

Video Ethnography: Toward a Reflexive Paradigm for Documentary

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Introduction

Between 1974 and 1984 I produced a series of documentaries on coal miners in the Rocky Mountain West. Because I am a sociologist first, and a documentary maker only second, I bring a set of theoretical/methodological concerns to the enterprise of shooting and editing, that are in many ways different from those of the documentarian. My interests revolved around questions like: What is the nature of history and social life? What is the proper role for the sociologist as researcher/theorist with respect to the people and communities that (s)he studies? In oral history/ethnography, what standards can be used to evaluate the stories that we collect? And, how can these stories be utilized? The tentative answers to these questions with which I approached the miners' world were drawn from the tradition of critical theory, specifically from the Existentialist Marxism of Jean Paul Sartre. While some of the social theory is fairly abstract, many of the issues that are problematic for sociologists have concrete applicability to the work of documentary including interviewing and editing. As much as possible I will try to illustrate the theoretical and methodological discussions with concrete referents from the coal project.¹



The author interviewing Henry Mathias July 2, 1975 near Lafayette, Colorado. We were using historic photographs to try to identify the location of coal camps razed years before.

Developing the Project

Publicly funded arts, humanities, and social science projects do not occur in a vacuum. In the same way that anthropology rested upon the foundation of colonialism, specific social, political, and technological relations allowed the coal project to get funded.²In 1974 Jimmy Carter had recently been elected, and the National

Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) was using a revenue sharing model to establish state-based humanities programs. The Colorado Humanities Program (CHP) issued a request for proposals that would involve the "out of school adult public" and "local humanities scholars" in discussions of "public policy issues."



Modular housing for oil shale workers, Battlement Mesa, Colorado. 1975

Modular coal camp housing under construction in southern Colorado. N.D. Photo courtesy of CF&I corporation.



Main Street, Trinidad Colorado 1974. In the 1920's Trinidad was a boom town, the commercial hub of the Colorado coal industry. Fifty years later the mines were closed and the town had fallen on hard times.

In the seventies the western states were in the midst of an energy boom that included oil and natural gas development, experimental oil shale and synfuel projects, and renewed coal mining much of it from large surface mines associated with mine-mouth power plant construction. Boom-towns and the environmental and social impacts of large scale energy development constituted one set of public policy issues. Another set of policy issues stemmed from history. Coal had been mined in the West at least since the 1860's and legacies of that earlier coal age included "bust-towns," environmental damage, and black lung disease. The social impacts of both the old and the new coal industry constituted the kind of "public issues" upon which the CHP was interested in bringing humanities expertise to bear. I want to emphasize that there was a very narrow window for programs such as the coal project. During the Carter years the NEH funded a number of documentary programs with labor history topics: films were made on the Wobblies, Rosie the Riveter, and the Lincoln Brigades for example. After Reagan was elected the window shut tight, moreover Reagan's shift to a market-driven energy "policy" produced a dramatic recession in the West and drove boomtowns into bust-towns faster than ever before.

The coal project began with a CHP grant for about \$20,000. The money funded us to conduct life history interviews with miners living in Colorado coal towns. We interviewed working miners and photographed in both surface and underground mines. But most of the interviewees were retired miners living in towns that had been all but abandoned when the first coal age ended in the 1950's.



Oil rig and Buffalo near
Wright, Wyoming, 1981



Coal Loading at Energy Fuels
mine, Hayden, Colorado,
1975

The Regressive Moment: Interviewing and Data Collection

We asked the old timers to recount the events of their lives beginning with stories they had heard from their parents and continuing with immigration experiences, recollections of childhood, working life, retirement and the experience of growing old. We probed to discover the big events of mining history like strikes and disasters, but we also searched for the mundane reality of everyday life. We sought the communities' articulation of their identity, recognizing that this included contrary positions and community conflicts. Only the most general interview schedule was prepared in advance; interviews were not interrogations, questions were conversational and open-ended. There was no time limit, the interview technique assumed agency on the part of the respondents and provided space for them to determine their own agenda. As a sociologist I hoped to discover "natural" social and historical explanations in the mining communities. Film makers would of course be appalled at a shooting ratio of 100 to 1 or more.

Genero and
Rose DeSantis
being interviewed
on their front
porch, Frederick,
Colorado 1975.





Genero DeSantis as a young man, Berwind Mine north of Trinidad Colorado. 1920's

As part of the interview we asked subjects to suggest other respondents. Through this snowball sampling process a network of interviewees was developed which spanned the coal fields and included: union and non-union miners, union organizers, mine operators, bosses and foremen, mining engineers, occupational health and safety specialists, government officials, coal miners' daughters, wives and widows, shopkeepers, doctors and others who lived in the coal communities but did not work the mines. We also took steps to make sure that the sample represented the many ethnic groups that came west to mine coal -- Italians, Welsh, Slavs, Greeks, Mexicans etc. We interviewed people representing the range and variety of factions, social groups, and specific viewpoints found in coal communities. The community participated in and welcomed the coal project. The miners' felt that their perspective had been systematically ignored or devalued and relished the opportunity to talk. Perhaps the situation was best summed up by one old timer who after an interview said: "who'd have ever thought you guys from the university would come down here and want to hear all this stuff." We quickly had far more people volunteer to participate that we would ever be able to interview.

Interviews ran as long as three hours and audio recordings were made so that excerpts could be used in a slide-tape production. With a 35mm camera we photographed the miners, their families and the environment. The recording technology, rather than making people shy, seemed to raise the event in importance. With a couple of visits to libraries and historical museums we began to uncover the rich visual history of black-and-white photographs. Many subjects volunteered family albums and documents which were copied as part of the record. Thousands of additional historic photographs were copied from archives, and company files. We used Panatomic X film and Kodak's direct positive development kits to make beautiful sharp black-and-white slides.



Minnie Clarke shares some of her personal photographs. Longmont, Colorado, 1975.

The recounting of historic events is one way that individuals make

community. Oral history is thus a social process that occurs whether someone is there with a tape recorder or not. The other kind of oral history, the research process, is fraught with problems. In essence an outsider is attempting to enter the community process for a "higher" purpose. That is, they seek to "discover" or "preserve" or "bring to a wider audience" the taken-for-granted realities of a community to which they do not belong. Outside interviewers must therefore "negotiate access," "establish rapport," protect the confidentiality of human "subjects" and so on. In sum, they must construct an identity acceptable to community members so that they will talk with them. Anyone who has done much interviewing is aware of the ways that questions overdetermine the answers. If you ask "What was life in a company town like" they will tell you about the exploitation of company stores and scrip. If you ask, "What was life in a small town like?" they will tell you how everyone got along and helped one another in ways that they don't today. Experience as an interviewer also makes you aware that while questions elicit information they frequently get in the way -- that is they side-track people, lead off on tangents, are distracting etc. Most of us also live with the feeling that the person sitting across from us would tell a good story, if only we knew the right question to bring them out. Not being members of the community, however, we do not know what to ask. We fumble around. Frustrations with the interview process and the notion that oral history was going on all the time led me to try to develop procedures that allowed us to record history-speaking while avoiding some of the pitfalls of interviewing.



U.S. Department of Labor meeting concerning black lung benefits, Lafayette, Colorado, 1975. Hundreds of miners and their wives attended and the crowd spilled out into the street. The meeting was highly contentious as government officials explained the cumbersome and sometimes arbitrary process for getting promised benefits.

I noticed that old timers got together at certain formal locations as well as informally to tell stories, "mine coal" and "swap lies." So we went to some of these places and recorded. A day was spent in a clinic where miners went for the medical tests necessary to proving that they were eligible for federal black lung benefits. We also recorded a meeting crowded with retired miners where officials from the Department of Labor explained the rules and administrative procedures for black lung benefits. We set up situations allowing us to record discussions of history between participants -- bringing together husbands and wives, brothers, friends, or small groups of subjects. Recording sessions were held in bars and restaurants as well as living rooms, kitchens, and front porches. In one remarkable session, a man who had operated a small mine took us through a collection of artifacts he had accumulated. Everything he picked up had stories connected to it and we simply recorded while things asked "what is this and what does it mean." In these situations the

role of interviewer shrank to asking an occasional question while subjects took over directing the discussion.



Chas Porta demonstrating how to use a breast auger. Lafayette, Colorado 1975.

I was the naive interviewer at first. I had not studied the written history; in fact the first time someone mentioned Mother Jones I did not recognize the name. There were two theoretical/methodological reasons to begin with interviews, rather than the more usual scholarly process of reviewing the literature. In the first place, I was forced to ask questions which frequently led to important explanations. (later, as I became more "expert" I had to feign ignorance to elicit information and this never felt natural or worked as well). The second reason is more subtle. Sociologists including critical theorists, and Marxists, tend to begin with theory and frequently ignore the messy empirical features of the lived reality. Ethnic relations, the generation gap, voluntary organizations like labor union locals, particular local towns, the idiosyncratic psychology and comprehensions of individuals, etc., have all too often been relegated to the realm of accident, tagged with pejorative labels like superstructure or false consciousness, or simply reduced to the mean, merged and glossed into abstract categories of subculture, role, class, etc. In place of the detailed historiography which Marx, Weber and Durkheim practiced, recent sociologists (and post-modernists are among the worst offenders) substitute slogans, abstract generalizations, or the exegeses of sacred texts.



Three generations of coal miners. The Steels ran a family mine near Oak Creek, Colorado in 1976. The mine provided house coal to many rural households. Mrs. Steel at the quilting frame, Mr. Steel at the mine mouth. Government regulations were forcing them and many other small operators out of business.

By the end of the first interviewing phase several dozen interviews had been recorded on audiotape and the tapes had been transcribed. Several hundred color slides of the interview subjects had been made and a couple of thousand historic photos had been copied as black-and-white slides. We sat down to edit a multimedia document portraying the history and present conditions of the Colorado coal community.

The Progressive Moment: Editing

I conceived of editing as a place where biography and history intersected. Editing was the process which would transform individual biographies into a historical progression elucidating the individual's role in history. Employing Sartre's theoretical suggestions (discussed more thoroughly in the conclusion), I planned the editing process to be alternately regressive and progressive. In the regressive moment transcripts became the basis of the script. They were analyzed, cut apart, and organized topically: mine explosions, mules, Mother Jones, Ludlow, company scrip, etc. Photographs were similarly indexed. This analytic procedure converted heterogeneous interviews into homogeneous categories. Many people providing perspectives on similar or identical events portrayed the unity or conflicts of events in the coal miners' history. The progressive moment was the attempt to produce synthesis. Efforts at "totalization" produced scenes utilizing juxtaposition, montage, agreement and contradiction that further developed the process intended to create a document that captured the movement of history.³

Mother Jones leading a protest march down Main Street in Trinidad, Colorado. Probably during the 1903 strike.



I intended to use the editing process to produce "documents" rather than documentaries. My role as editor was not that of providing the sociologist's standard of objective truth, but rather to arrange an order that reflected the living relation between biography and history. I wanted to capture the emphasis of knowledge held in common by communicating people's analysis in their own words. As much as possible I wanted to avoid relying on a narrator or expert commentator to impose an overview or legislate meaning. The process was designed to avoid forcing a preconceived analysis on the material. Ethnographic editing techniques allowed the raw materials to inspire both form and content. Certain topics brought up in almost every interview suggested scenes: immigration, ethnic relations, changing techniques and technology of mining, exploitation in the company town, the struggle to organize, the Ludlow strike, the IWW Strike, disasters, etc. Each individual biography lent unique content even as people recounted history that they made in common. Historical categories were not imposed by the editor but were nominated by coal people out of their own experience.

The assembled documents were architectonic in the same sense as Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings: historical structures were constructed out of materials available in the local environment, depicting historic relations that gathered together coal, technology and man. Editing itself was a materialist process concentrating on assembling and ordering things that had been collected including: recordings of people's talk about the past; photograph and other icons which remain after the things they represent have gone; and objects left over the coal age, including the miners' bodies, tools, and other things that were preserved. The edited document was intended as a model of the relation between biography and history. Art and artifice

entered the process. In order for the finished documents to be worth watching they had to be artistic creations able to engage the audience and keep their attention. Craft was important. Aesthetic concerns and the ability to capture both reality and an audience were essential. Music and sound or visual effects were employed to emphasize a mood or make the program flow.

The initial production was a multimedia slide show. When the paper transcript files were completed, sound clips were taken from the interviews and were assembled as the backbone of a sound track which included music and sound effects. Black-and-white slide copies of historical photographs were used to flesh out the program, they were selected to illustrate the events being spoken about. Color slides of the interview subjects introduced the narrators. Once the program was assembled a pulse track was created that drove four slide projectors with dissolves. The program was shown on a nine by twelve foot rear projection screen.

IWW
headquarters in
Walsenburg,
Colorado
November 30,
1927. Courtesy
of The Archives
of Labor and
Urban Affairs
Wayne State
University.



The program had three documents: history, modern mining, and black lung disease. The history document began with an introductory discussion of immigration experiences, testifying to how coal towns became polyglot communities and drawing attention to conflicts between ethnic groups. "Immigration" segued into a montage of voices explaining the work process and organization of production; company towns, scrip, crooked checkweighmen, and other forms of exploitation led to safety issues, disasters and the need for a union. In pattern the scene mirrored the structure of biographical accounts given by individual miners. The second history scene briefly discussed the 1927 Colorado strike led by the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies). Using this scene at this point interrupted the historical progression, it was an editorial decision based on pacing. The IWW strike was not the most important strike, but it introduced strike violence and was used to build towards the bloody climax of the Ludlow Massacre.

From 1927, the program "flashed back" to the 1913-14 strike and Ludlow massacre which were mentioned by every miner interviewed; it was the most important event in the community's history. The Ludlow scene occupied about a third of the one hour program. A tremendous collection of historical photographs and excerpts from interviews with several participants and one of the union organizers brought the story to life. Structurally, an interview with Barron Beshoar, who wrote a book on the strike, provided a framework upon which we "hung" first person accounts.⁴ Sound effects and montage technique helped build the pace to a climax, but actually with the exception of a few gun shots little artifice was needed for this section. Strike events had their own relentless pace: the UMWA issued a strike call; strikers and their families were evicted from the

company towns; tent colonies were set up; company guards and strikebreakers arrived; violence ensued; the militia were mobilized; Mother Jones arrived and was arrested; a women's march was broken up by saber wielding troopers; a small tent colony was destroyed by the militia. Eight months after the strike was called the Ludlow tent colony was set afire by the militia and eleven children and two women suffocated beneath a tent. Funerals were held while enraged miners attacked mines along Colorado's front range. Finally federal troops arrived and an uneasy truce was established.



Ludlow tent colony after being burned by the Colorado Militia. April 1914. Courtesy West Virginia University, Van Bittner Collection.

The Ludlow scene ended with a totalization from Beshoar:

As you know, the miners' lost the strike and the miners never became the people they are today until Roosevelt became President.... And finally, the UMWA, years and years later, gets a contract--a proper union contract in the mine. But from 1913 until the Roosevelt administration they had not won anything really.

After a fade to black, the sound of modern mining machinery faded up to a roar. Dark slides of underground mechanical miners filled the screen. A montage of voices, old and young, exclaimed an optimism that coal mining was coming back to the mountains and prairies. The visuals switched to brilliant sundrenched photos of strip mines and 100 car coal trains. A kaleidoscope of topics were brought up but not fully explored: modern technology, safety, young miners rejecting the union, social and environmental impacts. The modern mining document was brief, about ten minutes, and offered no conclusions. It was meant to reinforce the orientation toward the future that made the entire program a "document" rather than a historical documentary.



Loading coal at the Energy Fuels mine near Hayden, Colorado 1975

Unit train of Wyoming
coal roaring past the
old coal town of
Walsenburg 1975



The last document, "black lung," took twenty minutes to explain the causes and symptoms of the disease from the miners' perspective. They discussed problems applying for and receiving federal black lung benefits. Miners and a medical doctor frustrated with the federal bureaucracy were intercut with representatives of the Social Security Administration, and an Administrative Law Judge who explained why applications were turned down. Parallel cutting techniques raised this to a confrontational level. Slides of old timers on tread mills, having blood drawn, and in hospital beds, the miners' voices and the bureaucratic rationale for rejecting applications indicted the system. The essence of the document was contained in one miner's comment that "You've always had to fight for everything you've gotten." The comment totalized the miner's experience: they fought the coal, they fought to build a community on the frontier, they fought for wages, for working conditions, for a union, and now they fought the bureaucracy for the benefits they felt entitled to.



Black Lung
Clinic, Mt. San
Rafael Hospital,
Trinidad,
Colorado, 1975.

Miner taking
pulmonary
function test at
Mt. San Rafael
Hospital, 1975.



For the sociologist qua editor, the attempt to create a totalizing document began as a process of cross-referencing, seeking to enumerate the historical particularities of the life of the coal miner. Transcript analysis altered the order of the material from biographical to historical. The goal was:

[to] progressively determine a biography... by examining the period, and the period of examining the biography. For from seeking immediately to integrate one into the other, it will hold them separate until the reciprocal involvement comes to pass of itself and puts a temporary end to the research. (Sartre, 1960:135)

This description of editing is not to argue for some kind of

mechanical procedure or formula, nor to suggest that the program produced itself. The work of making "documents" was in large part no different from any editing project. For the multimedia show hundreds of hours of interviews were cut down to less than sixty minutes. Thousands of historic photos were similarly winnowed, selected and incorporated. Historic and modern music was located, selected and added to the production. But behind it all we sought to establish a certain understanding.

The social scientific approach which Sartre recommended gives concrete content to the method of "comprehension" or *Verstehen*. Comprehension is not a specialized method that is the property of professionals; it is no more (and no less) than the natural understanding each one of us uses every day to guide our lives. The comprehension of any human action simply requires knowledge of the conditions which led to action and the actor's goal. A example is the editing decision which brought together comments by Kate Livoda, and Donald Mitchell.⁵ Both grew up in Southern Colorado coal towns and talked about experiences in a company school:

Kate: And then we had to walk several miles to school and all such as that. And of course there was the miners' kids and they weren't treated any too good, cause the superintendent's children had the front seat, of course.

Donald: Even in the schools we wasn't, we was treated different. Hell, I fought my way through school here and I got to be quite a fighter, from just over that, heh, heh, heh.

Kate Livoda provided the regressive understanding of how deep the class system penetrated into coal camp life to reproduce the structures of exploitation. Donald Mitchell, however, thrusts our understanding into the future by telling us how he made himself a fighter. Mitchell showed how historic circumstances lead to action which takes place within a world of objective conditions and is motivated by intentions. Comprehension of an action, in Sartre's (1960:155) terminology, "...is the totalizing movement which gathers together my neighbor, myself and the environment in the synthetic unity of an objectification in process." In sum, comprehension is not abstract passive activity which remains in a world of contemplation; comprehension exists as part of our living praxis. Sociological comprehension is action, is social, and is itself part of history. Historical events are comprehended as unique, but this, very comprehension introduces a new possibility:

In fact, when the object is *rediscovered* in its profundity and its particularity, then instead of remaining external to the totalization...it enters immediately into contradiction with it. In short, the simple inert juxtaposition of the epoch and the object gives way abruptly to a living conflict. (Sartre, 1960:148-149)

Public Editing

In *Being and Nothingness*, written before he declared himself a Marxist, Sartre (1943:643) paraphrased Marx in an observation about the work of social science: "The historian is himself historical; that is, he historicises himself by illuminating 'history' in the light of his project and those of this society." This critical observation destroys the possibility of an objective "social physics" and indicates the path

to a social science based on "revolutionary practice," praxis. Sartre argued that praxis, the movement of surpassing which unites knowing and being, is the only adequate ground for a historical and structural anthropology. Sartre asserted with Marx that people, not prior conditions, make history.

Social scientists can no longer maintain an attitude of "ethical neutrality" or the "disinterested observer." As Sartre (1960:179) demonstrated: "The foundation of anthropology is man himself, not as the object of practical knowledge, but as a practical organism producing knowledge as a moment of praxis." The historical process produces an understanding analogous to self-consciousness as a moment of its development. History and social science cannot avoid being reflexive; because of this the human sciences should become cognizant of their role as a historical actor and develop methods to reduce the distinction between the investigator, and the human subject. Whether we admit it or not, our findings will be subject to modification imposed by our "subjects." The constructions of the film or video editor likewise take their place in history as one of several competing explanations: a kind of self-consciousness which emerges from the social process.



A public editing meeting in 1975. Note the slide projector stack on the left.

The slide program had been underwritten by a state based humanities program and was intended to spark public discussion of policy issues. The research process drew to a close as the slide show was completed. What was being created at this point was a "work in process." The program was not simply an end in itself but a methodological tool, a provisional portrayal to be taken back to the communities where it originated. The methodology provided an totalizing process in the reflexive phase which I termed "public editing." Public editing was a way to operationalize the concept of reflexivity. COAL MINING AS A WAY OF LIFE was shown and the audience was invited to comment on, criticize, and amplify the production.



As an example, I will discuss a single public editing meeting held in Trinidad, Colorado on April 21, 1978. About 50 people viewed the program in a room at the junior college. A panel of old timers, including Edgar Chinowith, a political figure and local judge in his

nineties, sat at a long table in front but they did not make formal presentations or dominate the discussion. When the lights came on the video cameras were rolling and the project director set an agenda:

Do you think this was a fairly accurate reflection of life, the early part of the movie, of life around 1913 or 14 around here?

There was a general chorus: "I think it was," and the discussion started. For the first few minutes people gave testimonials in the form of "I was there," "I remember mules in the mine." Then someone observed that Trinidad was bigger and better twenty years ago. The judge then gave his perspective on the future: "Our trouble right now is that we need more mines around here because we're down to two mines... oh I guess forty or fifty years ago there must have been at least thirty different mines and coal camps going." The judge's discussion connected the past to speculations on the possibility of renewed mining. He then expressed Trinidad's self-identity as a coal boom-town:

Trinidad was essentially a coal mining town. At one time the Chamber of Commerce of the United States designated Trinidad as the outstanding city of its size for business in the entire United States. We showed a trading area of 30,000 as far as they do to coal. Course those days are gone now. Natural gas has come in and you'll never see those days again as we knew them at that time.

The project director asked what Trinidad was like at that time.

A booming town. A booming town in every respect. there were streetcars running between a number of the coal camps... C&W railroad bringing in miners. Stores open till 10:00 at night, Saturday night, midnight. A boom town, lots of business, lots of money.

I understood this as an implied critique of the program's emphasis on strikes and hardship. The refutation of our negative presentation was picked up by a second generation Yugoslavian who eulogized his parents:



They had to leave there because they couldn't make a living over there. They come over here to make a living and thought this was a wonderful country even with all the hardships.

Another second generation resident, an Italian, brought the criticism to a sharp focus:

As you pointed out here there was a lot of negation against the companies. But I was born and raised up here at Morley, about 11 miles up the road, CF&I coal camp.

And I remember as a young boy they provided a YMCA for us, they had a little library there, pool tables, bowling alleys, gymnasium So there was a lot of fun along with it---Of course this was in the 30s and 40s. It wasn't--strikes was going on but not as severe as this.

In the slide show some of speakers had used terms like Wop and Bohunk, Amidst a general murmur of agreement, another member of the audience felt it necessary to clear up any wrong impressions of ethnic relations:



I think there's one thing that could very well be emphasized in a documentary like this. There wasn't all this racial undertone at that time. I know. I grew up as the dumb Swede and I suppose Ernest was the Wop, but we never worried about it. I was in his home, anytime. I was welcome. And he was in mine. I had friends from south of the border and Slavish people, we had lots of them in Money.

Women's stories had figured in the slide program, but not prominently. A woman had been sitting on the edge of her chair waiting to make a point:



There's another thing that ought to be said about the coal camps. I believe that they weren't exactly the easiest place to be a housekeeper in, but you could find more good housekeepers in a little coal camp like that than you could in all the rest of the country. Those women really ran a taut ship. And the kids used to get kind of ornery, especially the boys. (laughter) But each of them handled the problems and give 'em the paddle if they needed it. And on the whole, well there would be a little juvenile mischief and things like that, but there wasn't what you'd call delinquency.

The discussion ranged for about 45 minutes, generally celebrating the miners' way of life, but most of the second half was devoted to expressions of anxiety about the future. In the midst of the great western energy boom of the nineteen seventies, Trinidad was being passed by. The economy remained depressed with few jobs, young people leaving, and most of the oldtimers living on social security and union pensions. The transition was accomplished by the ninety year old judge who said:

Go to Washington, to the archive building, it says: "What is past is prologue" Many mistakes were made on both sides. But it's gone now. Now what are we going to do

about coal? I thought that was frankly what was the purpose of this meeting here tonight.

According to Sartre (1960:96), "Society is presented to each man as a perspective on the future not as a past which rules men like the cause rules effect." Human action can only be understood in relation to the historical material situation in which it occurs and in relation to a future object which the action is intended to produce. This is what Sartre called the project. It is the transcendent concept of the project which contains the dialectic between biography and history. Without this totalizing process at the heart of understanding, social science can only remain a misplaced abstraction (Marxism) which speaks in generalities, and an abstracted empiricism which has only a certain idealism in place of theory (sociology).

Only on the ground of the "project" can the meaning of history can be discovered. The progressive-regressive reflexive method is precisely a social science project. The long-term goal of the paradigm is to enter the ongoing totalization. The reflex meetings produced a agenda for the second round of interviewing and photo research. It led to far more emphasis on everyday life, childhood, actual relations between ethnic groups, and the tenor of women's lives. Public editing meetings produced other effects and understandings as well. After the Trinidad meeting a young man came up to me to thank me and shake my hand. His grandfather was dead he told me, and he had always told stories about the mines and strikes. But he had not paid attention to the old man, and it was only after seeing it in TV that he realized that it might have been important and that he might have missed something. To me, this brought a profound realization that the mass media's imitation of life was indeed more real than the community's oral tradition.

In another instance a reflex meeting taught me an off camera lesson about the complexity of social relationships in coal towns. One of the central people that we interviewed, Victor Bazanelle, had been a striker at Ludlow in 1913 and had died shortly after the interview. We had arranged a another reflex meeting in Trinidad, this one was co-sponsored by the United Mine Workers and held in the Eagles Hall which was also the UMWA hall. I phoned Victor's son Aldo and invited him to attend. As it turned out, in inviting Aldo I had violated local norms. Despite Victor's role in helping found the union, and the fact that Aldo had been a union member, he had turned in his union card and was currently a master mechanic at CF&I's Allen mine. This was a salaried position, Aldo had become a boss. He and his wife came to the union hall because I had requested it, but they were extremely uncomfortable. The union miners felt their space was being infringed upon, and as soon as the media program was over Aldo left without participating in the discussion.

The slide show had provoked the community into an oral historic discussion which was recorded. Tapes of reflex meetings were handled like other program material and incorporated into later generation documents. In this way the processes of inquiry became incorporated in the structure of the document; the subjects of the program participated in the editing process and made meaningful decisions on how their history would be comprehended. The reflexive method made it possible to produce programs reflecting the vertical and horizontal complexity of the coal community. Non-print media

facilitated an "electronic dialogue" between individuals and communities that had historically been isolated from one another both geographically and socially. The basis for communication was history and the common future lying beneath the mountains and plains, while the medium made information exchange possible despite physical and social distance.

The Video Project

In 1976 more than fifteen reflex meetings were held in Colorado towns with a history of coal mining.⁶ At one of the meetings, at the Aspen Humanities Institute, a representative of the NEH saw the program and invited us to apply for a grant to continue the process using video. To make a long story short, the coal project received a large public media grant in 1977. We purchased the first generation of one-inch highband color video equipment (Ampex VPR-1's). We transferred the slide show to video and continued to use it in public editing meetings while recording the audience discussions on video. As might be expected, one of the benefits of public editing was to introduce us to an enormous number of new potential interview subjects. After every meeting people offered names and addresses of new subjects. In spring and summer of 1978 we began another round of oral history interviewing with the new equipment and in the second round of interviews we recorded more than one hundred hours. We enlarged our geographic scope from Colorado to include coal towns in Wyoming, Utah, and New Mexico. All of the ethnographic data was transcribed. More than 10,000 additional historic photos were collected and cataloged. A search of the archives yielded many hours of historic film footage, period music including folk and ethnomusicological recordings, and a number of historic documents.

Public editing had become part of the ongoing research process, not simply a stage in a production plan. The entire investigation thus became methodical and replicable. However, instead of a written report, the research findings appeared on videotape. By 1981 two new one-hour video documents had been produced: *TOIL AND RAGE IN A NEW LAND* portrayed the history of the western coal community from the turn of the century through 1913, *OUT OF THE DEPTHS* told the story of the 1913-14 Colorado strike. In 1984 a third program, *HARD TIMES, SOFT COAL*, carried the story from 1914 through the 1927 IWW strike. The video documents followed a historical temporal logic, except that the first program included a fifteen minute section introduced with the title "Public Editing." The reflexive chapter had three sections, each beginning with a shot taken from the Trinidad reflex meeting: good times in the coal camps, racial and ethnic relations, and the lives of women and children. The goal was to demonstrate the manifold, contradictory, and interpretative nature of history and social life.

Out of the Depths -- The Miners' Story

Eventually *OUT OF THE DEPTHS--THE MINERS' STORY* made its way to public television. It was aired in 1984 as an episode of the PBS series, "A Walk Through the 20th Century with Bill Moyers." Moyers' production house recut the two "documents" as an hour long documentary. The first half described working and living conditions, the second focused on the strike and the Ludlow massacre. Public

editing was omitted. The documentary was subtly different from the preceding documents. More polished, less tentative, it was "finished;" there was nothing more to add. The conveyed message was emphatically not "What's past is prologue" but that history "was past and gone;" history speaking was not presented as part of the living reality of the coal communities. "Historification" was accomplished by Moyers' narration, which in typical documentary fashion interrupted the old timers' talk to provide summaries of what they "meant."

Moyers' PBS documentary collapsed a multi-faceted and contradictory reality always oriented towards the future, into the expected story, abused and exploited miners were forced to fight back against overwhelming odds but through their struggle achieved higher wages, shorter hours, and a safer workplace-or even more grandiosely: a better America. In essence the meaning was transformed from "coal mining as a way of life" to "lo the poor miner." As just a brief example, consider the introductory sequence. The program begins with a montage of old timers' voices, the last of which is Alfred Owens, an African American miner from Walsenburg, Colorado. Alfred says:

Well before, when the mines was running here it was good times. The people, you know, they had plenty and they would have dances and things like that, and they had places to go. Well of course it isn't - Now the mines is all shut down, there's nothing here but just old people.

Moyers breaks in at this point to say:



Just old people. But where there are old people there are memories, and through these memories run the veins of the American past like seams of coal winding deep in the rock of the earth. In this broadcast you'll meet some people who helped to build America by putting the pick to that rock and freeing its treasure for the industrial expansion of the 20th Century. This is their story. Its a story of struggle. They had to rest their livelihood from the stubborn earth, and their rights from men even more stubborn.

Many things can be said about Moyers re-reading of the miner's story. Alfred Owens' living history and biography, totalized as a lack of things for old people to do and a town in which all the young people have left, has simply vanished. Deindustrializing processes which result in cast-off old people and dying towns are not one of Moyers' problematics. It might have been read as a continuing form of exploitation, but Moyers program portrays the miners' as having successfully struggled not as being exploited. Next, Moyers describes the memories of old people, history, as a kind of natural resource to be exploited. Presumably we are to learn a lesson. In the next sentence we learn that this history consisted in providing the

fuel for progress "the industrial expansion of the 20th Century." Now the lesson is applied, struggle over adversity is rewarded. Obviously the miners "wrested" their living and their rights from stubborn natural forces (rocks or capitalists).

The subtle "historification" and "naturalization" accomplished by Moyers re-cut of the coal project was emphasized by the fact that the name "Rockefeller" was never mentioned. A brief description of my contacts with the Moyers group will make it clear how curious was this omission. One of Moyer's producers called me seeking still photographs or historic footage of the Ludlow massacre for a program they were working on. THE IMAGE MAKERS, one of the "Walk Through the 20th Century" programs, was going to examine the growth of the public relations industry. The first half of the show focused on the campaign created by Ivy Lee to improve the image of the Rockefellers after the deaths of women and children at Ludlow had tarnished the family name. I provided them with photographs and other material for that program and sent Bill Moyers copies of my tapes. As it turned out, one of the programs planned for the series had fallen through and Moyers decided to contract with me to replace it with a program on the Colorado miners.

In essence, then, Moyers produced two programs. The first showed Ludlow in a quick montage to establish the terrible events which led Rockefeller hire Ivy Lee to manipulate and recast his image. According to the program this was the first time that public relations had been used to create a personal image. One legacy of Lee's effort is the image of the old man giving away dimes and JDR Junior as the great philanthropist. The blurb for THE IMAGE MAKERS sums up the program: "Practitioners of public relations claim they are exercising their democratic rights to inform and persuade, but Moyers points out that this powerful tool must be carefully scrutinized since truth can be disguised at many levels." This program is recommended for "business, advertising, marketing and public relations training" (PBS, 1987-88).

The second program, OUT OF THE DEPTHS-THE MINERS' STORY, was recommended for "labor relations, sociology and American history courses." In Moyers' introduction to the program he sets the strike in a curious far away land:



Our story takes place in that part of the old west where the Rockies meet the prairies in Southern Colorado. If you don't live there, and not many of us do, your idea of that country was perhaps forged as mine was by the tales of Kit Carson and Jim Bridger, the cowboys and Indians of Hollywood. It was the wild wild west. Bat Masterson was the sheriff of Trinidad, the biggest town around. Farmers fought cattlemen, cattlemen fought shearers, and there were shootouts just like in the movies. But there was another way of life that doesn't fit the romanticised

image of the old west. I mean the life of the coal miner.

The program might have been contextualized quite differently. In 1903 John D. Rockefeller had acquired a controlling interest in the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. By 1913, when the strike began, absentee capitalists controlled the company which was both the largest employer in Colorado and the dominant coal operator in the state. CF&I refused to negotiate with the United Mine Workers of America and their lead was followed by the other operators. The company hired the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency of West Virginia which specialized in breaking mine strikes and was responsible for widespread violence. In my program these events were emphasized and repeatedly discussed by a number of interview subjects. Miners held Rockefeller personally responsible for the strike and the escalating climate of violence, and they attributed the deaths at Ludlow to Baldwin-Felts mine guards who had been inducted into the Colorado Militia.

All of this was left out of Moyers' re-cut. When I was invited to help write narration for Moyers, I tried to write the Rockefellers back in, arguing that it was a central part of the story. But my arguments did not prevail. One might be tempted to attribute the shift in context to a decision on Moyers' part not to bite the hand that fed him. "A Walk Through the 20th Century" with Bill Moyers was funded by Chevron, AKA Standard Oil of California. Certainly many of the residents of southern Colorado are convinced that the long arm of the Rockefeller family continues to suppress attempts to tell the Ludlow story. But even without a conspiracy, it is clear that, as Moyers' put it "truth can be disguised at many levels." In this case it was accomplished by re-contextualizing the strike to make it just another example of widespread violence between cowboys and Indians, cattlemen and sheepherders, etc.; truth was further, disguised by leaving Rockefeller out, and by segmenting the audience. One program sold as suitable for business and the other for sociology classes, making it unlikely that viewers could put the story back together again.

Broadcast television plays a reflexive role in our culture, gathering images and reflecting them back to us in various self-amplifying or self-correcting ways. However the reflection offered is generally pacifying and therapeutic, as in Moyers' presentation; the struggle took place long ago in a distant place but the miner's sacrifice made possible the modern world where everything is much better. However, the fact that television has not been used critically or in rigorous scholarship is more a critique of scholars than of television. Interviewers who have been privileged to encounter history in the first person know how exciting the experience can be. Oral history/ethnography offers a sense of immediacy but more importantly conveys "participation" which is utterly different from the "one-way" experience of written or documentary history. It makes clear that meaning is negotiated. Oral history allows scholars to develop more active roles than "expert commentators" on documentary or "talk" shows, and goes a long way toward raising the level of discourse in the "global village."

Sartre's work pointed the way to reconstruct history and social science in a fundamentally different relation to the society which produced it. He suggested that explanation shift from narrow, technical, and manipulative languages of control based on the earlier

model of physics, to a reflexive "comprehension," in which historians and social scientists function as translators and communicators rather than law givers. The paradigm for a historical structural anthropology is not limited to either oral history or videotape, but this technology offers one way to operationalize the concepts, and perhaps to revive history-speaking as a community building activity.

In Conclusion

Marx and others observed that historians are products of history and sociologists members of society. I began the coal project from this perspective but in the course of the research I formulated a corollary: oral histories are not merely accounts elicited by a researcher with a tape recorder; historyspeaking is a big part of an ongoing social process which creates communities out of groups of individuals. These realizations were critical in my attempts to develop a "reflexive" approach to doing ethnographic and oral historical research. Briefly, the term reflexive describes a different role for the investigator who recognizes that they are working within society and history. In this essay I sketched some of the implications of that observation.

Film, audiotape and videotape are appropriate media to record communities' spoken traditions. Documentary also offers new ways to address a deep and profound contradiction within the social and human sciences. Sartre (1960:9) described the human sciences as suffering from a crisis which arose from the contradiction between knowing and being, existence and knowledge: "We are not only knowers, in the triumph of intellectual self-consciousness, we appear as the known." On an epistemological level, the crisis resulted from the failure of the anthropological sciences to recognize the Heisenberg principle. "The only theory of knowledge which can be valid today is one which is founded on the truth of microphysics: the experimenter is a part of the experimental system" (Sartre, 1960:32N). This observation is just as true, of course, for film and video makers. There is no place "outside" society or history for us to stand. The quest for objectivity is mis-taken.

The use of non-print media offers opportunities for the investigator to record social processes directly, to explicitly enter into the process, and to record the effect of that interaction. At the same time that I "studied" coal miners, I intended to explore the developing relations between what I was doing and the miners. Not only do cameras and tape recorders open up new possibilities to record social interaction and for sociologists to present their findings, they also have the potential to reduce the dualism experimenter/experimental subject. Reflexive research designs utilizing non-print media have the potential to provide checks on the work by encouraging "subjects" to participate actively in the research and take a critical role in the presentation of research findings. With this in mind, I set out to utilize audio-visual technology within the epistemological framework set forth by critical theory. This essay sketched the theoretical and practical dimensions of a documentary project which used non-print media in specifically dialectical and non-positivist processes of social research. In essence the project had three "moments": oral history interviewing, editing, and presentations of edited programs to the community which included the interviewees. This entire process was repeated more than once at expanded levels.

Sartre (1960:52N) praised Henri LeFebvre, the French sociologist, for suggesting "a simple and faultless method for integrating sociology and history in the perspective of a materialistic-dialectic." In LeFebvre's studies of rural communities he first studied *horizontal* complexity: environment, the existing state of technology, the social structure, community relations, ideology, the relations between the community and its neighbors in the state, the region and the rest of the world. Horizontal complexity was merely one moment of *vertical* or historical complexity: we know that it was not always thus. ie two dimensions "react upon one another." In order to ep all the complex relations clear, LeFebvre devised certain ethodological procedures:⁷

(a) Descriptive: Observation but with a scrutiny guided by experience and by a general theory...

(b) Analytico-regressive: Analysis of reality. Attempt to date it precisely.

(c) Historical-genetic: Attempt to rediscover the present, but elucidated, understood, explained.

Although LeFebvre was recommending a methodical apoach to be employed by professional sociologists, it is imirtant to understand that these are not specialized techlues. Material and dialectical moments of comprehension part of our everyday understanding. Consider for instance following observation by Claude Amicarella, a retired miner:

You depended on a little coal stove to keep you warm. And you had to deal out of a company store. And if you didn't deal out of the company store your job was at stake. And if you didn't bend over backwards to the people that were your superior, your job was at stake. So you had to take these and graciously swallow them and hope that someday things would be different, but they haven't changed,

Amicarella began horizontally, describing the objective state technology. His next sentence rises to a description of sod structure and the exploitation embedded in the "truck sysn," company stores and scrip which required miners to end their wages in the coal camp. His analysis continues in ; description of having to kowtow to petty bosses and superintendents who controlled jobs and patronage in the mine urns. Claude then moves beyond horizontal description. He alizes his historical experience using his analysis to recover the present. The last sentence bears repeating because it is key in what I hoped to convey with the coal project: "So u had to take these and graciously swallow them and hope it someday things would be different, *but they haven't changed*." Claude's sentence illuminated the present. He did t mean, of course, that we still had company towns, but that ; fundamental structure of exploitation, that he had starkly pealed in its vertical and horizontal complexity, still haunt the world.

To Lefebvre's paradigm Sartre had only one addition, albeit an important one:

This method with its phase of phenomenological description and its double movement of regression followed by progress is valid--with the modifications which its objects may impose on it...

Sartre's addition to LeFebvre's methodology distinguished it from all other sociologies whether they are adopted *a priori* like Marxism and academic sociology, or practice "atheoretical" description like phenomenology or ethnomethods. None these approaches encourage the "objects" of investigation modify the science's methods. The problem comes when etries to operationalize Sartre's concepts. I offer the coal oject as one way to do historical-structural social science.

NOTES

1. The "coal project" was an ethnographic investigation exploring the intersections between biography and history that sought to develop methods for presenting oral history research to a wide audience. The project was begun by two graduate students in sociology at the University of Colorado, Eric Margolis and Ronald L. McMahan. Randall C. Vik was the technical engineer, but made many substantive contributions, to shooting and editing. Kai Schuman served as still photographer, Oliver Ask operated the video camera, and Ruth Astor helped with the editing. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs in this paper were taken by the coal project.
2. Sartre (1960:72) emphasized that "Research is a living relationship between men (sic.)," in which "the sociologist and his 'object' form a couplet, each of which is to be interpreted by the other; the relations^{hip}between them must be itself interpreted as a moment of history." For instance, "The sociology of 'primitive people' is established on the more profound relation, which may be ...colonialism."
3. As I am using the term, "totalization" defines both the movement of history and the editor's practical attempt to situate an event, a person, or an interpretation. As Sartre (1960:108) explained:

Every action has many significations and exists in relation to a future and is determined by a past; every action can be analyzed, isolated and broken down to its diverse significations. But the movement which has joined them together in life is, on the contrary, synthetic.
4. Barron Beshoar is a pivotal figure in the oral history and the production, not exactly a narrator but more an expert witness. A third generation resident of Trinidad, Colorado, where the strike took place, his father was the union doctor in 1913. In 1943 Barron wrote *Out of the Depths*, the first book on the Ludlow incident, and later went on to be a Bureau Chief for Time-Life. When I met him he had returned to Trinidad to retire. He took an interest in the project, providing an extensive personal photograph collection, taking us on tours of the region, giving several interviews and reading from his book.
5. This excerpt was selected from the video program TOIL AND RAGE IN A NEW LAND, which was the first of the series produced with NEH funding.
6. Towns included Trinidad, Aguilar, Walsenburg, Lafayette, Louisville, Erie, Craig, Meeker, Hayden, Durango, Crested Butte, Gunnison, Carbondale, Denver and Boulder.
7. Henri LeFebvre: "Perspectives de Sociologie Rurale," *Cahiers de Sociologie*, 1953: as quoted by Sartre, (1960: 52N).

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[Return to top](#)