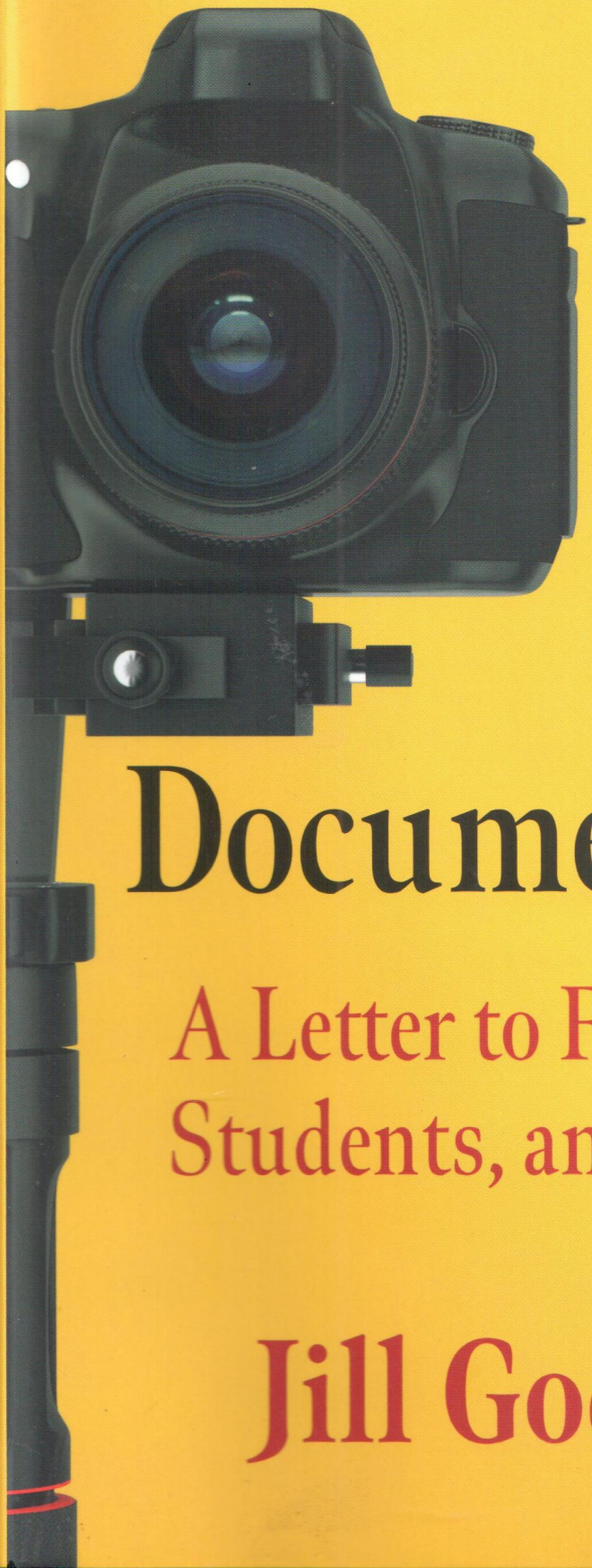

Kill the Documentary

A Letter to Filmmakers, Students, and Scholars

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RECORD SOCIAL RITUALS, WHAT THEY OFFER, WHOM THEY IGNORE

Perhaps you are too young to know the jingle that little girls used to sing as we jumped rope: "First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage." Study Su Friedrich's *First Comes Love* (1993). In this black-and-white film, we see footage of four traditional weddings in process much as a passerby might observe them on any spring day from the sidewalks of New York City. The four wedding parties, intercut with one another, proceed along parallel lines. In each, the first guests arrive and greet the bride and groom. Hugs and kisses all around. Then come the bridesmaids in their matching gowns, then the best men in tuxes. Then more limousines, flower girls, ring boys, and so forth, all eventually mounting the stairs into the church.

In *First Comes Love*, there is no synchronized sound—nothing that stitches the audience into the time and place of these rituals on the church steps. Rather, Friedrich covers the sequences with short chunks of the best of sixties and seventies passionate love songs: Aretha Franklin, Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder, Janis Joplin, Marvin Gaye, Tina Turner, and others. We remember them well—they're *our* songs. "I was made to love you, made to adore you," sings Stevie Wonder for a few phrases, then the song cuts abruptly to the next, then the next. For a few seconds, the music seems to organize time, memory, and feelings, but then the comfort of the music fails as each romantic song is abandoned and the next one cuts in. The film instructs us to remember these wonderful moments when music accompanied our dreams of love and longing. For Friedrich, the music clips are just some facts of our social dream, enumerated in no order, explaining nothing, just cultural facts. The arrangement of the songs is antiorganizational—producing a simple list of pleasures from our past. For a while you don't understand why, but soon . . .

Sometimes I think filmmakers' radical stubbornness is the best tool they have for crashing through the DAWKI's dilapidated techniques. Friedrich wields her stubbornness here to great effect.

Soon all the wedding parties have mounted the church steps and we are inside, watching a bride and groom move toward the altar,

accompanied by Mendelssohn's traditional wedding music. As they walk, we're confronted by a superimposed text: "If two men or two women wanted to legalize their commitment to each other, for any reason, they would be denied that privilege in the following countries." Alert, we watch a slow upward crawl of the alphabetized names of 172 countries—every country in the world but one, but we don't know which. It takes a long time, and we try to guess, but soon our best bets—the Netherlands? Norway? crawl off with the *N*s and we abandon hope. Somewhere around South Africa the Mendelssohn wedding march fades out. We watch the rest of the countries in naked silence. The last, the United Kingdom, rolls up and off the screen, and most of us still haven't figured this puzzle out.

Then, back on the church steps, the four wedding parties emerge, and the old love songs start up again. The photographers get busy. Everyone on screen is smiling, but we in our cinema seats are not. We are waiting for the name of the missing country, not sure it will ever be offered. This is the stark transactional experience of the film—the whole ritual, the dress-up, the ring boys and flower girls, the kit-and-kaboodle of the entire wedding celebration—in 1993, these are denied all gay persons everywhere except in one small country.

Willie Nelson finishes "You Were Always on My Mind" as the limos carry off the married couples. The wedding parties are all gone, and young boys appear to start sweeping up the rice. Four nuns walk up the empty church steps. We are running out of time, we know, but then a final title appears: "In 1990, Denmark became the first country in the world to legalize homosexual marriage." This is what we have wished to know for a long time, but now that we do it's unsatisfying. The brutally truncated love songs and the dilemma posed by the crawling text have made the operations of the state too disturbing.

Why four weddings? To see that the rituals of the marriage are proscribed—that they are socially "necessary" and basically all the same. There is no tension about what will happen next, no narrative and nothing at stake except the rights of same-sex couples to marry—that's all. Remember: just as the belly's hunger gives no clue to the complexities of human cuisine, the sexual organs don't determine appropriate sexual conduct or what kind of love should be celebrated, sanctified, and legalized. *First Comes Love*, to be sure, but what comes

next? In 1993, it wasn't marriage, not for everyone, not until the Supreme Court Decision twenty-two years later, in 2015.

POSTREALIST FILM AS A KOAN

What is a koan? Wikipedia says "a koan is a story, dialogue, question, or statement, the meaning of which cannot be understood by rational thinking but may be accessible through intuition or lateral thinking."

JG: As you probably can tell, I often consult Wikipedia. Some days, three times or more, I go there to look up a date when something was published or the correct spelling of a name. We need to respect and be grateful for stuff that is easy to use and free and smart and built by many hands and minds.

A Buddhist master/mistress might offer a koan to a pupil to shock him or her into some new consciousness, to ask for a different kind of attention. Here's a koan I just read in a short story by Haruki Murakami: "What is the nature of a circle with many centers and no circumference?" Your high school algebra won't help you here—your mind has to go somewhere else, somewhere more invigorating, more unthinkable.

Nonfiction film could work as a koan does. It could present a story, dialogue, question, performance, or statement, "the meaning of which cannot be understood by rational thinking but may be accessible through intuition or lateral thinking." Here is what I would call a film koan: a postrealist one. *The Eternal Frame* (1975), by the collective Ant Farm and T. R. Uthco, is a recording of a very carefully made, near exact reenactment of the November 22, 1963, assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the thirty-fifth president of the United States, at Dealey Plaza, Dallas, Texas. It's staged exactly where the president was assassinated twelve years before. The "JFK" and "Jackie" look-alikes appear in the presidential limousine driving slowly down the street. When shots ring out, secret service men leap onto the tail of the car. While dumbfounded onlookers watch this strange ritual reenactment, what