

“Portraits of Real Life”: Distance and Documentary

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Abstract

This study is an exploration of narrative structure and documentary, using two 2021 documentaries as examples and Bill Nichols’s framework on understanding the “gaze” of the documentary from his book *Representing Reality*. Each of the two documentaries uses a different framing of the filmmaker’s relationship to the subject material, revealing the range of possibilities available within the documentary genre. In *Q: Into the Storm*, director Cullen Hoback employs a narrative structure in which he is drawn slowly from ironic spectator to active participant, while in *The Beatles: Get Back*, Peter Jackson deliberately holds himself aloof from the source material while using various techniques to make his re-framing of the original documentary, *Let It Be*, clear. This study examines the different ethical and structural issues in documentary via a close look at two very different takes on the genre.

Keywords

Documentary, The Beatles, QAnon, Peter Jackson, Cullen Hoback

Introduction: On Documentaries

The very first use of the word “documentary” to describe a film was in 1926, when John Grierson wrote a review of Robert Flaherty’s cinematic depiction of life in Samoa, *Moana*. “Of course,” he wrote in the *New York Sun*, “*Moana* being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family, has *documentary* value” (McLane & Ellis, 2005, p. 3, italics added). While Grierson apparently meant the term merely as a description of the purpose of the movie in documenting daily life, he later developed the concept into a genre detailed in his 1932 essay, “First Principles of Documentary.” “Documentary is a clumsy description, but let it stand,” he began (p. 19), and went on to extol “cinema’s capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself” that can lead to “a new and vital art form” (p. 21). He specifically called upon filmmakers to eschew re-creations because “the living scene and the living story. . . give it the power of interpretation over more complex and astonishing happenings in the real world than the studio mind can conjure up or the studio mechanic re-create” (p. 21).

The movie that inspired Grierson to create this new term was Robert Flaherty’s second movie after his groundbreaking *Nanook of the North*, in which he detailed the life of an Inuk hunter in northern Canada. *Nanook of the North* is considered one of the first documentaries for its depiction of the daily life of the native hunters of Canada, and at the time was notable for its use of non-fictional narrative: not merely a

record of found artifacts, but a movie edited from those raw materials to create a story out of and based on reality.

Of course, parts of both of Flaherty's movies were manipulated by the director. For example, when preparing to film a walrus hunt, Flaherty reminded Nanook that dramatic imagery was more important than the pragmatic kill, saying:

“Do you know that you and your men may have to give up making a kill, if it interferes with my film? Will you remember that is the picture of you hunting the ivuik that I want, and not their meat?”
(Barnouw, 1992, p. 36).

The hunt that Flaherty recorded ended with the walrus being shot by rifle, something Flaherty edited out in order to keep the “purity” of the older style of hunt. In other places, Flaherty encouraged Nanook and his family to feign ignorance of modern life: at one point Nanook “bites a gramophone record in cheerful puzzlement, but in fact the man was quite savvy about modern equipment and even helped Flaherty disassemble and reassemble his camera equipment regularly” (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 2). In his second film, *Moana*, Flaherty found himself at a loss for a narrative in the lush and threat-free environment of Samoa, to the point where he had to pressure the locals to revive the practice of tattooing as a rite of passage into adulthood in order to create a framework for his movie (McLane & Ellis, 2005, p. 12). Flaherty's movies are acclaimed for their capturing of a way of life, but even at the origins of the genre the role of directing and editing to make a clear and understandable narrative was in place.

Some of the very first movies were proto-documentaries. Louis Lumière, inventor of the first portable camera, stuck to nonfiction for his first movies, which were slice-of-life vignettes of life in 1890s France: *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory (La Sortie des Usines)*, *Arrival of a Train (L'Arrivée d'un Train en Gare)*, *Feeding the Baby (Le Repas de Bébé)* (Barnouw, 1992, p. 8). But in the United States the theatrical model, where movies became a way of showing a fictional narrative with sets and actors, won out in the public mind, leaving nonfictional narrative to develop more slowly there as a genre. The Scottish John Grierson, the first theorist of documentary film, admired the American Flaherty's work but became frustrated with Flaherty's focus on “exotic” locales when he felt the genre of documentary would be better spent looking at lives closer to home:

A succeeding documentary exponent is by no means obliged to chase off to the ends of the earth in search of old-time simplicity and the ancient dignities of man against the sky. . . Loving every Time but his own, and every Life but his own, he avoids coming to grips with the creative job insofar as it concerns society (p. 22).

How close should the documentary-maker be to the subject of the documentary in time and space? As we have seen, the balance between immediacy and clear sight, involvement and detachment, has been up for debate since the genre's inception. Grierson envisioned the documentary as turning its gaze to societal issues closer to home rather than distant times or cultures on the other side of the world, and in the long run

Grierson’s vision has borne fruit in documentaries like *Harlan County U.S.A* (1976), *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), *Paris is Burning* (1991), *Hoop Dreams* (1994), and *13th* (2016). Michael Moore revolutionized the genre, shaking up its staid image by applying his sardonic black humor to corporate greed in *Roger & Me* (1989), gun violence in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), and American politics in *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). In all of these, the documentary-maker turns a lens to current society and forces the viewer to look at what is going on in their own world.

At the other extreme, documentaries have continued to frame and explain topics distant in space and time. As archival footage becomes more readily stored and found, and as technology has made it increasingly possible to restore old footage to clarity and brightness, filmmakers have increasing options for vitalizing distant topics that do not rely on re-enactment. Ken Burns’ *The Civil War* (1990) avoided re-creation of events but brought the subject to vivid life through actors speaking lines over images. Burns has applied similar techniques to other relatively distant historical phenomena in *Baseball* (1994), *Jazz* (2001), *Prohibition* (2011), and *The Roosevelts* (2014). Other recent examples of documentaries that use extensive archival footage include Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), which illuminated the historical experiences of Vietnamese women; Andrew Jarecki’s *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), which used the home movies of a family in which members were accused of child molestation to create an unnerving portrait; and Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* (2005), which traces the life and death of bear enthusiast Timothy Treadwell through Treadwell’s own videos—including the video of his death as a victim of the bears he loved (though Herzog doesn’t use that footage in the film). As documentary theorist Bill Nichols notes in “‘Getting to Know You...’ Knowledge, Power, and the Body,” re-enactments now seem outdated, “encrusted with the traditions of studio filmmaking” (1993, p. 177).

What all documentaries have in common is a gaze fixed on reality, and a gaze that frames reality for the viewer. Never merely found footage of raw existence, “documentaries are *about* real life; they are not real life. They are not even windows onto real life. They are portraits of real life, using real life as their raw material, constructed by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what story to tell to whom, and for what purpose” (Aufderheide, 2007, p. 2). One of those myriad decisions is a tonal one—how much a part of the documentary should that documentary-maker be? The issue harkens back to age-old questions about ethnographies and participant-observers. Each documentary-maker has to decide how to frame their own distance from the subject of the film. In his key work about documentaries, *Representing Reality* (1991), Bill Nichols talked about different modes of engagement for documentary-makers, which he called “gazes”: ostensibly referring to documentaries which capture the moment of death, but the terms can be expanded out to cover documentary stances in general. There is the *accidental gaze*, which is found footage like Zapruder’s footage of the assassination of Kennedy, in which the filmmaker is unaware of what they are capturing; the *helpless gaze*, in which the filmmaker is filming deliberately but is unable to affect events as they unfold; the *endangered gaze*, in which the filmmaker is themselves put into danger; the *interventional gaze*, where the documentarian becomes drawn into the action in order to help the subjects of the film; the *humane gaze*,

where the filmmaker’s subjective emotions and empathy are communicated through the process, even if the filmmaker is not directly involved; and the *clinical gaze*, which is caught partway between humane recording and detached reporting, expressing emotions but remaining above them.

This essay is an exploration of two recent “portraits of real life”: Peter Jackson’s *The Beatles: Get Back* (2021) and Cullen Hoback’s *Q: Into the Storm* (2021). Each documentary illustrates a distinct way of interacting with the source material, a different “gaze,” and the effects of immediacy and distance on the creation of that portrait.

Background: *Get Back* and *Into the Storm*

Both *The Beatles: Get Back* and *Q: Into the Storm* came out in 2021. The process leading to both works was radically different and the resulting documentaries reflect that: the raw materials of the documentary, the topic, and the director’s stance all vary in interesting ways. Before we can understand what these two films reveal about the possibilities and limitations of documentary narrative, we have to know the forces that created them.

The process behind *Into the Storm* was a relatively straightforward one: the director, Cullen Hoback, became interested in the identity of the mysterious person who went by the single letter “Q” on the anonymous message board 4chan (later 8kun). Q’s “drops” of information were mostly carefully-worded ambiguous statements that could be taken as having any variety of meanings, like:

News unlocks map.
 Future proves past.
 Why was the Lord's prayer posted?
 Which version?
 Why is this relevant?
 What just came out re: the Lord's prayer?
 What can be connected?
 Do you believe in coincidences?
 Re-review the map post relevant news drops.
 Godfather III. (Q., 2017)

Starting in 2017 and through Donald Trump’s presidency, Q’s posts slowly escalated into the conspiracy theory phenomenon known as “QAnon,” the fundamental tenets of which include the belief that most Democratic politicians and movie stars are secretly controlling a network of abducted children who are sexually traumatized in order to produce a chemical that will prolong the lives of the members of the cabal. Larger and larger numbers of people began to discuss, to promote, and to believe in Q’s ideas. In 2018 the message board Reddit banned the various Q-based communities after “threats to kill [Hillary] Clinton pervaded GreatAwakening. . . when users were incensed by a Qanon-based theory that she was somehow

causing military planes to fall out of the sky” (Zadrozny & Collins, 2018). This banning is what piqued Hoback’s interest. A strong believer in free speech, he wanted to know: “What was an idea that was so dangerous that it warranted being banned?” (*Q: Into the Storm: Director Cullen Hoback on Unmasking Q* | HBO, 2021).

That question took Hoback on a quest around the world--to the Philippines, to Italy, to Japan--in an attempt to understand who Q was and what Q’s motivations were. While he considered some of the high-profile possibilities--Trump’s former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, Trump himself--Hoback eventually concluded that the most likely identity for Q was a collaboration between the owner of 8chan (the message board that Q eventually ended up posting on), Jim Watkins, and his son Ron Watkins. Along the way Hoback became embroiled in a vicious power struggle between the Watkinses and their former business partner Frederick Brennan, who helped them run 8chan until he started to have qualms about the eventual effects of the conspiracy theory. Most of *Into the Storm* becomes Hoback’s recounting of that conflict. That earned it some criticism: “[The documentary] gradually becomes more about the director’s weird entanglement with these cartoonish albeit memorable characters, but *Into The Storm* frequently gets lost along the way,” reviewer Kevin Ritchie noted (Ritchie et al., 2021). But as we shall see, for better or for worse, that very derailing, that getting lost, is the heart of the documentary.

The Beatles: Get Back has a very different origin story. It begins in 1969, when the Beatles, struggling with internal schisms and personality conflicts, decided to compose an album in three weeks, to be performed at their first live concert in years. In addition, the process of making the album was to be meticulously filmed and turned into a *cinema verité* documentary, concluding with the triumphant concert. Unfortunately, the conflicts within the band were quickly becoming unresolvable, and the band splintered into a resentment-and-lawsuit-filled morass a year later. The director found himself with sixty hours of footage of a band that no longer existed: “By the time Michael Lindsay-Hogg’s *Let It Be* reached theaters in May 1970, it had been transformed into light from a dead star” (Phipps & Tobias, 2021). The resulting movie, framed by the bitter knowledge of the band’s impending demise, focused heavily on the dissension and distance between the band members, and the former Beatles themselves accentuated that framing, as Harrison, McCartney and Lennon all talked in different times and places about how the movie revealed their misery. “It was a particularly bad experience that we were having at that time,” Harrison said in an interview with *Entertainment Tonight*, “and it’s bad enough when you’re having it, let alone having it filmed and recorded so that you get to watch it for the rest of your life. I don’t like it” (Harrison, 1987). Lennon recalled the experience bitterly as well: “you sit through 60 sessions with the most bigheaded, uptight people on earth and see what it’s fuckin’ like” (Hagan, 2021). In the long run, only Ringo Starr insisted that the making of the movie and the album *Let It Be* was not a joyless experience, criticizing Lindsay-Hogg’s editing for focusing only on the moments of friction and conflict: “There was lots of laughter, I was there, we were laughing, we were having fun. We were playing and doing what we do” (Jones, 2021). But the narratives of

Lennon, McCartney, and Harrison--that the last year of the Beatles was a living hell--won out in the popular imagination, bolstered by the *Let It Be* documentary.

When Peter Jackson was approached about digitizing, restoring, and re-editing the footage of the *Let It Be* sessions in 2017, the director was reluctant:

I said, “Can I look at all the footage first? And then I’ll let you know.” Because I was thinking, I’d love to make a Beatles film, but I don’t want to make the Beatles-breakup film. That’s the one Beatles movie I would never want to make. (Hagan, 2021)

However, after watching all sixty hours of film and listening to all hundred fifty hours of audio, Jackson reached the conclusion that not only could he create cleaner, crisper renovations of both the video and audio, he could re-edit the footage to paint a very different portrait of some of the last work the Beatles did, one that balanced the dourness of the prevailing opinions about the time; one that Jackson believed had a truth that the original *Let It Be* did not.

Working in conjunction with both Starr and McCartney as well as the widows of Lennon and Harrison, Jackson not only used modern remastering to create high-resolution video from the fifty-year-old original film stock, but used cutting-edge computer algorithms to isolate and clarify the voices on the recordings. Jackson notes that during the original recordings, the members of the band deliberately would turn up their amps to make it almost impossible to make out their voices, rendering a lot of the audio unusable until now:

We developed a machine learning system that we taught what a guitar sounds like, what a bass sounds like, what a voice sounds like. In fact, we taught the computer what John sounds like and what Paul sounds like. So we can take these mono tracks and split up all the instruments. We can just hear the vocals, the guitars. (Walt Disney Studios, 2021)

As a result, Jackson ended up with substantially more usable footage than Lindsay-Hogg had, to the point where he ended up going to the distributor, Disney, and telling them that the project could not be contained in the length of a feature film, and he wanted to make it three segments of two or more hours each. Disney, limited in its theatrical release possibilities due to the coronavirus pandemic, agreed to release the full six to eight hours on their streaming service. The final product stands as a testament to the power of editing and framing to reveal different angles in a documentary.

“Game Over”: Analysis of *Into the Storm*

Q: Into the Storm shows us the ending at the beginning. It starts with a screenshot of one of Q’s “drops” (message board posts) from 2018 explaining with typical paradoxical contradiction: “This is not a game. Learn to play the game.” Generic video-game style music plays as the words appear on the screen. The documentary then cuts to one of Hoback’s first meetings with Ron Watkins, the man Hoback will eventually argue is the person behind Q, in Sapporo Japan in 2019. Watkins, who manages to come across as both diffident and smug simultaneously, explains that he founded 8chan, the message board where Q posts his messages, because he is a believer in absolute free speech. “When is free speech too much?” Watkins asks

hypothetically as the camera cuts away to a long shot of the snow-covered tranquil hills of Sapporo. Then the quiet of the winter landscape is broken by a hollow, insistent banging, far too close and immediate to be coming from the drone footage.

The camera cuts to an ornate door in a marble hall as the banging resolves into the sound of a mob trying to break its way into the halls of Congress on January 6, 2021. Glass shatters, and the rioters surge into the Capitol. It’s an implicit and compelling answer to the question “When is free speech too much?”

Considering the documentary was released in March 2021, the lack of distance between the subject and the text is made shockingly clear from the opening scenes: the events of Jan. 6 must have been unfolding even as Hoback was starting to do final edits on his documentary. In the last of the six installments, we actually see the filmmaker at the Capitol riots, the footage mostly too raw and chaotic yet to have much framing: a wild jumble of images. It’s exactly this emotional progression--from the austere distance of a drone shot to the worm’s-eye view of an insurrection--that Hoback tried to capture in his documentary.

Some critics recoiled from what they called Hoback’s “gamified” look at the assault on democracy: “The project could have worked to counter or explore the damage QAnon has done to the wobbling facade of American democracy, but instead it’s a rollicking game that could arguably make things worse,” Sophie Gilbert argued in *The Atlantic* (Gilbert, 2021). And indeed, the way Hoback portrayed himself at the beginning of his quest is somewhat callow, a man on a lark to uncover a goofy mystery. Early framing of the major characters in the QAnon drama was buffoonish, exaggerated caricatures: Ron Watkins surrounds himself with *anime* merchandise and goes by the online handle “CodeMonkey”; Jim Watkins waxes his mustache points and seems to be play-acting a Bond villain; a source arguing that an online riddle-game using cicadas as a theme is important has a giant CG cicada head obscuring his identity, its faceted eyes glinting. Hoback’s persona is fascinated but distant, uninvolved; a man observing these grotesque figures.

The shift in tone is gradual but inexorable. Halfway through episode three, Hoback visits Ron Watkins where he lives in Sapporo, Japan. Watkins suggests that they go visit a “soapland”--a brothel--together. “It’s like Disneyland,” Watkins chuckles, adding, “Better than Disneyland.” The editing implies that Hoback took him up on the offer, but it’s also clear that this is not just an exercise in male bonding: Watkins seems to be hoping this will give him blackmail leverage over Hoback. From there the documentary covers in detail the 2019 mosque shootings in Christchurch New Zealand, which were egged on and celebrated on Watkins’ message board, 8kun. Hoback meets up with Ron Watkins in Macau a month later and finds him utterly untouched by any kind of regret or remorse about the role 8kun might have played in the massacre. The installment ends with an unnerving flashback to Ron Watkins in Sapporo, practicing martial arts in his backyard by punching a post over and over again until it’s smudged scarlet, interspersed with news stories about right-wing violence. The camera lingers on Watkins’ raw and bloody knuckles: this may have felt like a game at first, but by the halfway point of *Q: Into the Storm* the blood on Watkins’s hands is quite real.

Episodes 4 and 5 of *Into the Storm* continue Hoback's slip from detached to involved, as he becomes more and more caught up in the machinations between the Watkinses and Fredrick Brennan, one of the other founders of 8chan. Jim Watkins had moved Brennan to Manila and helped him set up an apartment there that was accessible to his needs, as Brennan has brittle bone disease and must use a wheelchair and other assistance for living. The setup also included a full-time caretaker, who later became Brennan's wife. Hoback draws no conclusions, but the viewer might well remember Ron Watkins taking Hoback to a Japanese soapland, attempting to use access to sex to create a dependent relationship.

Brennan, like Hoback, is a proponent of absolute free speech, but after the Christchurch massacre he grew alarmed at the ways that his creation was fostering hate and violence. Eventually he quit working on 8chan, and his disillusionment led to a gradual but severe rift between him and the Watkinses. In Episode 5, this conflict comes to a head, and it's in many ways the emotional heart of the series.

In February 2020, Brennan called Hoback to ask for his advice about his attempt to keep Jim Watkins from becoming a naturalized citizen of the Philippines. The tone of the documentary shifts dramatically at this point. In the first installment of *Into the Storm*, Hoback almost never appears on-screen; viewers catch glimpses of him here and there in the frame as he interviews the wild cast of characters, and they hear his voice in voiceover explaining events, but he never appears as a full character within the narrative. This starts to shift about halfway through, when he's shown answering phone calls that move him to the next part of the documentary. But from the point of this call from Brennan, there's a notable change in the framing and tone of the documentary. We see Hoback taking the call in the wee hours of the morning, his face haggard in the pale light of the computer screen. Suddenly the documentary-maker is part of the story, his decisions changing the events of the film.

A few days later, Brennan calls again, more urgently this time. He has slowly started to realize that what looked like a kind gift from Jim Watkins, helping him set up in Manila, is actually fraught with danger: he's in a foreign country, with no support. One possible reason why Jim Watkins chose the Philippines as his base of operation abruptly becomes chillingly clear when Brennan reveals Watkins is suing him for cyber-libel, and Brennan discovers that the Philippines has some of the strictest cyber-libel laws in the world. Suddenly, there's a possibility that his angry online venting calling Jim Watkins a senile liar could literally land him in prison--and Brennan notes that for a person with brittle bone disease in the Philippines' notoriously harsh prisons, this could be a death sentence. We see Hoback's worried face as he asks "How can I be helpful at this point?" Brennan says he's going to flee the country, and asks for Hoback's help. Hoback agrees, and soon is shown taking a shaky video of himself with his cell phone on a plane to Manila, a marked contrast to the smooth professional filming of everything that has gone before.

The shift in tone is dramatic: Hoback has moved from a detached and ironic gaze to what Nichols would call the *interventional gaze*, in which “the camera abandons the precondition of distance, transforming the detachment of a gaze into the involvement of a look” (Nichols, 1991, p. 85). This time when talking with a distraught and frightened Brennan, the camera shows both of the two of them equally: a conversation instead of an interview. Brennan states what will become one of the central ideas of *Into the Storm*: “I always just thought that the Internet is the Internet,” he says as the camera cuts between him and a wan and shaken Hoback. “That what I did on there was different from real life. Internet stuff, I didn’t see it as affecting the real world. You know what? There’s no difference at all. The Internet *is* the real world.” What may have started as a lark has become horrifically real—a theme that will continue to the end of the documentary.

The interventional tone becomes more pronounced as the events of the penultimate installment unfold: On February 26, shortly after Hoback arrived in Manila, the Philippine court issued an arrest for Brennan, whose flight from the country became immediately imperative. To add to the tension, the COVID pandemic had just started to reach its full fury, and the flight Brennan was trying to catch was literally the last international flight out of Manila for the foreseeable future. Hoback’s embodiment in his own film becomes increasingly pronounced on the day of Brennan’s flight, which starts with a pre-dawn video of himself preparing to leave his hotel room in the dark, as the power is inexplicably and ominously out. The video is shot from the point of view of Hoback himself, the camera overtly standing in for Hoback as he moves through the room; we glimpse his arm reaching into the frame to grasp his luggage, and when he steps into the bathroom we literally see the filmmaker behind the camera, looking into the mirror: the filmmaker revealed at work as part of the narrative. He sighs: “Okay, here we go.” As Nichols points out, in an interventional documentary, “the filmmaker chooses to act in history alongside those filmed rather than operate from the paradoxically ‘safe place’ of authoring agent” (p. 85), and we can see this shift in Hoback throwing in his lot alongside Brennan.

The camera follows Hoback through the tense morning, down blank hotel halls and into the airport. Hoback’s voice in voiceover informs us that they didn’t know it at the time, but Brennan’s indictment was being written as they struggled to get through the process of getting onto a flight in the panic of the impending country lockdown. “I shut down cameras for this stretch,” Hoback explains as there’s a blurry shot of his own hand shutting off the camera. “It was already a precarious enough situation.” The explicitly stated cessation of filming in order to ensure Brennan’s safety again stresses Nichol’s interventionist framing: “the interventionist gaze is willing to nullify itself, to abandon filming in the course of intervening” (p. 85).

When Hoback resumes shooting, Brennan’s voice plays over images of him wheeling his chair through the crowded, chaotic airport as they rush for the final flight: “This has become, like, reality now. This isn’t just a game I play online and then go back to my family.” The camera finally shows the view from an airplane window, Manila dwindling below it. As they sit on the plane, Hoback shows Brennan his phone with a recent post from Q: “To be blunt, Game Over,” and Brennan chuckles weakly, turning his face away from the

camera for a moment. The episode ends with Brennan rallying and saying “It’s not. We’re just playing a new game now,” but the documentary narrative does not have a similar recovery in tone. Although Hoback is less overtly present in the final installment, which covers the events leading up to the January 6 2021 insurrection, the “gaze” of the film never quite goes back to the distanced and ironic one of the first installments. As Nichols notes, with an interventional gaze “the camera becomes more than an anthropomorphic symbol and locus. It becomes the physical embodiment of the human being behind it” (p. 85). Although Hoback mostly retreats back behind his camera for the ending, the viewer is unlikely to forget the image of him, pale and nervous in the bathroom mirror in Manila, realizing that the ironic games played online are starting to spill into real threats of violence: threats of violence that go from individual to communal as the images of the seething mobs of January 6 fill the screen at the end of the documentary.

“Isn’t It a Pity?”: Analysis of *Get Back*

The Beatles: Get Back opens with a brief montage of moments from the history of the Beatles that lead up to the three weeks of filming for *Let It Be*. Most of them are familiar to anyone with casual knowledge of the band: glimpses of Lennon’s band the Quarrymen, scenes of fainting fans during their United States tour, clips from their movies, their retreat in India, all shown at a breakneck speed that emphasizes how quickly the band evolved. They seem haphazardly chosen at first, but upon re-watching, it’s clear that the clips have been selected carefully to introduce themes that will play out across the three weeks of recording the album and the nearly eight hours of *Get Back*. There are various shots of manager Brian Epstein watching carefully from the sidelines, making clear how much of an authority vacuum his premature death left in its wake. A young George Harrison laughingly says of early Beatlemania, “It can’t last forever, can it?” and the viewer can see in the clips the toll that the frenzy took on the four young men: fans manhandling them and pressing on them to the point where they withdrew entirely from touring in 1967. All of the themes of authority, freedom and pressure; of public performance as a means of bonding as a band in conflict with the intense reluctance to make themselves so publicly available again; are there in the ten-minute montage.

There are no talking heads that explain the cultural impact of the Beatles, just the primary footage itself. There isn’t even a voiceover; the director, Peter Jackson, doesn’t impinge on the film with his image or his voice. There are captions that explain some of the basic facts: “16 year old John Lennon has a band called the Quarrymen,” the very first one reads. The captions provide extra context here and there: for example, while talking about the White Album, they note that “recording separate multi-tracks means that they rarely get to perform together as a band.” While explaining the motivation for making *Let It Be*, the captions appear over footage from the recording of “Hey Jude,” which had a live audience to join in, explaining that the Beatles enjoyed having an audience for the first time in two years and wanted to try it again, then adding that the recording would be an extra challenge: “Their new songs would need to be recorded live, without overdubs or tricks.” The montage introduces the audience to the director of the movie *Let It Be*, Michael Lindsay-Hogg, who will become a character in *Get Back* in a way he was not in *Let It Be*. Then with a zoom-in on a calendar that illustrates the time-pressure, the movie proper begins.

The “voice” in the captions is clearly Peter Jackson’s, and the tone is distinctive: detached but sympathetic, distant but also warm as it explains not only the facts but the overall environment of the times. The internal and external pressures on the band, their personalities and relationships, are sketched out for the audience to see before the actual footage of the making of the album begins.

Jackson was in an unusual position as a director: using the original raw footage that had already been edited into one movie to make another, new movie. It would have been enough of a task to clean up the video and audio, but he goes substantially further than that to create something wholly original, choosing in fact to use as little of the original footage as possible. In this project the extra fifty years of time gave him two distinct advantages that Lindsay-Hogg did not have, advantages that shape Jackson’s “gaze” and the psychological distance of the documentary.

The first advantage the intervening years gave Jackson is the ability to edit the film to create an almost theatrical level of foreshadowing. His knowledge of how the future unfolds meant that he could spot moments that hint at future events and accent those through editing, in a way that Lindsay-Hogg, whose knowledge cut off at 1970, could not. For example, each of the Beatles spent a fair amount of time working on pieces that would only be released as songs after the breakup of the Beatles. Lindsay-Hogg had no way to know which of the many fragments of songs would eventually become recognizable to the audience, but Jackson can pick out McCartney working on “The Back Seat of My Car,” which would be released as a song only in 1971, Harrison diffidently offering a song with “There’s no solo or anything complicated,” which would eventually be released as “All Things Must Pass” on his first solo album in 1970, or Lennon practicing a song then called “On the Road to Marrakesh,” with a melody that would eventually become the tune to his solo song “Jealous Guy.” Lindsay-Hogg, editing *Let It Be* in early 1970, couldn’t know what an audience in the 21st century would recognize from the many snippets that the Beatles play, but Jackson could.

Other examples abound of Jackson using the benefit of distance to add narrative impact to *Get Back*. For some reason, McCartney delivered most of these moments, perhaps because he was most focused on the future image of the Beatles. In one moment he’s talking almost to himself, trying to reconcile himself to the presence of Lennon’s future wife Yoko Ono, and says wryly, “It’s going to be such an incredible comical thing in 50 years time -- they broke up because Yoko sat on an amp,” which is of course exactly how many people fifty years later have constructed the story. In another moment, Lennon is enthusing about Allen Klein, who he wants to take over the role of manager for the group. “I just think he’s fantastic,” Lennon says, star-struck, “because he knows everything about everything.” Lindsay-Hogg, editing in 1970, perhaps didn’t notice what Jackson noticed in 2020: a brief flash of McCartney raising his eyebrows dubiously, clearly not as sold on Klein as Lennon is. Of course, Jackson knew what Lindsay-Hogg did not: that Lennon, Harrison and Starr overruling McCartney to install Klein as their manager would become one of the precipitating factors of the breakup of the band. Klein would go on to do a disastrous job, to the point that even Lennon,

not generally given to granting McCartney anything, would admit in 1973 that “possibly Paul's suspicions were right” about him. Jackson’s use of these moments add dramatic irony to the documentary that Lindsay-Hogg’s *cinema-verité* style was not able to achieve.

The most poignant examples of this dramatic irony, however, come from moments that the people in the documentary were not at all aware of and could not be for a long time to come. For example, after Harrison quits the band, McCartney and Starr are waiting, dispirited, in the studio. Lennon is late as usual, and the mood is glum. At one point McCartney, on the verge of tears, looks bleakly into the camera and says, “And then there were two.” It’s a sad moment in the original footage, which Lindsay-Hogg never used, but the particular impact of the moment comes from the future audience’s knowledge that indeed, as of 2021, Harrison and McCartney will be the only two remaining Beatles alive. Similarly, Jackson includes audio surreptitiously recorded of Lennon and McCartney over lunch, discussing the tensions within the band. The audio is muddled and almost obscured by the environmental sounds, so Jackson augments it by writing their words on the screen as they speak. The conversation ends with McCartney saying wistfully, “Probably when we’re all very old, we’ll all agree with each other. And we’ll all sing together.” Jackson lets the last sentence hang in the air briefly in silence, knowing that there’s a sadness to the words that the original director could never have heard. These moments of dramatic irony that only years of distance could provide are a large part of the power of *Get Back*.

The other advantage those fifty years of distance give Jackson is the ability to achieve a balance of emotional detachment and warmth, making the film an excellent example of what Nichols calls the *humane gaze* in documentary. As mentioned previously, Nichols was especially theorizing about these varieties of gaze when portraying death in a documentary, and in an odd way both the original *Let It Be* and Jackson’s *Get Back* are about a death: in this case the death of the group entity of the Beatles. Lindsay-Hogg, editing the original raw footage, must have been aware of the fracturing and dissolution of the group that was happening in late 1969; as it turned out, his movie was released a month after McCartney confirmed the demise of the band in a press release. As a result, he edited the movie as a eulogy, and it was entirely natural that the tone was somber. Lindsay-Hogg’s movie was an example of Nichols’s *helpless gaze*, in which the filmmaker sees tragedy occur but is powerless to prevent it. Jackson, on the other hand, though admittedly a huge fan of the Beatles, had fifty years of distance from which to be philosophical about the end of the band, and thus he approached the editing process as an attempt at recovery and reclamation. As Nichols notes, in films where

the subject has already died prior to filming, the humane gaze attempts to recover from the traces of a life departed (belongings left behind, letters, reminiscences, and photographs) those affective bonds that would have joined the one departed to his or her community. (86)

Jackson deliberately focuses on the more positive interactions between the members of the Beatles and their relationships with their own music in an attempt to counter the dour tone of *Let It Be*. Moments of affection, laughter, and delight in music are showcased in Jackson’s edit, although interestingly, despite *Get Back*

being seen as “more positive” and *Let It Be* as more “negative,” it’s Jackson’s edit that actually shows the three days Harrison quits the band and their aftermath, while Lindsay-Hogg simply skips over them. Of course, Lindsay-Hogg was working with a ninety-minute movie time limit, while Jackson managed to convince Disney to let him make a nearly eight-hour documentary and thus had the time to dwell on the conflict and give it context and meaning. In Lindsay-Hogg’s edit, Harrison’s departure and return are unmentioned but painfully oppressive in their very absence, a record-scratch across the documentary.

This difference between Lindsay-Hogg’s helpless gaze and Jackson’s humane gaze appears at the end of the film as well. Where Lindsay-Hogg cuts the film off abruptly after the rooftop concert, freezing the frame as the band begins to walk off as if to keep them from leaving, as “The End” appears over the image. Jackson, on the other hand, continues the film for ten minutes after the concert, showing the members of the band listening to the playback of their performance, smiling and euphoric, then going back into the studio to record the final takes of the other tracks. “This was the Beatles last public performance,” Jackson’s caption notes over the image of Lennon and McCartney on the rooftop, smiling at each other as they put their instruments down: a statement Lindsay-Hogg might have suspected in 1970, but could not have been sure of. The very finality of the future--the loss of Lennon and Harrison--made it possible for Jackson to frame the rooftop concert as a sort of bittersweet victory, rather than the loss Lindsay-Hogg saw it as. In fact, Lindsay-Hogg became a character within *Get Back*, physically present as he was not in *Let It Be*, and the viewer can watch him arguing doggedly for a huge triumphal concert to conclude the picture. He was especially committed to it being in an ancient amphitheater in Tripoli, with an audience of thousands all bearing torches in a dramatic spectacle. Listening to him desperately returning to the theme even after all four Beatles have repeatedly shot the idea down makes clear why his *Let It Be* cannot feel positive at the ending; the director couldn’t help but feel like the rooftop concert was a woefully squalid conclusion. Jackson was more able to see the ways in which that concert was amazing to have happened at all, how close the album and concert came to never existing. Lindsay-Hogg in 1970 was inevitably focused on the loss, while Jackson in 2020 could be focused on the gains.

Jackson’s directorial voice was distant in *Get Back*, but not absent. While he chose to mostly let the footage speak for itself, the captions tend to encourage empathy with the conflicts and struggles each of the Beatles are going through. In one of the most striking scenes, Harrison, Starr, and McCartney are sitting around the studio, waiting for Lennon to eventually arrive. As he sits and waits, McCartney picks up a guitar and starts strumming idly on it. Jackson’s captions appear on the screen to frame the moment and call the audience’s attention to what is happening: “Feeling the pressure of the approaching deadline, Paul searches for new song ideas,” appears over the bored faces of Harrison and Starr as they listen. “What is about to emerge,” Jackson’s captions go on, “will be the Beatles next single.” The captions serve here as Jackson’s gentle nudge to make the audience pay attention to what’s happening on the screen, as McCartney’s aimless chords coalesce like magic into the familiar sounds of the song “Get Back.” Harrison and Starr sit up straighter; Harrison yawns, but the yawn is in harmony with the tune McCartney has started to hum; Starr’s toes start

tapping the rhythm. Jackson's caption here positions him as a fellow Beatles fan, leaning over to whisper urgently to us in a voice touched with awe: *pay attention*.

One of the other times Jackson's captions become intrusive is when framing the events outside of the studio after Harrison quits the group, at the close of the first episode. Over video of the three remaining Beatles huddling in a group hug, deep in discussion and trying to avoid the prying cameras, Jackson's captions read "Paul, John, and Ringo decide to meet with George, hoping to convince him to rejoin the band." There's a shot of the calendar, then over a still of Starr's house, the captions go on: "On Sunday, the four Beatles, along with Yoko and Linda, meet at Ringo's house." The screen fades to black and the captions appear once more, unadorned over the darkness: "The meeting does not go well." The wry understatement is augmented and complicated by the track chosen to run under the images: the song "Isn't It a Pity," by George Harrison, one of the many songs he wrote that Lennon and McCartney rejected for use by the Beatles, in part prompting his break with the group. "Isn't it a pity? Now isn't it a shame?" Harrison sings mournfully, "how we break each other's hearts and cause each other pain. How we take each other's love without thinking anymore. Forgetting to give back, isn't it a pity?"

The song and the captions are the strongest positioning of Jackson as the humane gaze of the documentary; watching the dissolution of the world's most famous band from a distance of years, filled with pity. As Nichols puts it:

This gaze stresses a form of empathetic bond across the barrier between the living and the dead (or those whose death is imminent and those whose death is, as yet, unforeseen). Subjectivity streams outward, toward the dead or dying, rather than inward, toward the cameraperson's helplessness. (86)

Get Back was summed up as "more positive" than *Let It Be*, but in the end it might be better described as more *compassionate* than *Let It Be*, which was caught up in the helplessness of watching events at such close distance. This compassion was part of what was so appealing about the documentary: one of the many positive reviews captured the tone with its title, "I Miss My New Best Friends, the Beatles" (Gay, 2021). The Beatles are framed not as superstars but as flawed human beings; subjectivity streams outward to them and the audience responded with tenderness and empathy.

Conclusion

In her book *The Beatles and the Historians: An Analysis of Writings about the Fab Four*, Erin Torkelson Weber traced and detailed four different historiographical narratives in accounts of the band, starting with the clean-cut "Fab Four" narrative that focused on the positive; the "Lennon Remembers" narrative that was shaped by Lennon's bitter post-breakup diatribes the post-Lennon-assassination "Shout!" narrative that canonized Lennon as the *avant-garde* hero; and the final, most recent narrative, the "Lewisohn" narrative, named after the first history writer to do a careful historical analysis of the band. Weber argued that historical distance was necessary to achieve a balanced look at a band, a collection of individuals, and a cultural

phenomenon that had always prompted strong emotions. “It allows a wider perspective, providing greater context and understanding regarding events and their consequences. . . . [and] it often reduces the strong emotions associated with an event or individual, allowing more impartial evaluation” (Weber, 2016). Only recently, Weber claimed, has it become possible to achieve the distance necessary to write with clear eyes about the Beatles.

Distance greatly affects tone in a documentary--which is of course a form of history writing--as well. In the two examples explored in this paper, we can see two distinct modes of engagement with the documentary subject, and the different strengths of each one. Hoback’s *Into the Storm* is an exploration of the lack of distance, of the documentary-making becoming embroiled in the events being documented as they unfold in front of him, to the point of becoming an active participant in the film. Hoback goes from being a detached observer to an involved and intervening force, and his emotional process is meant to stand as an argument against ironic ridicule of the QAnon movement as the documentary winds from ludicrous conspiracy theory role-playing online to an attempt to storm the very halls of power in the United States. While this progress can elicit criticism in people who either disagree with the game-like detachment of the beginning or who see him as compromised by his intervention at the end, it reflects a journey from the clinical gaze to the interventionist gaze and an implied argument about the dangers of the former.

Get Back has a double layer of distance: the fifty years between the footage and the director, and the fact that Jackson was working with raw footage from an entirely different documentary. Where one might expect that distance to create a clinical objectivity, Jackson instead uses it to understand and empathize with the major characters in the drama of the end of the Beatles. Although Weber doesn’t name a specific time, it makes sense that forty or fifty years of distance would be a sort of “sweet spot” for approaching a historical topic in a compassionate way. At this distance, the people who are most likely to be memorializing the event are people who experienced it in person, but who were too young to be personally involved and thus have personal stakes in it. Peter Jackson was nine when the Beatles broke up, but fell in love with their music when he was about twelve, so the knowledge of their breakup was always part of his knowledge of the band, less of a trauma and more a fact (Fleming, 2021). As a result, he was able to balance an involved warmth and a compassionate distance to achieve a humane gaze that turns the historical figures of the Beatles from the cyphers they have often become into real human beings.

Bill Nichols noted in *Representing Reality* that the interventional gaze and the humane gaze have a similar ethic: “Intervention may be considered one form of humane gaze that pertains to situations where intercession may have some effect. Both the interventional and humane gaze disrupt the fixed, mechanical recording process to emphasize the human agency behind the camera” (Nichols, 1991, p. 86). In the end, both *Into the Storm* and *Get Back* are attempts at transforming an impersonal tone into a personal one: *Into the Storm* by transitioning from a clinical gaze to an interventional gaze; *Get Back* by re-editing the same material from the helpless gaze of Lindsay-Hogg’s original documentary to a more distant, humane gaze.

Both documentaries attempt to put a more human face on massive, fraught, and complex events, and as such they both, despite the vast differences in topic and approach, have in the end similar goals.

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