Media

In a digital moment where both the democratizing and totalitarian possibilities of media are unprecedented, the need for complex, ethical, and imaginative documentary media—for you, the reader of this book to think, question, and create—is vital. Whether you are an aspiring or seasoned practitioner, an activist or community leader, a student or scholar, or simply a curious audience member, author Broderick Fox opens up documentary media and its changing forms and diversifying social functions to readers in a manner that is at once rigorous, absorbing, and practical. This new edition updates and further explores the various histories, ideas, and cultural debates that surround and shape documentary practice today. Each chapter engages readers by challenging traditional assumptions, posing critical and creative questions, and offering up innovative historical and contemporary examples. Additionally, each chapter closes with an “Into Practice” section that provides analysis and development exercises and hands-on projects that will assist you in generating a full project prospectus, promotional trailer, and web presence for your own documentary.

Broderick Fox is a media practitioner and scholar whose work explores the democratizing potentials of digital media technologies and distribution platforms, to engage challenging perspectives and subject matters traditionally excised from mainstream media. His award-winning documentaries, including recent titles *The Skin I'm In* and *Zen & the Art of Dying*, are available globally on a number of platforms including the academic streaming service Kanopy. Fox is a professor in the Media Arts & Culture Department at Occidental College in Los Angeles, where he teaches courses on both theory and production.



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This book is dedicated to Lee Biolos, my partner and support in all facets of life.



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Preface

Whether you are an aspiring or seasoned practitioner, an activist or community leader, a student or scholar, or simply a curious audience member, the aim of this book is to unlock your approach to the study, development, and creation of documentary media.

With nearly every new personal computer arriving with factory-installed nonlinear editing software, mobile devices capable of shooting high-resolution video, and the Internet permitting the instant distribution and sharing of media, notions of who may call themselves a media maker are rapidly and profoundly shifting. Interest in documentary media has exploded, as evidenced by the proliferation of channels, sites, and programs devoted to documentary works, the emergence of interactive and transmedia documentary forms, and the upsurge of user-created content with claims to “the real” on the Internet. Yet access to technology is not necessarily synonymous with its use toward creative, innovative, and culturally challenging ends. In fact, there is often an alarming disconnect between these digital-age capacities and the potential, power, and responsibility that come with their use.

As a scholar, media practitioner, and college professor, I found myself frustrated by the absence of a single text that addressed documentary development and production in a critically, ethically, and historically informed fashion. As such, each chapter in *Documentary Media: History, Theory, Practice* challenges traditional assumptions about documentary form and function, presents critical theories and creative techniques, offers historical and contemporary examples for consideration, and closes with an Into Practice section that assists readers in putting the chapter’s concepts to direct use in three distinct ways:

- *Analysis*: A set of guiding queries and perspectives organized around the concepts of the chapter are posed that the reader can keep in mind while watching documentary media.
- *Development*: A series of prompts and guided exercises lead readers step by step through ideation and development of their own documentary projects. By the final chapter, any reader who has committed to the development directives at the end of each chapter will come away with:
 - A project treatment
 - A detailed prospectus
 - A production notebook
 - Templates for a participant informed consent/release form, an emergency medical form, a location release form, a call sheet, and a music release form.
- *Practice*: The practice sections offer a sequence of exercises and projects designed to help readers gain technical skills specific to the documentary form and to grapple hands-on with the historical, theoretical, and creative concepts raised in the chapters. Readers who carry out the exercises and projects with a specific documentary endeavor in mind will generate:
 - Camera and sound tests
 - Archival and other supplemental audiovisual materials
 - Interview footage
 - Footage from the field produced in a range of modes
 - An opening teaser
 - A promotional trailer
 - A web presence for their project.

In short, critical scholars and general readers will be afforded detailed insights into the production process, the history and theories of documentary, and the ethics of representation. Practitioners will be challenged to develop works that are ethically responsible, historically grounded, and creatively and formally innovative. For educators, this book's integrated approaches make it distinctly suited to addressing the growing importance of both media studies and media production to all disciplines.

The documentary media examples cited in each chapter are specifically chosen to represent a range of time periods, approaches, subject matters, and practitioners' identities. Some are popular titles while others were intentionally selected over more familiar works to permit an exposure to works that readers might not otherwise encounter. All media texts discussed are readily accessible through online retailers or academic distributors. The *Quick Reference: Media Resource List* in Appendix K provides the directors, distributors, and vendors associated with every project analyzed. The writing on each media example is also intended to give enough context that each need not be viewed to understand the related concept in question. Viewing the mentioned documentaries will certainly deepen the experience, but readers are also encouraged to seek out the chapters' concepts in other works.

I am a scholar and practitioner working in the United States, but *Documentary Media: History, Theory, Practice* has been designed to acknowledge and examine cultural context in its questions. The production practices developed foreground cultural sensitivity and ethical considerations at all stages, from ideation and preproduction, to production and postproduction, to distribution and audience outreach and engagement. Many historical examples in this text are international in origin, and the evolution of documentary aesthetics, form, and function continues to be a global conversation. Many contemporary examples do come from the United States, but these are distinctly diverse as well. Chosen works often address international issues, and they represent a spectrum of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status both in their subject matter and in the identity of their practitioners.

The central premises of this book also encourage independence and innovation by

- exploding preconceptions and tropes of documentary form and function;
- encouraging scholars from across disciplines to think more broadly about the practical realities and representational stakes of documentary media;
- pushing makers to contextualize their work historically, critically, and ethically; and
- developing aesthetic and narrative approaches specific to the technology and means at one's disposal.

I believe these core aims are relevant across geographies, disciplines, and curriculums, and I encourage each of you to shape the questions and processes suggested in this book to your own purposes, rather than permitting "mainstream" notions of form and function or access to "professional" technologies and budgets stand as deterrents to taking action and representing your "reality."

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Reimagining Documentary

Chances are that many of you come to this book with strong convictions about what a documentary looks and sounds like, what it can be about, and the role of documentary media in society. This opening chapter is designed to explode your preconceptions of documentary and to reframe the possibilities and responsibilities that come with watching and making documentaries. This involves isolating some core concepts, which far too frequently go unexamined in our daily viewing of media that make claims to the real, lived world around us. We will subject the following assumed “norms” in spectatorship and production to fresh scrutiny:

- *Reality, Objectivity, and Truth:* We'll explore these monolithic concepts so frequently attributed to documentary, revealing their socially constructed nature and exploring the representational burdens we place upon documentary media both as audience members and makers.
- *Subject, Form, and Function:* Often documentary is defined by negation, termed nonfiction or nonnarrative. Through specific historical and contemporary examples, we'll expand our notions of what subjects are worth representing, the forms documentary media can take, and the roles documentaries can serve in society.
- *Power and the Public Sphere:* We often hear about media existing in a *public sphere*—a space of collective spectatorship and debate. What are the boundaries of this space, and is access to it really as democratic as we'd like to think? What is the line between such a forum and the *private sphere* that comprises each of our individual lives? Where do the forces of government and corporate control enter into the mix? We'll address a third, often-forgotten *sphere of public authority*, which controls much of the media that shapes our sense of reality and ask what place and purpose independent documentary holds in the mix.

This first chapter will at times be conceptual and theoretical. Without a shared critical foundation and basic terminology, we won't be able to watch and analyze existing works fully. Nor will we be equipped to develop and make complex, challenging documentaries of our own that surprise and energize audiences out of complacency and into active spectatorship and citizenship.

Reimagining documentary is by no means a process of breaking fully from the past. In our quest for newness we are often too quick to overlook both prior successes and other innovations that may have come before their time. As the specific examples in this chapter and those that follow will prove, history offers a wealth of renegade strategies and approaches to representing reality just waiting to be revitalized in our digital age.

This chapter is designed to be critically and conceptually freeing, opening up possibilities for pleasure, experimentation, and audacity rarely associated with documentary media production. Clear your mind of presumptions, and let us expand documentary's social, political, and representational possibilities.

Reality?

André Bazin was a French critic who wrote extensively on film and culture after World War II, co-founding the seminal journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1951. His strong opinions, though often contested, continue to serve as touchstones in media debates today. Though Bazin wrote primarily on fiction film, his collected writings *What Is Cinema?* (Volumes 1 and 2), published in 1958 and 1959, have much to do with documentary, particularly in the ways that Bazin weaves his opinions and definitions of *reality*, *objectivity*, and *truth*. In his essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” Bazin writes:

Originality in photography as distinct from originality in painting lies in the essentially objective character of photography. . . . For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. The personality of the photographer enters into the proceedings only in his selection of the object to be photographed and by way of the purpose he has in mind.

(vol. 1: 13)

In plain terms, an *ontology* refers to a state or status of being, and as this excerpt attests, Bazin is making a strong claim for the status of images produced through the lens of a camera over those rendered by the human hand alone. He claims a particular *indexicality*—a direct, one-to-one link between real-world subject and resultant image—that gives the photograph a claim to reality greater than that of other representational strategies, bestowing upon that image a sign of “objectivity” or “truth.”

Writing in a predigital age, Bazin’s argument may already seem quaint to us now. We live in an era of photo-processing software and computer-generated imagery, where the authenticity of recorded audio and photographic evidence is continually toyed with or called into question. The idea of photographs, film, and video frames somehow possessing single, absolute meanings has been starkly challenged through highly politicized examples.

In 1991, Rodney King, an African American, was pulled over by Los Angeles police after leading them on a high-speed chase. Claiming that King resisted arrest, the four officers exerted excessive force—tasing King and beating him with their batons. Local resident George Holliday captured the officers’ assault on video. The tape spread around the world on the next news cycle, igniting a bonfire of latent racial tensions in Los Angeles and across the country.

For most, the twelve minutes of Holliday’s video presented clear evidence of the four white police officers using excessive force. But after a judge replacement and a venue change to the predominately white suburb of Simi Valley, in April 1992, three of the four officers were fully acquitted by a jury of thirteen whites, one Hispanic, and one Asian. The decision sparked a week of race riots in Los Angeles that left over fifty people dead and resulted in close to a billion dollars in property damage. For many, the rulings delivered an unambiguous message about the reality of racism and classism in American society: that the “reality” of the photographic image is rigged against the socially disenfranchised. The King verdict and its message about the malleability of photographic evidence fostered deep, painful community rifts and a distrust of both law enforcement and the judicial system that only continue to be compounded in our own digital moment.

The Rodney King tape is but one example of our postmodern condition. By *postmodern* I refer to a cultural state since World War II when simple notions of modern social progress



Figure 1.1 George Holliday's amateur video captures Rodney King being beaten by police.

(everything can be explained and improved through technology, science, and logic) unraveled in the wake of the European Holocaust and the atomic bomb. Such a world view was replaced by a far more amorphous, fragmented, and relativistic experience of reality. In our postmodern, digital, and globalized culture, the sheer amount of imagery and audiovisual accounts now representing “reality”—print journalism, network and cable news, online journalism, independent documentary, viral videos, blogs, social media platforms, expert interviews, surveillance cameras, amateur video, firsthand testimony and witnessing, reenactments, fictionalized renditions, intentionally “fake” news, etc.—are so great that many argue the ontology of the photographic image has been forever compromised.

Rather than throwing up our hands and declaring the representation of reality an impossibility, we all should seize upon this as an opportunity to break out of our traditional roles as passive viewers. Instead, we can actively seek out and synthesize meaning from a range of media forms for ourselves, taking greater accountability not only in our spectatorial practices but also in how we produce and insert new imagery and media into the conversation. Since Rodney King, the frequency with which we encounter videos of excessive police force against U.S. citizens, particularly African American males, has increased exponentially. This is certainly due in part to developments in “official” recording practices—the use of bodycams as part of police protocol and the increased video surveillance of public spaces—and activists’ demands to have such material made public. But such visibility is also a result of the proliferation of audiovisual recording devices on our mobile technologies and our individual capacities to distribute such material online.

In July 2014, on a Staten Island street corner, it was the decision of witness Ramsey Orta to use his phone to record and then post video of Eric Garner suffocating at the hands of excessive police force that rocketed the case into real-time popular consciousness, quickly transforming his repeated refrain of “I can’t breathe” into an enduring protest call and a globally recognized #ICantBreathe hashtag. Two years later, in July 2016, the traffic stop for a broken tail light that ended in the fatal St. Paul, Minnesota police shooting of Philando Castile was not only archived to video but livestreamed to Facebook, narrated in real time by girlfriend Diamond Reynolds to the world through her phone. The ubiquity of such seemingly incriminating audiovisual material has not yet led to what most would consider to be appropriate legal justice, accountability, policy changes, or cultural shifts around systemic racism. What has indisputably changed, however, is individuals’ increased self-identification and empowerment as media producers.

In Chapter 2, we will historicize video and underscore that consumer analog camcorders were still prohibitively expensive for most in 1991, when Holliday recorded Rodney King’s beating. The power to produce the contextualizing ontology of that video was controlled by only a handful of corporate television stations and cable conglomerates. Digital-age access to the means of production and distribution has been profoundly democratized. And as we’ll revisit at the end of this chapter in our discussion of a *public sphere*, the current potential for our individual media acts to impact mainstream media narratives, policy debates and legislation, and broader cultural conversations is unprecedented. Notions of what a documentary should look and sound like, the sorts of issues it should address, and who can call themselves a “maker” are in a present state of flux that you can actively participate in shaping. We can also each acknowledge and never take for granted our privilege and responsibility as media producers—using whatever technologies are at our disposal to offer our own claims to reality.

Objectivity?

The notion of objectivity long associated with documentary media is a myth. Contrary to Bazin’s assertions, the camera is not an apparatus operating independently from human intervention. The choice of what to frame always means turning one’s back on something else, and the syntax of editing and sound design profoundly shape the meaning of a shot. The documentaries we often see on television—news magazine programs, nature documentaries, or historical biographies—are often termed *expository* documentaries (to be explored further in Chapter 2) as they are guided by a disembodied voice-of-God narrator providing exposition and supplemented with images or interview sound bites subordinate to this narration. The function of such documentaries can usually be described as informational, with rarely any further challenge, call to action, or methods of engagement suggested as the end credits roll. Most often, viewers come away with no sense of the identity of the filmmakers behind the camera or the politics governing the documentary’s creation.

Such an approach is similar to the methodology long used to write “official” accounts of history. If you think back to a history textbook from high school or even college, chances are you were supplied with a chronological order of events, neatly relating to one another through *causality* (A led to B and because of that C). The writing was likely a series of declarative statements, with few questions posed, and certainly never a use of the first person—the historian’s own identity obscured behind a proper, academic “voice.” There is

much that is attractive about such approaches to documentary and history. For the viewer or reader, details and events seem clear, linear, straightforward, and factual. And yet a false logic can occur: the absence of any contradiction and the invisibility of the writer or maker often lead us to confer unquestioned objectivity, truth, and facticity to the account.

In 1991, an experimental video by Japanese American filmmaker Rea Tajiri achieved the rare feat of making three distinct groups—historians, documentary practitioners, and media scholars—all come together in shared fascination of her documentary video *History and Memory* (1991). The video explores the rarely addressed history of internment camps on America's west coast during World War II, where over 100,000 Japanese Americans, stripped of property, possessions, and civil liberties, were relocated and incarcerated for the duration of the war.

The U.S. government's War Relocation Authority filmed documentary images of internment, creating newsreel films aimed at legitimizing and downplaying internment in popular consciousness. These works of propaganda, along with a series of photos by Dorothea Lange and a handful of Hollywood fiction films, have, for all intents and purposes, come to constitute the "reality" of Japanese American internment in *American popular memory*.

Scholar Marita Sturken warns, "The camera image produces memories, yet in offering itself as a material fragment of the past it can also produce a kind of forgetting. As such camera images can be seen as 'screen memories'" (1). Sturken's recruitment of *screen memory* references a psychoanalytic concept coined by Sigmund Freud to describe substitute memories one might construct in order to mask traumatic memories. Extending the mechanism of screen memory to media's role in constructing popular memory in our contemporary screen culture provides compelling and disturbing double meaning to the word *screen*. We risk the "official" War Relocation Authority propaganda films, or Hollywood films depicting World War II and offering false closure as the end credits roll, becoming our nation's "screen memories" of internment—remembered as a necessary wartime evil, smoothed over by a ceremonial apology in 1988 and then relegated to the history books.

In Tajiri's case, this hole in popular memory was accompanied by a hole in her own *private memory*. She tells us in voice-over:

I began searching for a history—my own history. Because I had known all along that the stories I'd heard were not true and that parts had been left out. I remember having this feeling as I was growing up that I was haunted by something, that I was living within a family full of ghosts. There was this place that they knew about. I had never been there, yet I had a memory for it. I could remember a time of great sadness before I was born. We had been moved; uprooted. We had lived with a lot of pain. I had no idea where these memories came from, yet I knew the place.

How does a documentary maker represent a historical event still largely outside popular memory, or a family history comprised of fragmented stories told in snatches by various relatives, for which there are, for the most part, no documented images? In *History and Memory*, Tajiri gathers every image she can find:

- Hollywood films (*From Here to Eternity*, *Bad Day at Black Rock*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*)
- Newsreel footage (Captain Eric Hakansson's footage of the actual Pearl Harbor attack, captured Japanese footage taken from an airplane)
- War Department-sponsored propaganda (John Ford's *December 7th*, Salinas Relocation Center footage, Office of War Information films such as *Japanese Relocation*).

To such "official" and popular images she adds:

- The few private photos her family has (cameras were confiscated in the camps)
- Family possessions (drawings by her uncle, a wooden bird carved by her grandmother, a box of white movie star pictures belonging to her sister, her grandparents' camp identification cards)
- Excerpts from David Tatsuno's *Topaz Footage* (1942–1945), shot by internee Tatsuno with a hidden camera during his internment years at the Topaz internment camp.

Tajiri selects this final repository of amateur footage for the private glimpses it offers into camp life. Although she is not related to Tatsuno and her own family was interned at Salinas, not Topaz, Tajiri uses these images as proxy home movies to imagine the experiences of her relatives. The resulting mix, combined with voice-overs from various relatives, her own present-day video footage revisiting the remnants of the Poston Camp, and scrolling text excerpts from a variety of official and private sources, confounds traditional separations of public and private history, calling many of the long-standing practices of historians and documentary producers into question. In each of these disciplines' traditional forms, an unnamed writer or narrator shapes a deceptively clear, single line of events out of the infinite details. In Tajiri's video, the infinite details and perspectives are offered to audiences at a dizzying pace in multiple, often simultaneous layers, and the guiding voice is Tajiri's own, her personal search for a family history serving as the work's unifying property.

Tajiri does not appear on screen during her video, with one distinct exception. She begins and ends the video by conjuring a memory fragment of her mother in the camps, stooping to fill a canteen at a water pump—an image Rea could not possibly have seen firsthand



Figure 1.2 Frames from *History and Memory*. Top, left to right: scrolling text written in screenplay format; a reenacted family image performed by Rea Tajiri; a bird carved in the camps by Tajiri's grandmother. Bottom, left to right: a WRA image of the Santa Anita camp; one of Tajiri's only remaining family photos from before internment; Tajiri superimposes her own question on a War Relocation Authority propagand film.

because she was not yet born. A reenactment of this image, shot to resemble an 8mm home movie image, recurs throughout the video. Tajiri makes the compelling choice to cast herself as her mother in this reenactment (an example of what we'll describe as a *performative mode* of documentary in Chapter 2), underscoring the fact that the holes in her mother's memory and the pain that keeps her mother from talking about the camps are now also very much her own. As the video ends, she offers this conjured video image as a gift to her mother—a gift of a private memory for which there was no official recording, now visualized and shared with audiences nonetheless.

What emerges from *History and Memory*, and what makes its popularity endure among audiences, critics, and historians alike, is a new form of historical telling in which subjectivity is not a liability, but rather a central necessity in producing acts of *countermemory* that challenge both the official historical record and dominant popular memory narratives. Rather than the customary monologue, Tajiri creates a documentary space of dialogue. Instead of a singular line of cause and effect, she intentionally produces contrast, contradiction, and questioning through her edits. At one point Tajiri superimposes text over a War Relocation Authority film image asking the haunting question "Who chose what story to tell?" Tajiri favors *reflexivity* (also to be explored in Chapter 2) over *transparency*, making audiences aware of the media production process and her hand in it as we watch. She makes us understand that the meaning of a documentary doesn't simply come from its informational content but also from its *form*—the particular aesthetic possibilities of time-based, audiovisual media to communicate that information in a fashion not possible via a print article, a radio podcast, or a photo essay. Instead of promising objectivity, Tajiri instead offers perspective and greater understanding, making us think for ourselves and expanding our perceptions about viable forms of documentary evidence.

Truth?

Despite the potential range in form and content, all documentaries make *truth claims* about our physical world and its workings. Like objectivity, however, the concept of truth is also a myth. Even seasoned audiences tend to leave some of their critical questioning and active viewing behind as soon as *talking heads* (referring to the typical closeup framing of head and shoulders in expository documentary interviews) with official-looking credentials displayed in a *lower third* (referencing the typical placement of identifying name/occupation text chyrons in the lower third of the frame) and authoritative voices appear on the screen.

In Orson Welles's final film *F for Fake* (1973), the subject matter is forgery and deception, but Welles assures us, "Everything you hear and see in the next hour will be true." The film intertwines the antics of three real-life charlatans—the forgery painter Elmyr de Hory, the fact-falsifying biographer Clifford Irving, and the life/art-blurring actress Oya Koda. Welles himself takes on the role of performer and narrator, a prestidigitator of sorts who chronicles this ride of forgery, fraud, and sleight of hand.

The documentary includes footage from three separate film endeavors that a combination of real-life coincidences and directorial flair led Welles to intertwine. Comfortably immersed in what we think is the film's *diegesis* (the world of the film—all the sounds and images its characters can also see and hear; score and voice-over, for example, are nondiegetic), the shot suddenly zooms out to reveal we are watching this footage along with Welles in an editing suite as it plays on an editing flatbed. The screen of reality has in fact been framed

within another level of space and time all along. With the punch of a button, the sequence we just watched stops and rewinds as Welles inundates us with an entirely new forgery subplot twist and its associated set of “facts.”

It makes sense for a film about fakery to engage in it, and though Welles keeps his promise that everything we “see and hear in the next hour will be true,” his film is just over an hour long. But because the film is dizzying in its layers and its speed, few viewers are watching the clock, and when the film crosses the one-hour mark most don’t notice the moment when Welles is freed up from his promise. *F for Fake* is an entertaining romp that ultimately frames serious questions about both the mutability of evidence and the suspension of disbelief we so quickly cede when watching a documentary. The film also challenges the role of “experts,” asking us to meditate on why we permit self-appointed elites (filmmakers, critics, academics, public figures of all sorts) to sway our beliefs so heavily, allowing these same individuals to pronounce what is and is not art, what is and is not genuine, and what is and is not true.

In *Confessions of a Chameleon* (1987), video artist Lynn Hershman Leeson sits before the camera in talking-head closeup against nondescript backdrops and talks directly to the camera for the video’s entire twenty-two-minute duration. But the piece is far from static. Hershman begins by telling us,

So when I was small, when I was little, there would be these, uh, kinds of episodes of battering. I would go up to my attic and, uh, almost retreat into myself. And I would create these characters, each of which had their own life. Um, very completely. And sometimes it was hard to tell who was who or what the real truth of the incidents were and, uh, what was fantasy. It was always that, uh, in my situation the truth was always much more difficult to believe than anything I made up.

Already during this opening clip, the frame of the traditional documentary image begins to fragment, both formally and ontologically. A second identical, but smaller image frame of Hershman speaking begins to float across the screen. As Hershman recounts the stories of her life—going to college at the age of twelve, spending several years of her life in the hospital terribly ill, working as a call girl to support her daughter, creating a socialite persona in San Francisco who would crash parties and then steal leftover food from the trash to take home—the dates and facts she offers up begin to defy any neat chronology. The stories simply don’t seem to match up. Correspondingly, Hershman’s image multiplies on screen at times; in other moments it flips or mirrors itself. The intense candor of her confessional mode and the simple talking-head frame we so associate with documentary truth are continually undermined, in both form and content, until Hershman’s final utterance: “And I always tell the truth.”

What are we to make of *Confessions of a Chameleon*? If we’re to call this a documentary, what sort of *truth claim* (a charge substantiated by verifiable evidence) can we possibly ascribe to it? The piece is one in a series of four videos, collectively called *First Person Plural, The Electronic Diaries of Lynn Hershman Leeson* (1984–1996). All are similarly confessional, and by watching them in sequence one gains a fuller picture of Hershman as someone who is incredibly intelligent and highly imaginative, who is the survivor of physical and sexual abuse, and who has a complex often painful relationship to her physical body—separating internal conceptions of self from her physical reality. She is someone who bares herself to her audiences with a rare, blunt candor while simultaneously hiding: behind her hair, her words, and the formal choices of framing and editing she employs.



Figure 1.3 Lynn Hershman Leeson fragments and refracts multiple selves in a frame from *Confessions of a Chameleon*.

And yet even without seeing other works by Hershman, some extremely powerful truth claims emerge from *Confessions of a Chameleon*. The title and her opening words (“ . . . in my situation the truth was always much more difficult to believe than anything I made up”) make no pretense about the fact that from an early age, Hershman fragmented her personality, blurred fantasy and reality, and donned multiple personas as a means of sheer survival. Individuals can choose for themselves which of her details to believe and which to question, but there is undoubtedly a kernel of truth in every story she tells. Any fibs or exaggerations she mixes in still testify to the fact that Hershman developed an elaborate proclivity for fantasy and screen memory as survival mechanisms against incest and abuse.

Through *Confessions of a Chameleon*, we must ask ourselves what place dreams, imagination, fantasy, superstition, memory, and other powerful internal, subjective states have in documentary. Fantasy and screen memory become forms of documentary evidence—legacies of trauma that directly impact Hershman’s conception of self and her interactions with others in the real, lived world. Hershman’s closing words, “And I always tell the truth,” are in essence an invective to us all to ask questions as viewers—to become active, engaged spectators who judge evidence and calibrate truth for ourselves by measures beyond the mere words, images, and speaker credentials on screen. Lynn Hershman Leeson offers her private past into the public sphere, confessing and cajoling us toward profound truths about the human condition and possible forms of documentary evidence.