

Table 6.1

**Documentary Modes**

Chief Characteristics

—Deficiencies

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**Hollywood fiction** [1910s]: fictional narratives of imaginary worlds  
—absence of "reality"

**Poetic documentary** [1920s]: reassemble fragments of the world poetically

—lack of specificity, too abstract

**Expository documentary** [1920s]: directly address issues in the historical world

—overly didactic

**Observational documentary** [1960s]: eschew commentary and reenactment; observe things as they happen

—lack of history, context

**Participatory documentary** [1960s]: interview or interact with subjects; use archival film to retrieve history

—excessive faith in witnesses, naive history, too intrusive

**Reflexive documentary** [1980s]: question documentary form, defamiliarize the other modes

—too abstract, lose sight of actual issues

**Performative documentary** [1980s]: stress subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse

—loss of emphasis on objectivity may relegate such films to the avant-garde; "excessive" use of style.

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## Chapter 7

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### How Have Documentaries Addressed Social and Political Issues?

#### PEOPLE AS VICTIMS OR AGENTS

When we first asked "What to do with people?" in Chapter 1, our discussion fell primarily within an ethical frame. What consequences follow from different forms of response to and engagement with others? How may we represent or speak about others without reducing them to stereotypes, pawns, or victims? These questions allow few easy answers, but they also suggest that the issues are not ethical alone. To act unethically or to misrepresent others involves politics and ideology as well.

In a harsh critique of the documentary tradition, especially as represented by television journalism, Brian Winston argues that 1930s documentary filmmakers in Great Britain took a romantic view of their working-class subjects; they failed to see the worker as an active, self-determining agent of change. Instead, the worker suffered from a "plight" that others, namely government agencies, should do something about.

*Housing Problems* (1935), for example, gave slum dwellers the opportunity to speak for themselves, in a synchronous sound interview format set within their own homes. The words of actual workers appeared on British screens for the first time, a sensational achievement in the days long before television or reality TV. But they appeared as if they came with hat in