



UCLA'S JOURNAL OF CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES

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Low and Behold: Using Fiction/Documentary Hybridity to See the Real Damage of Hurricane Katrina

By David O'Grady



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The films I most eagerly look forward to will not be documentaries but works of pure fiction . . . in collaboration with unrehearsed and uninvented reality. –James Agee¹

Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans on August 29, 2005, leaving in its wake what the federal government called the most destructive natural disaster in U.S. history.² The storm caused or contributed to the deaths of more than 1,300 people, inflicted more than \$100 billion in property damage, and contributed to incalculable economic losses for the city of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. More than a million people fled the storm and the ensuing floods swamped the crescent city for more than 40 days after the disaster, displacing 770,000 residents—more than any event in the nation's history since the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. Despite the wrath of Hurricane Katrina and the failure of New Orleans' extensive levee system to keep the storm surge at bay, the story of the city's destruction was rapidly eclipsed by a more troubling drama: the inability of local, state and federal government agencies to respond to the initial crisis and its still-lingering aftermath. The media devoted significant resources to documenting this "event after the event," although the meanings of images and reports were actively critiqued, debated, and even debunked.

What the storm revealed, and media practices struggled to formulate into a cohesive perspective, are the cracks in the larger cultural and social frames of reference behind the images—the historical, entrenched "master narratives"³ that typically obfuscate or even deny issues of race, poverty and geography in the United States. Media images and interpretations that encouraged readings of African Americans as opportunistic looters, Superdome savages, and "foreign" refugees in their own country showcased a "bad faith" ethnographic process; even as affluent media practices revealed the federal government's failures, they perpetuated stereotypes of a disenfranchised, "other" culture.⁴ Music star Kanye West expressed the frustration and suspicion of many Katrina survivors when he declared, "George Bush doesn't care about black people," during a Katrina telethon on NBC:



While Bush's accountability is indeed significant, his emblematic relationship to larger narratives of economic and cultural power underscores the politicized nature of Katrina and exposes the tension between the "winners" of a master narrative, who benefit from and perpetuate its viability, and the "losers," who suffer under its exclusions.

In such a highly contested, exposed, and distorted context, the question of how media practices—in particular, documentary filmmaking—can unearth "real" experiences and find audiences for them in a politicized environment challenges the filmmaker to examine new forms and techniques. Can cinema develop forms that cut across the political polarization of a public event without resorting to historical distancing of the event itself? Can documentary challenge the historical entrenchment of master narratives by dramatizing contemporary reality? Certainly digital technology and the economics of low-budget filmmaking have increased access to documentary means and accelerated the speed of production, shortening the window between event and textual interpretation, between past and present. This narrowing is useful to documentary as a temporally relevant agent of change, but the distancing quality of a documentary's text—its "sobriety,"⁵ to use Bill Nichols' term—remains unaltered, while its vulnerability to co-optation or politicization by competing constituencies has grown worse since the demise of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987. Now every social-issue documentary must run a gantlet of myopic television pundits and radio shock-jocks, arriving in the marketplace battered by political labels that limit the film's bi-partisan reach. Making a documentary has never been easier; sharing documentary content with diverse audience has perhaps never been harder.

Such issues bring us to the curious construction of the independent film Low and Behold (2007). Set in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Low and Behold presents an intriguing alternative to historicizing didactic modes of documentary filmmaking through a systematic blending of fictional story with verité-style interviews of actual Katrina survivors. By eschewing the more common conventions of mixing fictional content and documentary form, Low and Behold presents a form of film hybridity worth close analysis. The following will examine in more detail the genesis, structure, and potential impact of Low and Behold, as well as contrast its ability to reveal the private hurt of a public event with other documentaries about Hurricane Katrina, specifically Spike Lee's When The Levees Broke (2006) and the eyewitness documentary Trouble the Water (2008). In the last section, this analysis will turn to larger questions about the relationship among historical events, trauma, and filmmaking, and to what degree hybrid cinematic forms are viable as a postmodern approach to presenting and representing major events before they recede into history.

I. Examining the Text: The Hybridity of Low and Behold

Low and Behold,⁶ which debuted at Sundance Film Festival in 2007 (and screened at UCLA's Bridges Theater in May of that year), is the brainchild of Barlow Jacobs, a New Orleans-based actor and writer who was displaced

by Katrina. Temping as an insurance claims adjuster in the wake of Hurricane Rita in Florida (which hit about a month after Katrina) gave Jacobs the idea to create a fictional film set in New Orleans based on his experiences. Teaming up with a fellow Louisiana resident, director and co-writer Zack Godshall (a graduate of UCLA's film school), Jacobs began exploring the possibility of incorporating "real" elements of Katrina's aftermath into the film—not only backdrops of rotting, flood-damaged houses, but also the actual Katrina survivors themselves. As Jacobs explains:

Both Zack and I were interested in the type of films that were experimenting with the mixture of reality and fiction. Directors like John Cassavetes, Robert Flaherty, and Werner Herzog had been a major influence for both of us. We had many conversations of how documentary elements could be used in a narrative story—not separately, but as one unit, forming a special hybrid that would propel a story to reach its maximum potential.⁷

From these conversations came the story of a young, ambivalent insurance adjuster named Turner Stull (played by Jacobs) who arrives in New Orleans to work with his uncle in assessing damage, writing reports, and moving on as quickly as possible. Explaining that they get paid per claim, Turner's uncle rationalizes, "The best way to help these people is to get in, measure the damage, and get out. This is what we do—you'll get used to it." Instead, Turner reluctantly becomes entangled with a down-on-his-luck survivor named Nixon, who is looking for his lost dog; the two forge a relationship that takes Turner on a consciousness-raising journey far beyond the damage of property loss.



Turner Stull (Barlow Jacobs) learns the claims adjuster ropes from his Uncle Stully (Robert Longstreet). But Turner realizes his job disregards the more personal damage found within the homes they assess.

The fictional story in Low and Behold derives much of its authenticity from the highly integrated use of real settings and local actors—a la neorealism—intercut with more than a half-dozen scenes with non-actor survivors interviewed verité style. Godshall and Barlow's intent to incorporate the real into their fictional story evolved and expanded as the necessities of shooting a low-budget film coincided with an environment rich with real stories. Shooting in high-definition digital with a Panasonic AG-HVX200 on a budget that producer Sarah Hendler describes as "way below \$500,000,"⁸ Barlow and Godshall increasingly turned to documentary elements, enhancing the overall hybridity of their film. As Hendler explains:

This [inclusion of documentary scenes] occurred a lot more in the editing room, because when we started interviewing people out in the field it was much more narrative focused. But once Barlow started talking to real people and we started filming them—that overtook everything. What better way to show the emotion, the rawness of the destruction of this time than to hear it from the people themselves and not impose a fictional dialogue more than we needed to.⁹

Despite the permeation of documentary elements through the fictional story, it is the fiction of the insurance adjuster that motivates and contextualizes the presence of the documentary elements and holds them in close proximity. From a spectator's perspective, most of the scenes arguably signal their documentary or fictional

intent; fictional scenes feature the character Turner as one of the *dramatis personae* onscreen, documentary moments present the survivor's testimonial in direct address, and various cues (sound bridges, editing rhythm) tie the disparate forms together. The one exception to the film's own "rule" occurs when Turner appears in the frame with an older man and his granddaughter—people who, based on their "performances," are clearly not actors. The scene presents a rare example in Low and Behold where the composition (i.e., including the character Turner onscreen), combined with the indexical presence of the non-actor "actors," overpowers the representational intent of the action.¹⁰

Setting this scene aside, the stability and clarity of Low and Behold's neorealism-meets-*verite* hybridity underscore the unusual nature of its construction. On the one hand, this hybrid form feels quite familiar, yet it defies easy categorization in relation to other documentaries or fictional films. Zelig (1983), Forrest Gump (1994), and Medium Cool (1969) serve as proximate examples, though none of them wholly co-create from scratch fictional and documentary elements through the same lens (instead incorporating and retooling archival content). What these films, including Low and Behold, most have in common is what Vivian Sobchack calls "the charge of the real," the presentation of "real" elements in fictional contexts that "ruptures the autonomous and homogenous space of the fiction."¹¹ Perhaps as a method for channeling and containing these ruptures, most films that mix fiction and documentary elements assign form and content to exclusive provinces along the fiction/documentary divide, as the book Docufictions diagrams with its formula of form and content yielding a taxonomy of documentary types, such as docudrama and mockumentary.¹² Yet Low and Behold defies this schema, balancing fictional form and content with documentary form and content on equal footing.

Turning to television's rich laboratory of experimentation with form and content yields a fertile ground for possible comparisons, in particular with a hybrid form John Caldwell calls the "docu-real."¹³ Docu-real episodes of programs such as M*A*S*H, ER, St. Elsewhere and others employ "docu-stunts," or "episodes that self-consciously showcase documentary units or modes as part of their narrative."¹⁴ In docu-real sequences, narrative and documentary elements often come into conflict, with the documentary unit acting as an incursion in the usual narrative discourse. Such tensions between fictional form/content and documentary form/content attempting to co-operate in the same frame seem inevitable, yet Low and Behold holds this tension in balance.



Low and Behold frequently transitions between *verite* and fiction, as in this sequence about a survivor whose own escape from the flood took him near St. Rita's Nursing Home, where more than 30 people drowned. The scene then shifts into fiction as Turner encounters an angry homeowner—a situation defused by Nixon (Eddie Rouse), Turner's tagalong guide to New Orleans.

Public knowledge of the "pre-text"—the glut of media images and stories (erroneous and semi-accurate) about Katrina and its aftermath—admittedly deserves some credit for Low and Behold's successful formula, positing a prefabricated backdrop for the fictional story, which enhances the viewer's interpretation of the real as much as it aids the filmmakers in establishing the authenticity of their images. Jill Godmilow's Far from Poland (1984), also about a public event—the rise of Polish solidarity—is not dissimilar in its reliance on a pre-mediated event. Though it is far more experimental and reflexive than Low and Behold in its use of myriad fictional and documentary styles, both films employ fiction and documentary as form and content inclusively. Godmilow coined the term "drama-tary" to describe her film and other documentaries that "claim not so much to educate,

but to edify," a distinction that seeks to liberate documentary from the "conceit of 'the real'"¹⁵ as a privileged (if even attainable) objective. As a film that eschews docudrama and mockumentary and embraces fiction and documentary in both form and content, Low and Behold provisionally comports with a drama-tary classification. The effects of this form as manifest by Low and Behold will be evaluated against more "traditional" Katrina documentaries in the next section.

II. "Seeing" the Damage: Contrasting Low and Behold with When The Levees Broke and Trouble the Water

While Low and Behold works a drama-tary strategy by interweaving fiction and documentary, Spike Lee's When The Levees Broke adheres predominately to an interactive documentary mode, in Nichols' parlance, featuring the eyewitness accounts and commentary of dozens of survivors, scholars, and politicians, and incorporating footage from news media, archives and government sources. Lee himself conducted the interviews, although he edited his presence out of the film, except when subjects engage him directly (such as to ask if they can use expletives). Originally conceived as a two-hour project, Levees was expanded mid-production to four hours (five-plus on the DVD release), as its organic, circular structure reflects. Despite its lack of overt narrative or rhetorical progression, Levees strikes a clear agitprop pose, channeling a deluge of interviews and images into several streams: documenting anecdotes of suffering (i.e., collecting evidence), indicting the government for failing to protect the city (citing substandard levee construction) and to respond to the flood, and putting Katrina in historical context with previous disasters in the region (namely, the 1927 flood and Hurricane Betsy in 1965). Levees, in short, is a film about righteous indignation, borne in part out of Lee's own frustration as he saw the disaster unfold on television while attending the Venice Film Festival. As Lee commented about the genesis of Levees:

I was flipping back and forth between CNN and the BBC, and it looked like these images were coming from some poor nation in Africa, not the mighty, mighty United States of America. And I kept watching, and I did not leave my hotel room for long periods of time, just watching these images. And I was very angry, very angry, and mad and hurt with the slow federal response. I kinda recognized this was going to be a pivotal moment in American history. Before I got back to the States I made the decision I wanted to make a documentary about this.¹⁶

HBO signed on to back the project, and Lee began work that fall, first conducting interviews of survivors who had relocated to New York, then moving on to New Orleans. The film debuted nearly one year later in the New Orleans Arena, adjacent to the now infamous Superdome, and a few days afterward, on August 21 and 22, HBO aired the film in two parts to widespread acclaim.

Through the sheer volume of anecdotes about human suffering and government inaction, Levees erects a tower of argument and anger about the injustice of the Katrina disaster, touching on, in varying degrees, what Michael Renov calls the four fundamental tendencies of documentary.¹⁷ Levees' passion is also highly political, and it shifts the film's focus from revealing the damage itself to critiquing historical master narratives about race, poverty and status in America. As scholar Michael Eric Dyson, who appeared in Lee's documentary, wrote: "It is safe to say that race played a major role in the failure of the federal government . . . to respond in a timely manner to the poor black folk of Louisiana because black grief and pain have been ignored throughout the nation's history."¹⁸ New Orleans' susceptibility to disaster was an established pretext, as Levees recounts through a history of levee breaches and floods in the city, with the poor invariably taking the brunt of the losses. Even without Mother Nature's assistance, New Orleans' intractable poverty and corrupt public services have earned the city its "Big Easy" moniker for decades. As a poor black city in the South, New Orleans is doubly cursed, ostracized regionally by its white neighbors and ignored on a national level as a small, poor community. New Orleans' misfortunes and marginalization mirror those of southern African Americans in general throughout history, as W. Fitzhugh Brundage wrote:

Southern white historical memory exalted white civilization, legitimated white power, and virtually excluded any admission of meaningful black agency in the region's past. White accounts seemed to insulate blacks from history. There was, in white history, no acknowledgment of true suffering or real accomplishments among blacks. They were without personal ancestry, their lives were small, and there was a great

void in their past. And if southern whites grudgingly acknowledged the restoration of the union, they still embraced a willfully sectional historical identity. This jealous defense of sectional honor that was at the heart of the white southern memory had no parallel in black memory.¹⁹

The victims themselves are painfully aware of their historical position, hurt by the lack of response When The Levees Broke, but cynically knowing about their role as “the other” in the narrative of American history. As New Orleans rapper Juvenile quipped, “It didn’t take a hurricane for me to do nothing for New Orleans, ‘cause like Chris Rock said, we was fucked up before the hurricane hit.”²⁰ Levees updates this historical pain by finding it in the anguished voices of the master narrative’s latest victims.

The latest entry into the Katrina documentary fold is Trouble the Water (2008), winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. If Levees excoriates systematic government neglect and its consequences on an epic and historic scale, Trouble the Water plunges deeply into a single, extraordinary case to similar effect. In the beginning of the film, Ninth Ward residents Kimberly Rivers Roberts and her husband, Scott, burst into the frame of filmmakers Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, shooting at a Red Cross shelter in Alexandria, Louisiana a week after the storm. The coincidence proved doubly fortuitous: Kim, possessing a video camera that captured her family’s direct account of the flood—and a personality both street-wise and larger than life—gave the filmmakers not only a fascinating filmic artifact but a riveting protagonist as well. The resulting film intercuts Kim’s eyewitness footage with the filmmakers’ account of Kim’s life after the storm and her eventual return home. “It’s me, reporting live,” Kim spoofs, as her video camera, purchased on the street days before the storm, records just another Sunday in the Ninth Ward, until the day succumbs to Katrina’s howling wind, lashing rain, and rising water. The harrowing footage—raw, jumpy (motion-sickness inducing for some)—provides snapshots of the Roberts’ retreat into the attic as the rising water filled the house. Their aborted efforts to find help in the first few days, most notably at a Naval base on high ground that turned away survivors at gunpoint, were not captured first-hand, so the filmmakers retrace the Roberts’ initial steps after escaping the floodwaters. A return to the scenes of various crimes and an attempt to skewer who they find there has more than a whiff of Michael Moore’s ambush technique about it; Lessin and Deal were part of Moore’s team on Bowling for Combine and Fahrenheit 911. Even though the geography is right, the personnel are only the visible face of a chain of command that treated survivors as a threat. The directors’ stylistic influence also exerts itself at the end of the film in the clever presentation of shocking factoids of Katrina’s aftermath, displayed on strips of yellow police tape wrapping the frame. But such info-graphic virtuosity clashes with the film’s raw power, its “I shoot, therefore I am” primal existentialism.²¹

More importantly, the overt argument made by Lessin and Deal about government failings—more rigorously examined already by Levees—limits the film’s implicit and more far-reaching conclusion: people like the Roberts are already suffering from institutionalized neglect. “It’s like we’re un-American, like we lost our citizenship,” Kim laments in the storm’s aftermath. But the real revelation is that they never had it to begin with. As one of Kim’s cousins observes, “If you don’t have money, if you don’t have status, you don’t have the government.” After finally arriving in Memphis to recuperate, Kim finds a recording of a rap song she made long before the storm, performed under her aspiring artist persona “Black Kold Madina.” In one of the more riveting and righteously fierce moments in recent documentary memory, Kim stares into the camera and raps along to the song, titled “Amazing,” the lyrics a testament to a lifetime of trials and tribulations as bad as Katrina itself:

I’m singin’ Momma, don’t cry, I know the rocks you takin’
 You been takin’ `em everyday that’s why the lights ain’t on
 You been takin’ `em everyday since my Daddy’s gone
 You been takin’ `em everyday and won’t leave `em alone
 You been takin’ `em everyday, I’m in the danger zone
 ...
 Only 13 years old—I’m penitentiary prone
 ...
 I was just a little girl caught up in the storm
 And it still amaze me now I live to see myself grown
 I don’t need you to tell me that I’m amazing
 Cause I know what I am and what I am that I be is amazing.

Kim's perseverance and resilience—the death of her mother from AIDS while Kim was still a teenager, turning to drug dealing for money—literally redirect the lens pointed at the storm to reveal instead an America languishing in the shadows cast by a country's shiny story of itself. What Levees mobilizes by testimonial and argument, Trouble the Water presents as direct experience: Hurricane Katrina destroyed the lives and homes of people already struggling to survive socio-economic and political disaster. The stronger case for change in Trouble the Water, however, comes not from the arguments of its filmmakers but from its star eyewitness to—and survivor of—a lot more than a hurricane.

In contrast to Levees and Trouble the Water, Low and Behold's use of near-real fiction in a hybrid or drama-tary form moves toward a different and perhaps more personal emotional effect. Understanding this effect necessitates a deeper analysis of Low and Behold's mix of neorealism and verite. Neorealism offers, in Bazin's terms, a "continuum of reality,"²² a way of constructing a close relationship with reality within the frame that eschews classical Hollywood's emphasis on representation to wholly supplant the indexical presentation of settings, objects and people within the frame. Preserving this continuum of reality lends authenticity to the fictional project while simultaneously drawing forward historical elements out of the past and into an experienced present. Nichols described the relationship between neorealism's fact and fiction elements in detail:

Neorealism demonstrates the ways in which narrative can be placed at the service of a documentary impulse by imparting a sense of autonomy to the image and shot, by developing an elliptical style of editing, by constructing a weakly motivated, coincidental form of plot, and by placing all these devices at the service of a world rendered with objective accuracy and subjective intensity. Although qualities such as these have been taken up by documentary, neorealism remains just the other side of the boundary between fiction and fact, narrative and exposition, story and argument.²³

Arguably Low and Behold's story contradicts Nichols' observation that weak plotting and motivation are perverse requisites of neorealism, but his sense of "objective accuracy and subjective intensity" briskly summarizes neorealism's potency. If the neorealist aspect of Low and Behold lends accuracy and intensity to its fictional elements, the fictional elements of the film rescue the trauma of Katrina from the historical distancing of the documentary gaze. Indeed, instead of taking a Levees or Trouble the Water approach by "re-indicting" injustice and indifference, Low and Behold's fiction situates these elements within the text and makes them the central conflict. Through the protagonist's eyes we as viewers experience his transformation from indifferent insurance adjuster to eyewitness of real trauma and loss.

This ability to "see" the real damage, to get to the private hurt of public events, emerges as the key effect of Low and Behold's drama-tary strategy. Implicit in its hybrid construction is a critique of documentary's factual detachment in the face of human suffering—and an implicit need for such suffering to motivate the documentary project. Turner's role as an insurance adjuster parallels the predicament of the documentarian; their mutual objective is to make an accurate "report" and move on. "You need damage," accuses Nixon in a confrontation with Turner, an accusation that sometimes fits the documentarian's (and journalist's) professional need for suffering.²⁴



Nixon exhorts Turner to help him look for his lost dog and challenges Turner's line of work, contending that he "needs damage" in order to

have a job—an accusation that parallels the professional hazard of the documentarian.

If “History is what hurts,”²⁵ then the documentarian exists to capture that hurt on film and to organize it into a discourse that often serves documentary’s historical, analytical—“sober”—concerns. Scholar Jane Roscoe tackles this issue in her analysis of Man Bites Dog (1993), a French black-comedy about a television crew’s efforts to document a serial killer, which rigorously deconstructs and indicts not only documentary’s detachment, but also the viewer’s desire for a “safe” distance from the subject:

These events could be read as the symbolic death of the ideal television documentary viewer and of the safe distance which they are usually guaranteed through the participation in the discourses of objectivity. Here, this objective distance implodes back on the audience. As we get closer to the subject, we become more aware of the constructed nature of the documentary look and we can no longer take for granted its promise to allow access to the real without the consequences of having been there.²⁶

In Low and Behold, access to the real has significant consequences for Turner, and compellingly, for the viewer as well. The act of experiencing the real trauma of Katrina—of implicating the viewer in the emotional toll—rescales the disaster in individual terms and retrieves it from documentary’s historical gaze. “Get your ass in here so you can see,” exhorts Nixon at the end of the film, as he finally reveals to Turner, in the water-stained ruins of his home, that he has lost not only his dog, but his wife and young daughter as well. In bringing Turner “low,” we can, at last, “behold.” Such losses are given due outrage in Levees and Trouble the Water, but the balancing act of fact and fiction, neorealism and verité, in Low and Behold makes a compelling case for the potential of hybrid cinematic forms to straddle the boundary noted by Nichols between “narrative and exposition, story and argument.”

III. Resisting History: Cinematic Hybridity and the Postmodern Event

Two years after Katrina, wildfires ravaged Southern California, an event that gave FEMA and the federal government a chance to showcase the “lessons learned” from Katrina. Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* deconstructs and lampoons the comparison between the disasters and their responses:

“The main thing about the wildfires, they were a lens on what we learned from a certain, earlier gigantic disaster,” Stewart deadpans, cutting to a montage of television news clips that proceed to make such a claim. “It’s a perfect analogy, except that one tragedy encompassed 780 square miles, while Katrina was 90,000 square miles—and 1,800 homes were lost in the fire, and 200,000 in Katrina. So it’s really apples to . . . I’m

going to go with dragons." Stewart wraps up the segment by contrasting the human suffering in the Superdome with the comparative surfeit of supplies at Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego. "Clearly the lesson learned for successful disaster relief: don't invite the poor people."²⁷

In the news media's competitive haste to move on to the next story—the next rupture in the master narrative or the status quo to be exposed and restored—the trauma of Katrina risks trivialization, its presence in the national psyche expedited to the past. The pre-text of Katrina revealed by the storm—the intractable racism, poverty and inequality experienced by New Orleans' African Americans—and the text of the Katrina disaster itself as represented in these films are eventually re-absorbed into the post-text of history, a place that "can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence," as Cathy Caruth contends.²⁸ Accepting Katrina as an historical event turns to questions about the role of cinema in constructing texts about this history, and the problem of creating fact-relevant stories when meanings and facts are contested, as they so often are in the postmodern era. Linda Williams highlights the contradiction and necessity inherent in this conflict: "On the one hand the postmodern deluge of images seem to suggest that there can be no a priori truth of the referent to which the image refers; on the other hand, in this same deluge it is still the moving image that has the power to move audiences to a new appreciation of previously unknown truth."²⁹

The hybridized cinema of Low and Behold can be seen, then, as a reflection of postmodernist concerns and technological capability, as a response to media spectacle and its omnipresent representations, and as an interpretation of the public event and its multifarious narratives and speaking positions among co-existent cultures, races, and levels of empowerment. Artistic techniques that pursue this polyphony of perspectives are essential in diffusing the fetish made of singular, monolithic forms (such as traditional storytelling in either fiction or documentary mode) purporting to represent a complete truth of an event. As Hayden White observed:

Modernist techniques of representation provide the possibility of de-fetishizing both events and the fantasy accounts of them which deny any threat they pose, in the very process of pretending to represent them realistically. This de-fetishizing can then clear the way for that process of mourning which alone can relieve the "burden of history" and make a more, if not totally realistic perception of current problems possible.

In this vein, restraint in privileging documentary or fiction opens up the prospect of seeing both modes in a dialectical exchange. Indeed, documentary and fiction in tandem offers a method for "de-fetishizing both events and the fantasy accounts of them," while establishing a field or zone of interpretation. Such a construct allows for a collection of attendant facts and meanings—a dynamic system that may contain even contradictory notions of the master narrative—that can "relieve the burden of history," but still hold works accountable for their representations.

Low and Behold ultimately presents a compelling case for fiction/documentary hybridity as a viable form for preserving history while activating its significance in a contextual—and contested—present. The challenge remains, however, to engage the public; Low and Behold has been celebrated on the festival circuit but slow to find a distributor.³¹ Features that attempt to cross the fiction/documentary divide face an historical otherness and current marketplace hurt of their own, although the proliferation of markets with thresholds lower than the multiplex—such as cable television—may provide hybrid forms an opportunity to connect with audiences. Low and Behold's compelling balance of real history and real hurt is an achievement deserving of an audience, and a form whose potential is punctuated by the film's final shot. After witnessing Nixon's true loss, Turner drives away through the ravaged Ninth Ward, followed by the camera in an unseen vehicle. Turner finally reaches an intersection and drives offscreen, his fictional story over but unresolved. However, the camera continues forward in a seemingly endless, haunting shot of destroyed homes, block after block, an entire landscape stripped of life. The trauma of Hurricane Katrina is not over; the damage Katrina revealed is not history.

NOTES

1 In interviews Low and Behold's co-writer Barlow Jacobs frequently cites this quote from Agee as inspiration for the film's hybrid structure.

2 U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2006, 5. The statistics in this paragraph come from this source.

3 Despite Lyotard's contention that skepticism toward master or metanarratives is a hallmark of postmodernism, diminished master

narratives still hobble along in various forms (e.g., nationalism, religion). The use of master narrative here reflects what could be described as a white, "patriotic" identity of the U.S. as capable, affluent, and powerful (except in its "otherness"-the poor, black, and disenfranchised).

4 The shock/soothe dialectic is common practice for television journalism. Mary Anne Doane ("Information, Crisis, Catastrophe") and Geoff King ("Just Like a Movie? 9/11 and Hollywood Spectacle"), among others, have commented on the spectacle (Guy Debord's term) of the televisual, modern event.

5 Nichols, 3

6 The title of the film is, of course, a play on "lo and behold," usually stated as an imperative meaning to look and see.

7 <http://www.sidetrackfilms.com/news/all/article/220/>

8 Interview with Hendler, Nov. 28, 2007

9 Ibid.

10 The presence of this scene in the film, according to Hendler, stems purely from Jacobs' desire to include his neighbor-an admittedly colorful character-in the film.

11 Sobchack, 269. Sobchack fascinatingly explores her reaction to the real death of a rabbit during the hunting scene of [The Rules of the Game](#) and analyzes the complex documentary/fiction reception issues at play in her essay "The Charge of the Real."

12 Rhodes, 2006. A useful-if reductive-form/content "formula" is presented on p. 4; a description of different documentary categories is presented by Lipkin, et al., in chapter 1.

13 Caldwell, 259

14 Ibid.

15 Shapiro, 81-82

16 Lee, 2006. [Levees](#) DVD commentary.

17 Renov, 21. Renov identifies the four tendencies as to record, reveal or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyze or interrogate; and to express.

18 Dyson, 24

19 As quoted in Dyson, 24-25. Original source: [The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory](#). Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

20 As quoted in Dyson, 156. Original source: Satten, Vanessa. "Still Lives Through." [XXL](#) December 2005, 114.

21 Denby, 97

22 Bazin, 37

23 Nichols, 170

24 For a recent parallel, see also [The Bridge](#) (2006), a documentary about suicide jumpers from the Golden Gate Bridge. The filmmakers attempted to balance film production with suicide prevention by acting as lookouts and alerting bridge personnel of possible jumpers during the filming.

25 Jameson, Fredric. [The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act](#). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981. 102.

26 Roscoe, 211

27 Stewart Oct. 29, 2007. [The Daily Show](#) itself is a hybrid form, mixing factual news with facetious comedy that serves as a critique of and a corrective to the co-optation of the media by power elites.

28 Caruth, 17-18

29 Williams, 10

30 White, 32

31 In a conversation on Sept. 20, 2008, Hendler indicated the film likely will close a distribution deal soon with an independent distributor.



Author bio:

David O'Grady is a PhD student in the Cinema and Media Studies program at UCLA. He has written about film for various publications, including [Nylon](#) and [The Noe Valley Voice](#).

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