

# Contents

*Manifestly Radical: A Foreword* xi

► BILL NICHOLS

*Acknowledgments* xvii

*I Call This Book a Letter* xix

Introduction—a Letter to Filmmakers 1

1. Abandon the Conventional Documentary—Reject Realism  
as the Only Authentic Nonfiction Form 7
  - The Pedigree of the Real 8
  - The Pornography of the Real 13
  - The Imperialism of the Real 21
2. Take Action—Make Useful Postrealist Films 27
  - What's in This Name *Postrealism*? 31
  - Follow Buñuel—Refuse the Codes That Encourage  
Useless Empathy 37
  - Poetry—a “Best Practice” for the Nonfiction Filmmaker 40
3. Forty Postrealist Strategies to Learn from and Borrow 57
  - Resist—an Essential Postrealist Stance 57

viii Contents

The Author of the Film Is Always Present, One Way or Another	62
Defamiliarize by Making Substitutions—Try Rats	62
Decontextualize	64
“Preposturize” (That’s Not a Real Word—I Know)	66
Try Camp—There Are Many Routes to Useful Experience	68
Demolish It, Burn It Down	69
Syncopate It, Unwrap It	70
Dwindle, Diminish, Chop It to Dust	71
Decompress Gender Relationships	74
Create Radical New Space; Perform the Unthinkable There	75
Suck Out the Pornographic—Interrogate the Apparatus	76
Recalibrate a History	77
Perform What Could Have/Should Have Been	78
Promote Criminal Behavior with a Straight Face	80
Recast the Terms . . . the Poetry	81
Pirate from Films and Texts to Examine and Remap Them	82
Jiggle and Juggle It Around	85
List Everything That Pertains—Reveal the Essence of All	87
Record Social Rituals, What They Offer, Whom They Ignore	88
Postrealist Film as a Koan	90
Make Maps So the Lay of the Land Can Be Grasped	91
Reject Pessimism—Collaborate with Other Filmmakers	93
Reject the Westerncentric Games Anthropologists Can Play	94
Reject the Clichés of Journalism	95
Dodge the Privileged Gaze	96
Excessify It—I Mean Blow It Up Big and Let Us Ponder It	97
Animation Anyone?	99
Mix Indigenous Humor with Colonial Nightmare— Blend Carefully	99

Collaborate Intensely with Your Social Actors	101
Make Us Stare at It—Make Us Count the Time	105
Misaddress an Audience; Produce a New Uninhibited One	108
<i>Shoah</i> , an Education in Impossible Filmmaking	109
Want More? Study This Superb Postrealist Film	111
Ten Thousand More Strategies: Here's a Good One	115
When You're Forbidden to Make a Film, Get Started Making It	116
Exploit Sound and Its Absence	118
Can You Dance a Nonfiction Film? Can You Drum a Useful Tale?	120
What Is the Political Usefulness of the Postrealist Film?	121
Finally, Some Useful Notes from the Poets	124
Afterword	125
4. The Toolkit	127
The Questionnaire: For Doing a Close Reading of a Documentary Film	128
Definitions of the Documentary Over the Years	133
The Unspoken Pleasures of the Documentary-as- We-Know-It	135
The Documentary Writ Broad in Just Five Sentences	136
Where to Find All the Postrealist Films I've Mentioned (Though Some, at Times, Tend to Disappear)	137
Teach Yourself Poetry . . . Just the Basics	141
Five Superb Hybrid Feature Films to Study	155
A Brief Review of the 2017 Burns/Novick PBS Series <i>The Vietnam War</i>	160
"Kill the Documentary as We Know It," Jill Godmilow, 2001	163
What Happened to Jill in Poland and How Postrealism Entered Her Life	164

x Contents

I Want to Be Useful 166

144 Feature Films You Should See Before You Croak 169

Filmography 173

*Notes* 177

*Bibliography* 185

*Index* 191