

Sheridan College

## SOURCE: Sheridan Institutional Repository

---

Faculty Publications and Scholarship

School of Communication and Literary Studies

---

Fall 2008

### Dresden Story and the Emergence of the Talking Head in the NFB Documentary

Michael Brendan Baker

McGill University, [mike.baker@sheridancollege.ca](mailto:mike.baker@sheridancollege.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://source.sheridancollege.ca/fhass\\_comm\\_publ](https://source.sheridancollege.ca/fhass_comm_publ)



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

---

#### SOURCE Citation

Baker, Michael Brendan, "Dresden Story and the Emergence of the Talking Head in the NFB Documentary" (2008). *Faculty Publications and Scholarship*. 7.

[https://source.sheridancollege.ca/fhass\\_comm\\_publ/7](https://source.sheridancollege.ca/fhass_comm_publ/7)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#). This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Communication and Literary Studies at SOURCE: Sheridan Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Scholarship by an authorized administrator of SOURCE: Sheridan Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact [source@sheridancollege.ca](mailto:source@sheridancollege.ca).

MICHAEL BRENDAN BAKER

## **DRESDEN STORY AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE TALKING HEAD IN THE NFB DOCUMENTARY**

**Résumé:** Peu d'histoires du cinéma documentaire délimitent clairement l'apparition du sujet interviewé comme dispositif rhétorique standard des films de nonfiction. En concentrant notre étude sur le développement de la « tête parlante » dans les documentaires de l'Office national du film du Canada, nous pouvons identifier les circonstances qui ont entouré l'émergence de ce procédé à l'intérieur du vocabulaire et de la culture filmiques. Plusieurs théories de la voix et de la performance dans le documentaire informent notre analyse de *Dresden story*, une production peu connue de l'ONF pour la CBC, portant sur les tensions raciales grandissantes dans une petite ville ontarienne au début des années 50. Ce film de nonfiction comporte diverses formes d'énonciation directe, incluant la narration en voix off, un animateur de télévision, des entrevues devant la caméra et des tables rondes. Tout cela illustre un point tournant dans l'histoire de la « tête parlante » dans le documentaire canadien.

Numerous surveys of the development of documentary cinema and analyses of its transitional moments exist, especially those concerning technological evolution and shifts in representational strategy. And yet few histories clearly mark out a space for the emergence of the interview subject as one of the standard rhetorical devices in nonfiction film. These “talking heads,” ranging in appearance from speaking subjects directly addressing the camera to the testimony of witnesses addressing an on-screen or off-screen interviewer, are a dominant feature of contemporary documentary cinema and a basic component of film and television language. While there are various discussions concerning the ideological dimension of interviews generally, there is little to no critical examination of when, how and why the device first emerges and subsequently evolves within specific filmmaking contexts.<sup>1</sup> By localizing my inquiry and focusing on the development of the interview subject in the films of the National Film Board of Canada, I hope to offer a specific account of the circumstances under which talking heads become a part of film vocabulary and documentary culture.

The corpus of early documentary cinema in Canada is built largely upon the compilation film in which assembled archival footage is accompanied by voice-over commentary in such a way that the spoken word establishes if not overdetermines the meaning of the images. The interview subject is first used as a

testimonial contributing to the truth claims made by the image and narration in co-operation. Voice-over commentary, however, remains the dominant organizing feature of nonfiction films. Colloquially dubbed “voice of God” narration, the device is described by Charles Wolfe as “connoting a position of absolute mastery and knowledge outside of the spatial and temporal boundaries of the social world the film depicts.”<sup>2</sup> Most often male, aggressive, and rhythmic in its enunciation and delivery, this scripted voice-over organizes the text and delimits the number of possible interpretations of the material, thus securing its rhetorical position. The practice comes to define the NFB’s World War II-era style while its presence in documentary film is felt internationally. Though most documentary film scholars acknowledge a decline or transformation of the “voice of God” in documentary cinema after 1950, it is the rapid parallel development of the interview device in the late 1930s through the early 1950s that holds a great interest, largely because it is during this period that talking heads begin to complicate the didactic qualities of “voice of God” narration. They represent a shift from scripted performance, to expert testimony (in support of the central argument of the film), to unscripted response. During this period, Canada’s federal filmmaking institution shifted from its war-time organization to a post-war configuration accommodating an ever-broadening scope of subject matter.<sup>3</sup> This opening up of subject matter to a number of governmental, social, and cultural concerns is accompanied by an increased experimentation in the presentation of documentary material and the practical (e.g. pedagogical) use of films generally.

A predecessor of the filmed consciousness raising groups that radicalized the New Documentary, the panel discussion film of the 1950s illustrates an especially interesting moment of this transformation. The very nature of these filmed group discussions on various social and political issues indicate which direction the NFB and others would move with regards to the use of social actors in non-fiction film, particularly in terms of the formal organization of talking heads within documentary cinema. It is within this early collection of panel discussion films that filmmakers and producers experimented with displacing the “voice of God” in favour of an embedded commentator—the talking head. With a clearer understanding of the motivations behind the use of the talking head and its impact upon the structure and presentation of documentary texts, I hope to lay the foundation for an evaluation of the device in various filmmaking contexts.

### **ANTECEDENTS OF THE TALKING HEAD**

Proper histories of the talking head and the panel discussion film have yet to be written, though ongoing work on the subject of the educational use of films in post-war North America (and the global currency of images of testimony) should contribute to a fuller understanding of these devices and their significance within particular viewing contexts.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, few of our standard documentary film histories discuss the specific aesthetic features of the talking head, nor do they

make any attempt to isolate its earliest appearance within any time frame.<sup>5</sup> To be fair, tracing the global emergence of the antecedents of the talking head during the 1930s through films such as Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* (Russia, 1934, Dziga Vertov), *Housing Problems* (Great Britain, 1935, Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey) and *The March of Time* newsreel series (Time, Inc. 1935-1951) would be an enormous project. But the result would be a definitive genealogy of the device, of which I hope to capture a precise moment of its evolution in order to seek and explain its form and function. Thomas Waugh, in an appendix to his doctoral dissertation, offers a summary of the use of social actors in early documentary film.<sup>6</sup> Waugh defines the term "social actors" in accordance with Bill Nichols's original use of the term to "[designate] real-life characters playing their own social roles in nonfiction film and presumably having an extratextual autonomy."<sup>7</sup> Catalogued chronologically and notated within a table according to recurring formal features and the nature of the sound recording technology employed, this appendix is a valuable resource for scholars who seek an exhaustive filmography addressing the appearance of speaking subjects pre-1950.

Nichols's work on the physical speaking subject and the theoretical textual voice in documentary cinema are central to the present study. He first addresses the element of direct verbal address typified by the interview subject in a short essay, "The Voice of Documentary" (1983), while the issue of the tension between the author-centred voice of authority and the witness-centred voice of testimony is more fully examined in his seminal work *Representing Reality* (1991). Nichols charges that interviews are an over-determined structure and he invokes Michel Foucault's work on testimony and patient-client interviews to outline the power relations consistently manifest in any exchange between one social agent and another.<sup>8</sup> Waugh develops an equally significant discussion of the device in his work on Ivens, picking up the thread of Ivens's philosophy of performance in documentary and expanding upon the idea of "presentational" versus "representational" performances of self on the part of social actors. The former involves the convention of performing an awareness of the camera, while the latter is the practice of subjects striving for naturalism by ignoring the camera and behaving as though they are unaware of the filming process. It is along this spectrum of performance that the difference between the type of speaking subjects seen in documentary films before and after the late-1940s is established. This difference further serves to highlight the evolving relationship between filmmaker and subject, becoming, as Waugh contends, "a gauge of the ethical and political accountability of the filmmaker's relationship with [her] subject."<sup>9</sup>

The "person on the street"-style interview appears as early as the mid-1930s. However, closer inspection reveals that many of these segments, such as those found in Frank Capra's films for the U.S. Office of War Information and Stuart Legg's *Churchill's Island* (Canada, 1941), were primarily, if not exclusively, scripted monologues performed for the camera on location and post-synchronized with



Figure 1. A young soldier explains how incoming artillery fire is recognized in *Churchill's Island* (courtesy of NFB)

sound. In both of these instances, material presented to the viewer as a “live” interview is most often a scripted exchange performed for the camera with a pre-screened participant.<sup>10</sup> True synchronous sound technology, tremendously cumbersome and unreliable in the field in its earliest incarnations, appears only sparingly in documentaries prior to the late-1940s (see above). In this context, the use of a prepared text ensures speaking subjects do not complicate shooting schedules or inflate production costs with misspeak and unwanted editorial. During the 1950s, however, radio and its continuing ability to incorporate live public response in its programming, the advent of broadcast television journalism, and the subsequent consolidation of lightweight sync-sound 16mm film technology all converge. Before the end of the decade the talking head interview became a primary component of documentary texts for its seeming ability to present the immediacy of unscripted liveness. The proliferation of the talking head in the 1950s, coupled with a growing fascination with public and collective forms of talk (fostered in large part by the post-war work of sociologists Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton and the widespread recognition of the “focus group”), marks the epoch of a polyphony of voices in Western media.<sup>11</sup> With televised trials, civic forums, lecture films and on-the-spot interviews emerging as fascinating televisual objects, the use of talking heads has never diminished.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of the talking head had upon the documentary form was immediate: people began speaking for themselves. But the circumstances in which these social actors were called upon to express their views and the degree to which these performances were moulded by filmmakers and supported or negated by off-screen narrators and on-screen moderators needs to be scrutinized. I will

argue that the talking head was initially a means of embedding the didactic element of commentary into the formal structure of the text, thus preserving the pedagogical function of the texts while diffusing its presence. While the films of the National Film Board of Canada were produced with the mandate to educate Canadians, and thus benefited from the on-screen participation by model citizens, the monolith of direct address (to paraphrase Nichols) and didactic narration does not disappear with the talking head, but merely becomes a part of the formal construction of documentaries.

The first step towards embedding the editorial position of the filmmakers occurs with the on-screen appearance of a narrator functioning within the text as host or hostess. The roots of this practice in documentary cinema can be traced to radio programming, and David Hogarth offers a compelling account of the device's role in Canada's radio documentary tradition in the decades preceding the arrival of the host on film and in television.<sup>13</sup> Occupying a uniquely liminal textual space in documentary programming, a host's appearance within the story environment aids claims of the "performance-free" participation of speaking subjects. It is, in fact, the host's placement within the environment of the story that gives value to the testimony of his interview subjects: the host's access to these individuals is offered as further evidence of the validity of the film's central thesis.<sup>14</sup> (*Housing Problems* foreshadows this practice, with the interviewer speaking within the space of the interview while remaining off-screen.)

With that in mind, we must consider that the talking head was initially an ordering device functioning in such a manner that the direct address of voice-over narration could be excluded by filmmakers without fear of the film's rhetorical aims becoming encumbered. "Historical judgement is replaced by personal testimony," according to Nichols, as the "omniscient deity is concealed in the form of the obedient mouthpiece."<sup>15</sup> Traditional hierarchies of power, embodied by the authoritative voice of God narration, become embedded in the formal structure of documentary film by way of the interview segment. Shots are organized into scenes that attempt to construct a transparency with regards to the interviewer and the apparatus recording the interview. Where traditional voice-over narration calls attention to itself as a result of its omnipresent and performative nature, the talking head slowly evolves into an element that is coded as free from performance, concealing the fact that preparation and distribution of scripted remarks often meant these subjects were "playing themselves" in a representational manner in the earliest era of their appearance. Nichols addresses this phenomenon in a slightly different filmmaking context (i.e. committed documentaries of the late-1960s and 1970s) but the impact is the same: a collapse between the voice of a social actor recruited to the film and the voice of the film itself, rather than the confirmation of a gap between such disparate voices.<sup>16</sup> The evolution of the device shifted practice from hired actors delivering scripted remarks to unscripted exchanges between social actors and moderators within

controlled spaces, to the airing of off-the-cuff remarks voiced by the person-on-the-street. With each of these strategies, viewers must remain critical of the hierarchy of voices and viewpoints arranged within the text and understand that one approach may be no less ideologically constructed than the next.

### TALKING HEADS OF THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA

Filmmakers and institutions enjoyed the freedom fostered by the exploration of new topic areas afforded during peacetime, and the talking head truly blossomed in the post-war documentary movement, specifically during the boom related to television that sparked documentary production for the BBC in 1947, the major American commercial channels in the early 1950s, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1953. As noted earlier, one could certainly search out the seeds of the talking head in the pre-war era. By focusing primarily upon the NFB as a model, however, one is afforded the opportunity to use its extensive institutional records to chart the various discussions and negotiations between producers and filmmakers on the subject of interview subjects; the result is one of the clearest pictures available to English-language historians of the formal evolution of the device.

Production files for various films from the period confirm via proposals, treatments and memoranda that the talking head was often viewed as an effective editorial tool by filmmakers (and the institution at large) during the first decade following the war. Treatments and memos for films prepared by the NFB for the CBC's *On The Spot* and *Perspective* series, specifically, give the clearest indication of this. Production notes for three in particular, Julian Biggs' *Dresden Story* (Canada, 1954) and *Are People Sheep?* (Canada, 1955) and Donald Haldane's *Embassy* (Canada, 1957), offer evidence that the on-location interviews were only considered to be effective if they supported the editorial position held by the program. The result is a confusion of the practice of scripting interviews in advance and the emerging tendency to let speakers speak for themselves. Take, for example, the following piece of correspondence between University of Toronto professor (and a frequent consultant to NFB writers) Prof. Everett Bovard and Director of Production Ross McLean in August 1955 concerning Bovard's involvement in *Are People Sheep?* Bovard writes:

Again let me reiterate in all sincerity (and with no false modesty) I would like to be left out as a *character* [emphasis added] in the film, coming in with commentary at the appropriate time, with as little visual time devoted to me as possible and as much to the process. This business of scientists becoming involved in too much publicity is bad and interferes with objectivity.<sup>17</sup>

The reasons behind the professor's hesitancy can be found in other examples of the growing practice of featuring interview material of experts in films, who are often well-coached professionals and whose loyalty to the filmmaker can be

discomforting to astute viewers. Bovard's concern about objectivity subtly alludes to a common practice in documentary television and film, namely the strategy of filmmakers to choose interview subjects with whom they agree to reinforce the rhetorical position of the film.<sup>18</sup> In terms of the visual design of these documentary programs, producers were keenly aware that the formal presentation of the material to viewers would dictate their ability to accept their factuality.

Jump cuts should always be avoided, film editor Harold Wright advised in the early 1950s, because they might make 'the interview subject's head spin around, making the viewer lose orientation.' He recommended instead, a broad use of close-ups and simple designs, since they alone would not 'tax the eyes of the viewers' of a limited-resolution TV screen.<sup>19</sup>

A link must be made between the aforementioned panel discussion films of the early to mid-1950s and the talking head as we see it in contemporary non-fiction film and television. While these discussion segments first appeared as early as the mid-1940s in the form of trailers that were distributed with the short subject upon request (e.g. *Food: Secret of the Peace* [Canada, 1946, Stuart Legg] was accompanied by a five-minute discussion trailer of the same name) it was not embedded within the program for nearly a decade.<sup>20</sup> It is in these latter films that we get our first glimpse of interview subjects with a unique position within the structure of the program, a position markedly distinct from the authoritative voice of the narrator or on-screen host. A cursory glance at a small number of films from the *On The Spot* and *Perspective* series suggests a link between the talking head and the practice of incorporating community roundtable discussions at the conclusion of the documentary short, moderated by the filmmaker or a popular host. Examples of this practice include *Escape* (Canada, 1956, Thomas Farley), *Four Teachers* (Canada, 1961, Donald Ginsberg) and the aforementioned *Dresden Story*.<sup>21</sup>

A series of post-WWII NFB films pre-dating the corpus of work under examination here offers a precedent for the roundtable discussions that figured prominently in the analyses to follow. As early as 1943, the NFB used synchronous sound recording in secure locations (i.e. studio sets, scouted meetings halls and offices) to feature "unscripted exchanges" between a moderator and speaking subject within the context of a discussion-group. *Film and Radio Discussion Guide* (1943), a three-minute short designed in cooperation with CBC radio forums and intended to foster discussion about Canadian post-war problems, is the first among these films. "Getting the Most Out of a Film," a series appearing from 1944 to 1947, bears a direct relationship with the panel discussion films of the 1950s. Produced and directed cooperatively by Stanley Hawes and Fred Lasse, these films were distributed with short documentaries—not always NFB productions—and commented directly on the subject of the preceding film in



order to provoke discussion amongst the audience like the group featured in the trailer. The roundtable discussion groups were normally comprised of trade or labour union members and topics included the Soviet Union (*Getting the Most Out of a Film No.1: Our Northern Neighbour*, 1944), life for veterans (*Getting the Most Out of a Film No.11: Veterans in Industry*, 1945), and unemployment and health insurance issues (*Getting the Most Out of a Film No.12: Second Freedom*, 1945).<sup>22</sup> The discussion-group format is revived most notably by Julian Biggs with his film detailing how to use films to foster group discussion—*Let's Talk About Films* (1953). While it fails to adequately train the viewer (the scripted dialogue and studio setting contradict the spontaneous spirit sought by the film) it does contain a few stylistic flourishes (specifically a noteworthy dolly shot) and serves as Biggs' first step towards incorporating this type of discussion into the body of the documentary.

### **DRESDEN STORY AND THE PANEL DISCUSSION**

*Dresden Story* is the most striking example of the NFB's panel discussion films as it illustrates a shift from controlled interview performances to expert testimony to unscripted witness reaction in a single film. As part of the *On the Spot* series produced in co-operation with the CBC, it is among the first wave of documentary programming on the Canadian broadcast airwaves in late 1952. With two separate panels—one composed entirely of white citizens, the other composed entirely of black citizens—the question of racism in a small, south-western Ontario town is addressed and debated following the introduction of the Ontario Fair Accommodation Practices Act of June 1953 as means of prosecuting prejudicial and segregationist public behaviour.<sup>23</sup>

Host Gordon Burwash takes viewers on a tour of the town of Dresden and interviews citizens on the street concerning their position on the highly sensitive issue of segregation. Burwash's participation within the environment of the story (and not just as studio-bound television host) is a validation of both the program's editorial position and the talking heads' appearance as evidentiary material. The following piece of correspondence between director Biggs and executive Ross McLean offers proof that this positioning of the host was not arbitrary, but also addressed the need to personalize the interview subjects. McLean writes:

Once you have introduced the discrimination issue as a problem faced by the town (and I would say you could devote at least ten minutes of your film to pure objective description before introducing it), then you can go into interviews. But, try to get as much character and background of your interviewees into the film as possible—not just statements by disembodied voices and faces. Probably, we should follow Gord around from place to place, asking this person and that person to build up the idea that he has no preconceived views on this particular problem, but is going around trying to find out all he can.<sup>24</sup>



A young student from the town of Dresden is interviewed in her home by host Gordon Burwash (courtesy of NFB)

These directives are intended to at once individualize and humanize the interview subjects while limiting their role within the film. As such, a tension exists among the interviews—at times there is an air suggesting the authenticity of the exchanges, while at other times the exchanges unintentionally reveal themselves as pre-scripted. Nichols describes the exercise of placing the filmmaker (or in this case, the host) at the centre of attention as a means of emphasizing the act of gathering information and building knowledge.<sup>25</sup> By acknowledging the process of social and historical interpretation, documentaries tacitly suggest that the encounter between people and filmmakers is enough to directly alter the lives of all involved.

In *Dresden Story*, Burwash speaks to several citizens both in their homes and in public places. A young black teenager, Ruth, timidly explains she “doesn’t go where she’s not wanted” in response to the host’s off-screen question concerning how she handles prejudice. Similarly, Mrs. Hugh Burnette (wife of a black panel member) naturally and sympathetically offers, “We’re looked at as second-class citizens now, and maybe we deserve to be if we don’t stand up for ourselves.” The camera and microphone do not dissuade her from expressing her views clearly and compassionately. Dr. French, the husband of a white panel member, is interviewed in his dentist office. A female patient is observed in the lower right corner of the frame, reclining awkwardly in an examination chair, staring ponderously at the camera while the doctor speaks. This detail is intended



The clergyman's prepared notes are revealed by a camera pan during an "informal" discussion with Burwash (courtesy of NFB)

to confirm the unscripted—and for the poor woman waiting for her teeth to be cleaned, unexpected—nature of the interview, but instead it suggests its staged-ness. There is an aspect of these interviews in which spontaneity coexists with a pre-scripted quality. In one sequence, Burwash's exchange with a member of the clergy is exposed as pre-arranged when a slight camera pan reveals the cue card being used by the interview subject. The integrity of the interview subject's exchange with the host is compromised by this on-screen moment which not only confirms the collaborative relationship between host and subject but could also suggest that the expert (the priest) enunciates the editorial position endorsed by the program. Such collaboration would be alternately denounced and embraced on various grounds by nonfiction film practitioners in the decades to follow.<sup>26</sup> What remains at issue is whether or not talking heads effectively activate the audience's critical evaluation of the material, or if the expert witness compromises this activity through their coding as carrier of objective information. A historical process has placed specific figures within a sphere of authority that allows them to confer meaning, but what is the impact upon the text when these figures are unable to perform their roles convincingly as experts and authorities?<sup>27</sup>

The nature of the panel discussion renders speaking subjects in a decidedly different form from their expert counterparts. Where the expert witness is asked to perform representationally for the camera to re-inscribe the authoritative voice



"Introducing our black panel ... "; Burwash moderates the panel discussion (courtesy of NFB)

of the filmmakers at the formal level of the text, the members of the panel discussion are encouraged to perform presentationally. Their awareness of the camera is a prerequisite, given the environment within which the shooting occurs and is offered to the audience. If this is the case, then the preliminary failure of the expert witness to perform transparently is in contrast to the panel members' accepted behaviour of correcting one's self, losing one's train of thought, or interjecting while another subject is speaking.

I should stress that especially in the case of *Dresden Story* the debate component of the panel discussion is largely a construct of the filmmaker's own design using a cross-cutting structure that temporally connects the two spatially divided (and racially segregated) panels. All too often, the citizens are arranged in a choir of voices that reduce the talking-head to unwitting mouthpiece in service to an institutionally endorsed editorial position assured by the host's moderation of the panel. For example, to the question, "Do you think prejudice is a recent thing in Dresden?" Mrs. H.G. French on the white panel offers, "I think it's fairly recent. I don't think we were conscious of it until lately." A cut to Mr. Hugh Burnette on the black panel offers his response to the same question as though he were addressing Mrs. French: "I wouldn't say it's too recent—it's been going on for over one hundred years." To Burwash's question of the "root cause" of racism in Dresden, the white panel members cite the fear of inter-marriage but otherwise suggest it is an isolated problem and one that will resolve itself. The black panel members each submit more carefully considered perceived causes,

one in particular being a feeling of servitude that black citizens may still carry with them following years of slavery. Ignorance, however, is the most obvious and most agreed upon cause of Dresden's prejudice by the black panel.

Far more problematic, however, are instances when the split-panel format of *Dresden Story* places the opinions of the speakers in opposition to one another. It is during these instances that the contradiction between a documentary model reliant upon a central voice of authority and one that allows for polyphony of voices is underscored. In *Dresden Story*, it is more often than not the thoughts expressed by the black panel members that are undercut by this structure. During a discussion of the visibility of black citizens at local businesses and the question of equal opportunity in the employment field, Mr. Hanson of the black panel speaks up first: "Well, as far as I know, we have no girls in any of the stores or any office in the town of Dresden." Off-screen, the voice of Mr. Burnette is heard to say rather knowingly, "Oh yes, recently we have a girl employed at the Dresden Times." The moment suggests the omniscience of the highly authoritarian narration prevalent in most films of the era and the control over material the device generally commands. Mr. Hanson is clearly flustered and with much nervousness apologizes, "Well...I'm sorry. I didn't know." A quick cut to the white panel members further emphasizes Mr. Hanson's perceived dishonesty and accents his factual error. A similar moment of embarrassment on the white panel is handled much differently as a shot-reverse-shot structure incorporates both the original speaker's blunder and the comments of the individual who respectfully corrects the error. No speaker remains off-screen, no device aligned with authority is used as a structuring tool, and thus the weight of the words remains with the speakers who, in this case, are reinforcing the program's overarching political opinion, namely that the instances of prejudice and the racist tendencies apparent in Dresden's community have been overblown by black citizens and media outlets alike.

It is important to note that Communism and the fear of its infiltration of the community are regularly offered by the white panel as the inciting force behind Dresden's problems. Panellist Robert Schultz, the Dresden school principal, speaks at length about his theories concerning the Communist infiltration of the black-equality movement. If Schultz's professional stature does not lend credence to his words, the decision to position him so centrally within the overall design of the panel discussion portion of the program—both in terms of the formal composition of the sequence and the lack of any direct rebuttal to his claims—certainly does. Once again, this practice underscores the contention that, for better or worse, the talking head was an effective way of embedding the filmmaker's position at the formal level of the documentary. That Burwash then continues as moderator on what amounts to a witch-hunt, directly questioning panel member Hugh Burnette about charges that he is affiliated with the Communist party, makes for heavy-handed albeit dramatic documentary television.

Responding to the charge of assisting in the infiltration of the Communist party in the mobilization of the black equality movement, Burnette is framed carefully so that the place-card bearing his name and occupation is in clear view—the first time this occurs since either panel is introduced. Burnette ably responds to Burwash’s query, denying the allegations confidently and intelligently, underscoring his ability as a speaker and simultaneously distinguishing himself from other members of both panels whose performances required editors to trim cautious remarks, self-interrupted sentences and curious claims. Overall, it is the black panel members who speak most passionately, intelligently and respectfully of everyone’s feelings with a flow that is largely uninterrupted from thought to thought, while the white panel consistently requires snips and cuts to properly frame comments and construct the appearance of an open dialogue between the panel members.

The tone (if not the form) of this forum of address and exchange characterizes the new documentary that was to fully emerge with cinema vérité and the subsequent expansion of community-based and socially-engaged filmmaking facilitated by video. The talking heads that appear during panel discussions are the closest relatives to the speaking subjects that characterize contemporary documentary with all their political and ideological baggage. It must be noted, however, that in the case of *Dresden Story*, the presence of Burwash as interlocutor assures that the opinions expressed by the panel members do not supersede the ideological position of the producers. David Hogarth, citing American producer Gilbert Seldes’ (author of *Writing for Television*) discussions with CBC executives in the spring of 1952, explains that popular hosts would be “the medium through which documentaries would speak directly to viewers.”<sup>28</sup> In light of comments such as these, the role Burwash plays in crafting an attractive discussion, so to speak, is only fully realized in the editing room with a formal design that privileges the notion that the problem of discrimination in Dresden will be resolved by the people of Dresden.

Nevertheless, the fact that the forum takes place before motion picture cameras, and that citizens—not experts—are invited to voice their views, is in and of itself an enormous leap towards the emphasis upon free-speaking interview subjects that grows in popularity in the years that follow. Once the role of the talking head is effectively negotiated, the objective rendering of a documentary film’s central thesis no longer needs to be achieved through truth claims made on the part of the filmmaker. Instead, a dialectic form is achieved by placing personalized, subjective statements from different interview subjects in counterpoint to one another, thus disarming the pedagogical function of the expert and leaving it to the viewer to interpret, analyze and incorporate the information presented. At least, this is the ideal. What ultimately results, however, is the potential emergence of a speaking subject unbound by these rigid demands. It is within this environment that the expert witness is both introduced and challenged by social actors intent on having their own voices heard.

## LOOK WHO'S TALKING NOW

It could be argued that the rise in popularity of the person-on-the-street in television journalism of the late-1950s and 1960s is tied to the failure of the expert in these earliest experiments with the talking head, experiments that featured the refusal of filmmakers and institutions to fully relinquish their control over interview subjects. Yet the example of the panel discussion film at the NFB and *Dresden Story* specifically demonstrates an institutionally directed shift away from voice-over narration as judge and jury of documentary material, away from the practice of enlisting and coaching professionals in service to the editorial position of the filmmaker, towards the host-and-interview template executed within environments coded as free from performance. Allan King's *Skidrow* (Canada, 1956, Allan King) for the CBC is another salient example of these techniques with its voice-over narration, verité-style photography and stunning instance of interview-footage (with the down-on-his-luck Jimmy) coalescing in a single text. But as the interview-oriented documentary becomes the cornerstone of nonfiction film and television (not least because of the cheap cost of producing interview segments) and confirms the expert in a place of authority, the unscripted person-on-the-street style interview remains a critical and all-powerful tool in the documentary filmmaker's arsenal. Mobile technology removes subjects from their awkward position in front of studio lights and stationary microphones and instead allows them to express themselves and offer their opinions in supportive environments far from institutional settings. The unscripted airing of ideas and opinions by laypersons heralds the arrival of socially conscious and politically-engaged filmmaking on many scales, laying the foundation for much of the contemporary documentary filmmaking currently in practice.

## NOTES

The author wishes to thank Tom Waugh, Will Straw, Bill Wees and the anonymous readers at CJPS for their comments, feedback and insights on various drafts of this essay and several conference presentations. Partial funding for early stages of research for this project was received from The Henry P. and Thomas R. Schreiner-National Film Board of Canada Research Grant in Documentary at Concordia University; additional funding was provided by the Film Studies Association of Canada's 2006 Gerald Pratley Award. Special thanks go to Bernard Lutz, archivist at the National Film Board of Canada, for his invaluable assistance and cheerful company; documentation for production files held by the NFB are noted by file number and date of visit. Lastly, the author would like to thank the members of the Film Studies Association of Canada for their continuing encouragement and support.

1. See John Corner, *The Art of the Record: A Critical Introduction to Documentary* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1996); Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and its Legitimations* (London: BFI, 1995).

2. Charles Wolfe, "Historicising the 'Voice of God': The Place of Vocal Narration in Classical Documentary," *Film History* 9:2 (1997): 149.
3. The institutional re-organization of the National Film Board of Canada following WWII – and its direct relation to an increasing focus on social, cultural and arts-oriented issues and subjects – has been the subject of numerous studies and a series of ongoing revisions. See Zoë Druick, *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2007); Gary Evans, *In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada from 1949 to 1989* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); and D.B. Jones, *Movies and Memoranda: An interpretative history of the National Film Board of Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1981).
4. In this regard, Charles Acland's various work on early film pedagogy and the Film Council movement is especially noteworthy; see for example, "Classroom, Clubs and Community Circuits: Cultural Authority and the Film Council Movement, 1946-1957" in *Inventing Film Studies*, Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 149-181.
5. See Erik Barnouw, *A History of the Non-fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Richard Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); and Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
6. "Appendix 6 – Development of Personalization in Documentary Film," in Thomas Waugh, "Joris Ivens and the Evolution of the Radical Documentary, 1926-1946" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1981), 617-25.
7. Bill Nichols, *Ideology & the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 181-85.
8. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 50.
9. Thomas Waugh, "Acting to Play Oneself: Notes on Performance in Documentary" in *Making Visible the Invisible: An Anthology of Original Essays on Film Acting*, Carole Zucker, ed. (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1990), 81.
10. Technical limitations of the period point towards pre-scripted interviews, and in the case of *Churchill's Island*, production files available in the NFB Archives can be used to confirm this assumption. For a more complete discussion of speaking subjects in *Churchill's Island*, see Michael Brendan Baker in *24 Frames: The Cinema of Canada*, Jerry White, ed. (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 23-32.
11. The "focus group" as a social scientific method evolves from the "focused interview," defined by Merton et al. as a technique designed to illicit context-dependent information about a particular event or situation while at the same time gaining insight into the interviewee's own experience and reaction to it. See Robert K. Merton, Marjorie Fiske and Patricia L. Kendall, *The Focused Interview: A Manual of Problems and Procedures* 2nd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1990 [1956]).
12. Margaret Morse details the transformation of direct address within the space of television in her classic essay "Talk, Talk, Talk: The Space of Discourse in TV News, Sportscasts, Talk Shows and Advertising", *Screen* 26:2 (1985), 2-15. Through analyses of various forms of talk on broadcast television, Morse argues for the medium as a "subjective presence" and adapts narratology to a discussion of particular televisual formats as discursive spaces with representational powers distinct from cinema.
13. David Hogarth, "The Other Documentary Tradition: Early Radio Documentaries in Canada," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21:2 (2001), 123-135.
14. Nichols, *Ideology & the Image*, 202.
15. Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, Alan Rosenthal, ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988 [1983]), 54, 58.
16. *Ibid.*, 54.



17. Everett Bovard to Ross MacLean, August 1955, file 52-423.04, National Film Board Archives, Montreal (hereafter NFB). 24 February 2003.
18. Nichols uses an example of “friendly witnesses” to illustrate the problematic nature of interviews, specifically the habit of not questioning their “subjectivity, consciousness, argumentative form and voice.” (Nichols, “Voice of Documentary,” 58).
19. David Hogarth, *Documentary Television in Canada: From National Public Service to Global Marketplace* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 58 with reference to Harold Wright, “Technical Aspects of TV Production,” *Radio* (March 1954), 16.
20. Unfortunately, of the six discussion trailers I could locate in the NFB catalogue, none are presently available for consultation. Other titles include *Valley of the Tennessee* (Canada, 1945) and *Joint Labour-Management Production Committee* (Canada, 1945) – both trailers were produced under Stanley Hawes’ supervision but neither credits a director.
21. Several films from the mid-1950s I allude to are presently unavailable for consultation. As such, story treatments, shooting scripts and broadcast transcriptions on file at the NFB Archives were used to evaluate the formal design of the program and its representation of speaking subjects.
22. For a sustained account of the NFB’s wartime and post-war efforts to use film forums as a tool of citizenship and public education, see Zoë Druick “Nationalism and Internationalism at the National Film Board of Canada,” and “Pages from the Story of the Way We Live: Film and Citizenship in the 1950s and Early 1960s,” in *Projecting Canada*.
23. Dresden, ON was the location of escaped U.S. slave Reverend Josiah Henson’s refuge for slaves travelling along the Underground Railroad (c. 1841) and Henson himself is believed to be the inspiration for the protagonist in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Henson’s home remains a part of Dresden’s “Uncle Tom’s Cabin Historic Site,” operated by the Ontario Heritage Trust, and a brief glimpse of the location is featured in the introductory sequence of *Dresden Story*.
24. Ross McLean to Julian Biggs, November 1954, file: 54-603-70.04, NFB. 24 February 2003.
25. Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 49.
26. A slight, though nonetheless valuable contribution to the theoretical foundation of the filmmaker-subject relationship, and one that has a thrust specific to the topic presently under consideration, is Barbara Halpern Martineau’s discussion of collaboration in feminist documentary film practice, “Talking About Our Lives and Experiences: Some Thoughts About Feminism, Documentary and ‘Talking Heads,’” in *Show Us Life: Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, Thomas Waugh, ed. (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 252-273.
27. See note 8 concerning Nichols’ invocation of Michel Foucault’s discussion of verbal exchange, testimony and institutional authority from *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978). I would be remiss to ignore Emile de Antonio’s contribution to exploding the convention of the expert in nonfiction in his films from the 1960s (e.g. *Rush to Judgement* [USA, 1966]; *In the Year of the Pig* [USA, 1968]). De Antonio would single-handedly do more to point out the failure of the expert than any other documentary filmmaker of the era through his pioneering use of interview footage (often arranged in such a way that the very historical narrative an interviewee has been recruited to shape and validate is called into question).
28. Gilbert Seldes quoted in Hogarth, *Documentary Television*, 42.

MICHAEL BRENDAN BAKER is a PhD candidate in the Art History & Communication Studies programme at McGill University.