

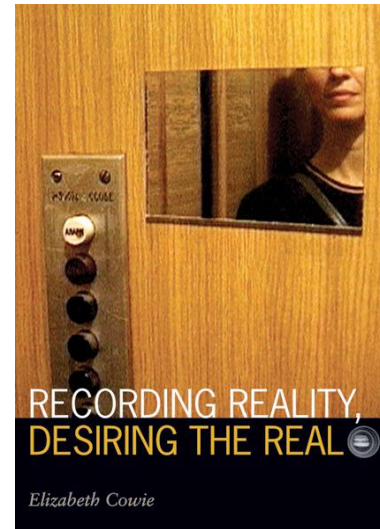
Elizabeth Cowie, **Recording Reality, Desiring the Real**, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 296 pp., \$75.00 (hardcover), \$25.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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Scholars historically engaged psychoanalytic theory with fiction film, but recent applications of psychoanalytic theory have also offered some insightful readings into documentary. While the intersections with trauma are most prevalent, scholars have started exploring other areas, such as emotion in Belinda Smaill's (2010) *The Documentary: Politics, Emotion, Culture* and ethics in Agnieszka Piotrowska's (2014) *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film*. In **Recording Reality, Desiring the Real**, Elizabeth Cowie combines psychoanalytic theory with deconstructionism and semiotics to examine some of the fundamental questions in documentary studies.



Recording Reality, Desiring the Real is part of the Visible Evidence series from University of Minnesota Press. The book includes an introductory overview and six chapters, each following a similar pattern that begins with a brief introduction followed by a theoretical overview and then the theory's application. Cowie signposts each chapter with a statement of its intent and focus, which helps clarify and frame the theoretical discussions that follow. A wide range of theorists appear, including Freud, Lacan, Deleuze, Žižek, Derrida, Bakhtin, Foucault, and many others. Cowie applies their ideas to a variety of documentary titles, canonical and new, traditional and experimental. Examples include *Las Hurdes (Land without Bread)*, Luis Buñuel, 1932), *Coal Face* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1935), *Let There Be Light* (John Huston, 1945), and *Capturing the Freidmans* (Andrew Jarecki, 2003). Cowie also includes titles from television (*Disaster at Hillsborough*; Yorkshire Television, 1990), reality television (*Big Brother*), and experimental installations (*Post-Partum Document*; Mary Kelly, 1973–1979). Notably, all documentaries addressed in this volume come from European and North American creators.

In the introduction, Cowie begins with the difficult dichotomy that always confounds documentary theorists, practitioners, and audiences: the form's supposed separation from, if opposition to, fiction, even though each form draws on the same tools, sometimes in the same ways. The book's purpose, she asserts, is to analyze

the paradox that arises here—of the fascinating pleasure of recorded reality as both spectacle and knowledge—through examining the interrelationship and interdependence of the pleasures of spectacle, voice, and identification in the documentary with its project of informing and educating. (p. 3).

This scrutiny of reality converges with provided evidence, particularly the subject, and with the audience, whom she calls the "citizen-spectator" (p. 1). The remainder of the introduction unpacks questions about the intersections of reality, knowledge, desire, and spectacle toward demonstrating how the "pleasures" of documentary emerge through "the re-presentation of actuality" (p. 2).

Chapter 1, titled "Narrating the Real: The Fiction and Nonfiction of Documentary Storytelling," engages these issues in more depth, unraveling the relationship between fiction and nonfiction to demonstrate not their oppositeness, but to nuance their similarities. Evoking Lacan, Pierce, Bazin, and others, Cowie notes how these terms are not inherent in the texts themselves but arrive through external validation and that the truth emerges from discourse. A brief analysis of *Capturing the Friedmans* concludes the chapter.

Chapter 2, "Working Images: Representing Work and Voicing the Ordinary," questions representations that show everyday life, as both "a sensory experience" and "as historical information" (p. 46). In particular, Cowie focuses on an array of 1930s documentaries about labor, drawing on the theories of documentary pioneers John Grierson and Dziga Vertov, alongside Foucault, Butler, and Rancière, to examine *Las Hurdes*, *Coal Face*, *A Day in the Life of a Coal Miner* (Kineto Production Company, 1910), and *Housing Problems* (Arthur Elton, Edgar Anstey, and Ruby Grierson, 1935), among others. Chapter 3, "Documentary Desire: Seeing for Ourselves and Identifying in Reality," addresses the intersections of desire, knowledge, and identification through Lacan, Freud, and Deleuze. Cowie writes, "The documentary's gaze allows us to 'see for ourselves' in an identification with the camera as objective and disembodied. We take the camera's look as our own in a wish to see" (p. 91). Specifically, she draws on Lacan's four discourses—the hysteric, the master, the university, and the analyst—to unpack these meanings in documentaries such as *Capturing the Friedmans* and *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (Spike Lee, 2006).

Chapter 4, simply titled "Documenting the Real," segues into questions of the unrepresentability of traumas in the face of documentary's "assertion of the knowability of the world" (p. 118) within *War Neuroses: Netley, 1917*, *Seale Hayne Military Hospital 1918* (Pathé, 1918) and *Let There Be Light*. Freud and Lacan figure prominently here, though the chapter's analysis favors *War Neuroses* over *Let There Be Light*. In Chapter 5, "Ways of Seeing and the Surreal of Reality," Cowie reframes the questions of reality into questions of surreality, specifically within the work of Jean Rouch, and how they force us to "re-see" reality in new ways.

The final chapter, "Specters of the Real: Documentary Time and Art," proves the most intriguing and insightful of the entire volume. Derrida, Bakhtain, Deleuze, and Žižek provide the foundation for considering the intersections of time and politics. Notably, this chapter pushes the boundaries of the documentary canon by looking at art installations and more experimental documentaries, such as *Maelstrom: A Family Chronicle* (Peter Forgacs, 1997), *Portrait of My Mother* (Milica Tomić, 1999), *The Nightcleaners Part One* (Berwick Street Collective, 1975), *El Valley Centro* (James Benning, 2002), and others. The installation *Post-Partum Document* garners detailed discussion that delves into the materials incorporated into the work, such as diaries, used diapers, and scribbles, while aligning it with psychoanalytic theory.

This book possesses several strengths. The primary strength is that it brings a broad range of critical theory to bear on some of the foundational ideas of the documentary form, such as the complexities of "real," the desire for knowledge, and the ideas of time. Another strength lies in how Cowie addresses both canonical works and surprising choices in her analyses, such as *Coal Face* and the much earlier *A Day in the Life of a Coalminer* in one pairing and *Let There Be Light* and *War Neuroses: Netley, 1917, Seale Hayne Military Hospital 1918* in another. She further pushes past the medium-bound definitions of documentary film to consider photography, television, and, more extensively, documentary art, particularly in the book's final chapter. The signposting, particularly at the start of the chapters, helps frame and move ideas forward.

As intense and detailed are the discussions of theory within this book, however, it would have been nice to see more balance between each theory and its application to the films and other texts. Some analyses offer a great depth of detail but others end rather abruptly, such as the discussion of *Let There Be Light*, which is more abbreviated than the long discussion of *War Neuroses*. The book, too, ends rather abruptly. While the final paragraph is insightful for that specific chapter, a short conclusion beyond that paragraph would have helped to bring these complex ideas engaged throughout the book together more.

Recording Reality, Desiring the Real is intended for audiences with deep backgrounds in and thorough understandings of critical theory, including but not limited to psychoanalysis, semiotics, deconstructionism, and others. Familiarity with documentary theory offers some help, but the critical theory background is almost essential. The volume is better suited for scholars looking for psychoanalytical insights into the documentary form, though graduate students with advanced coursework might find it engaging as well. Undergraduate students, however, might struggle with the depth of theory and writing.

Overall, *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* makes an important contribution to the applications of psychoanalytic and other cultural theories on the foundational questions of documentary. Cowie deftly uses these theoretical approaches to face head on the complexities of reality, our knowingness of that reality, and our desires for that knowingness represented in that reality.

References

Piotrowska, A. (2014). *Psychoanalysis and ethics in documentary film*. London, UK: Routledge.

Smaill, B. (2010). *The documentary: Politics, emotion, culture*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.