

## Truth Out of Context: The Use of Found Footage in *Let The Fire Burn*

Kevin King,  
University of Lodz

**Abstract:** The documentary film *Let The Fire Burn* utilizes only preexisting news, deposition and documentary footage to chronicle the 1985 bombing of a radical political group's headquarters by the city of Philadelphia. The article holds that the process of editing this compiled footage into a narrative sequence reflects the temporal process of contextual change in what both the filmmakers and viewers consider authorial voice of "truth" in 2013 as opposed to 1985. This new contextual viewpoint reflects the proliferation of digital footage from devices such as smart phones, police body cameras and surveillance cameras that have often exposed police and other officials in deceptive practices and falsehoods. This context creates the framework for a new perspective on the MOVE bombing, in which audiences detect a new "truth" behind contemporaneous news coverage and official statements on the event. Yet this new perspective can also be manipulated through the contextual assumptions of current audiences, ones that center upon the assumed validity of found footage over more formal content.

**Keywords:** MOVE, compilation documentary, authorial voice, documentary mode

### Introduction

*Let The Fire Burn* is a 2013 documentary film about the city of Philadelphia's confrontation with the MOVE organization in 1985, which resulted in city officials authorizing police to drop an incendiary device on MOVE's residential headquarters. This action led to a fire that killed eleven people and destroyed over sixty houses in the surrounding neighborhood. *Let The Fire Burn* utilizes a "compilation" approach (Nichols 2010, 191) to document the history of MOVE and the events leading to this confrontation. The film's director, Jason Osder, along with editor Nels Bangarter, used only found footage to tell the story of MOVE and the events leading

up to the bombing, eschewing many of the traditional narrative conventions used in documentary film. These conventions include witness interviews conducted by the filmmakers, re-creations of past events using actors, or the use of any spoken narration to describe the events on screen. *Let The Fire Burn* instead employs only footage created for other purposes, in this case, news reports and an earlier documentary about MOVE (Pomer & Mancini 1980), video depositions utilized in legal proceedings resulting from the incident, and televised hearings conducted by the city of Philadelphia to investigate the circumstances that led to the confrontation (*Temple Law Quarterly* 1986). In this way the “authorial voice” of the film is first diffused among the various sources of information and testimony, then edited together by the filmmaker to create a narrative structure.<sup>15</sup> This diffusion gives the appearance of more authenticity and objectivity than a traditional documentary with narration and staged interviews. These traditional forms, however well researched and documented, often suffer from their period’s cultural assumptions, which can then date their conclusions. Here the viewpoint of Osder is more obscure, hidden under the various perspectives of contemporaneous footage and testimony from police and MOVE members. Yet their use of various forms of this footage, editing technique and use of other film technique such as music, do reveal a viewpoint which reflects their own cultural assumptions about such found footage.

### The MOVE Group

The MOVE group was a communal collective of mostly but not exclusively African Americans, which was often described, in the nomenclature of the time, as a “black nationalist” organization. MOVE’s motives and goals were actually somewhat murky aside from railing against an American society which MOVE members, along with many other African Americans, saw as racist and exploitative (cf. Washington 1989). The group’s founder, Vincent Leaphart, renamed himself John Africa and developed an anti-technology ideology and lifestyle along with what was described in the press as a cult persona (McCoy 2010).

The organization, which at its height had around 50 members, lived in a series of row houses in largely African-American, working class neighborhoods in Philadelphia. The group frequently clashed with these neighbors, sparking

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<sup>15</sup> Jane Loader, co-director of the compilation documentary *Atomic Café*, refers to this approach as “compilation verite” (Loader 2002).

complaints that caused the police to become involved, a police force notorious for its racism (Pennsylvania Crime Commission 1974).<sup>16</sup> These early police interactions escalated into a shoot-out in 1978 that left a policeman dead and nine MOVE members in custody. During the lengthy trial and afterwards, the MOVE group continued to come into conflict with neighbors and the police, which led the city to attempt to evict them from their last dwelling in 1985, and in so doing finally to making the dubious decision to use a bomb on a rooftop structure.

### The Compilation Documentary Form

The traditional documentary approach utilizes authorial voices made expressly for the film, usually some combination of narration, re-creations and interviews. Narration is written from the filmmaker's point of view, which informs the viewer about the meaning of archival footage, while the testimony from witnesses or experts is shaped by the memories and agendas of these subjects and by the process of filming itself, in which this testimony is staged for a camera crew. While found footage displays the attitudes and agendas of its original creators, these become re-contextualized in the compilation process through editing and historical perspective, which demonstrates the perspective of the filmmakers and the historical differences in audience perceptions (Randolph 2000, 29-41).<sup>17</sup> These perceptions have changed more recently through the ubiquitous growth of devices capable of creating found footage itself; cell phones and digital recorders, along with police and security cameras have become a major tool in recording news events as they happen, from terrorists attacks to natural disasters. For viewers of *Let The Fire Burn* this contemporary found footage of police interactions with citizens informs the re-contextualization of the police actions against MOVE, both in terms of the TV footage of the incident and police and MOVE member testimony at commission hearings. In the United States police are almost never convicted for killing civilians

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16 This study found that "widespread corruption has been a constant problem which has plagued the department since its inception." [With a] "history of excessive use of arrests and failure to provide adequate protection for minorities" (Pennsylvania Crime Commission 1974).

17 In Emile de Antonio's compilation film *Point of Order* (1964), kinescopes and newsreels of the McCarthy hearings of the 1950's are compiled without commentary and ordered in a seemingly "historical narrative." Yet this time-line is manipulated to reflect post-hearing attitudes, so that Joseph Welch's famous "Have you no shame?" speech, which came to epitomize the McCarthy hearings, finishes the film, when in fact it occurred half way through the hearings.

in the line of duty (Stinson 2017),<sup>18</sup> but the public has seen countless examples of fatal interactions between police and citizens, particularly citizens of color, that paint a disturbing pattern of police culpability.<sup>19</sup> Since the structure and conclusions of a compilation documentary reflects the temporal attitudes and beliefs of the filmmakers and their audience, these attitudes can alter the authorial integrity of the various protagonists shown in the compiled footage.

### A History of Compilation Films

It is the temporal nature of the process of re-contextualization which gives the compilation documentary film its power and its potential limitations and even dangers. In perhaps the earliest compilation film, *Fall of The Romanov Dynasty* (1927), Esfir Shub edited newsreel and archival footage of Tsarist Russia juxtaposed between title card commentary from a post-Revolution, Soviet perspective (Osipova 2001). But modern viewers are now aware of the crimes of Stalin's regime, and these title cards and the ideology behind them create a perspective and sense of irony inconceivable to Shub. The presentation of found footage in compilation documentaries can be used for satire, as in *The Atomic Café* (1982), in which filmmakers Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty and Pierce Rafferty utilize American newsreels and public service films of the Cold War era to reveal the biases and absurdity of the underlying viewpoints of this footage, in which the government proposed survival from a nuclear holocaust. Yet this comicality can also blur the underlying serious issues; for a viewer thirty five years later, the film's period perspective and lack of gravitas becomes more obvious in its equivocations of Cold War figures such as Harry S. Truman and Joseph Stalin and an emphasis on testimony from individuals who were considered ridiculous at the time, but are presented as mainstream for the sake of humor (Rizvi 2015, 45-47). A more recent example of a compilation documentary is *The Autobiography of Nicolai Ceaușescu* (2010), in which director Andrej Ujică compiled Romanian state TV and film footage to create a narrative of the career of Ceaușescu that is book-ended by the infamous video footage of his arrest and interrogation that led to his and his wife's execution (Dargis 2011).<sup>20</sup>

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18 From 2005 to 2015 American police killed an average of 1000 people per year in the line of duty, but over that period only 13 were convicted of murder or manslaughter (Stinson 2017).

19 A recent study showed that 86% of Americans now support the use of "body cameras" on all police (YouGov 2015).

20 It could be argued that *The Autobiography of Nicolai Ceaușescu* is truly "verite" in that no extraneo-

What all these compilation films demonstrate is the power of utilizing the contextual assumptions of re-purposed footage to develop a wholly different narrative, one that is often at cross purposes to the narrative intended by the original creators. For a viewer witnessing Ceaușescu's sordid end at the beginning of *The Autobiography of Nicolai Ceaușescu*, the propaganda of the state footage takes on a ghoulish absurdity. Similarly, while in *Let The Fire Burn* the filmmakers structure the narrative generally along a historical timeline of the events, they use a title card to reveal the outcome of the MOVE stand-off and subsequent loss of life and property at the film's outset, creating a sense of dramatic irony and dread as we see events unfold towards their inevitably terrible conclusion, one that could only be guessed at by the news reporters creating the footage in real time.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the passage of time reveals underlying assumptions that were inherent in the creation of the compiled footage that were either unrealized, dismissed or barely acknowledged by the original creators. The footage used in *Let The Fire Burn* was three to four decades old when the film was produced, so that a modern viewer, especially one from the United States and particularly one from Philadelphia, has a much different contextual framework in processing and evaluating what is seen on screen. I have discussed the changed attitudes towards the police among contemporary viewers of *Let The Fire Burn* and the creators of the 1985 footage (Yuning, Sun, and Triplett, 2009). Without this background absent from such found footage in the 70's and 80's, citizens received their information about MOVE and their confrontations with police through TV news. As shown in *Let The Fire Burn*, local television news coverage was almost wholly supportive of police actions, both in the 1985 confrontation and the 1978 so-called "shootout" in which a policeman was killed. Similarly, we see police testimony in the commission hearings that the MOVE members did not have any automatic weapons and the policeman was killed by a hail of automatic weapons fire. Yet this went barely acknowledged at the time and no policemen were ever indicted for any crimes (Sanders and Jeffries 2013). Today, with many American's knowledge of the systematic abuse by police against minority populations, many viewers look at this "evidence" in news reports or commission testimony

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us music, sounds or titles are utilized.

21 This dread is heightened through a dramatic musical soundtrack placed underneath both the found footage and these titles.

with very different eyes, even if we choose to go along with the earlier views on these incidents (Prior 2013, 116).<sup>22</sup> A prime example of this phenomenon is the infamous Rodney King found footage of 1991. This camcorder footage, captured by a man named George Holliday from the window of his apartment, became a media sensation, resulting in a trial in which the officers were acquitted, followed by riots that left 53 people dead and 7,000 structures burned at a cost of a billion dollars. For African Americans this was an example of a black citizen being brutalized by a white police force in the manner of an occupying army, not a civic organization whose motto is “to serve and protect.” But many whites had little sympathy for Rodney King; he was driving an automobile legally intoxicated (on alcohol and PCP) and had just led police on a high-speed chase. It is the sort of encounter that happens every day in large American cities. The fact that the audience was able to see this beating, instead of merely hear the statistics, changed the public’s attitude with the visceral power of the image. Hence the contextual framework (as we have seen above, often defined by race and class) by which a viewer of 2013 (or today) reacts to the 1985 TV news and commission footage in *Let The Fire Burn* and re-configures their response about who they think has authorial integrity; the police or citizens of color. Some might still hold firm to the institutional view that the police are a so-called “thin blue line” between the law-abiding public and the hordes of criminals in our cities. But many others have not only come to a new perspective on just what happens during these encounters but have a new appreciation for the public statements of African Americans that have been made for decades (Martin 2005, 307-326).

### **The Authorial Voice of Deposition Footage**

We can also see how the process of re-contextualization is affected by the various types of compiled footage used in *Let The Fire Burn*. For example, legal deposition video utilized as evidence in a court case opens the film. As might be expected with such footage, the image is grainy and sound quality low, the framing unbalanced. Yet this low aesthetic quality lends the footage an air of authenticity, since it is clearly “real” as opposed to a staged (and slickly photographed) recreation of survivor testimony. The subject of this deposition footage, used

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22 There is increasingly a bifurcation of media into “right and left” in the United States that influences trust in stories about the police and citizens (Prior 2013).

in a legal action against the city of Philadelphia, is Michael Ward, one of the two survivors of the MOVE house fire (*New York Times* 1991).<sup>23</sup> In the deposition footage, the thirteen-year-old Ward is flanked by three unidentified men as he answers questions about the MOVE incident. One man asks Ward if he knows what it means to tell the truth, and what happens to people who don't tell the truth. The boy's answer, "bad things," serves as a signpost and warning to the various witnesses we will soon see; the media which report upon the fire and the makers of this documentary (or any documentary) with the implicit risk of distorting the "truth" through the use of cinematic technique. Finally, Michael Ward's very innocence and his childish version of the "truth" is in itself a testament to the lies and injustices of American society that produced a reaction like the MOVE group and the bad things that followed.<sup>24</sup>

As mentioned above, the methods the filmmaker uses to establish an authoritative voice without the usual documentary tools of staged interviews or voice-over has its own set of risks. We see Michael Ward giving his deposition testimony throughout the film, contrasted with commission hearing footage and news reports made as the confrontation unfolded. Ward's viewpoint, owing to his age and audience expectations about his fear of the authority figures around him, lends itself easily to viewers' contextual notions of which footage is "truer" than others. But, we do not know if this child has been coached beforehand as to what to say during the deposition, or if he would lie out of a desire to please these authority figures. In the initial deposition image, we see on one side of Ward two men with legal pads, giving the appearance of lawyers, and another man opposite who never speaks, but who was in fact Ward's father. Yet none of these men are identified. Would this proximity affect the boy's testimony? The father was estranged from the boy's mother, who was a member of MOVE and died in the fire. Would the boy answer differently if he was not sitting beside his father? Instead we have an assumption of authorial integrity created by the contextualization of our attitudes about the grainy deposition footage and the innocence of a child's responses to such authority figures. What Osder does not provide is contextual information about these figures, that is, we have no documentation of the identity or relationships of these men. The subsequent use of Michael

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23 Ward and his father received \$840,000 and monthly payments of up to \$9 million in a settlement.

24 That is, to the modern viewer made aware of these injustices through various media sources, including found footage. Others might see the subsequent presentation as a slanted usage of the compiled footage.

Ward's deposition commentary on life inside the MOVE house and details of the stand-off and bombing as it unfolds is very effective, owing to this authorial integrity, but it has not been earned through the accumulation of any verifiable evidence save the viewer's attitudes towards his testimony, which is a contextual viewpoint that can change over time.

Here again we see how the functioning dynamic of the compilation documentary, the process of re-contextualization, constantly evolves with each set of historical audience members, whose view of past events alters with the advent of new historical information, sociological developments and levels of sophistication about media and the potential for manipulation. Just as the "Voice of God" narration once commanded authorial credibility,<sup>25</sup> contemporary audiences often find images that are seen as unrehearsed or "real" compelling in themselves, especially if they are from a past devoid of reality show techniques (Goodmilow 1997, 92).<sup>26</sup>

### **The Authorial Voice of Commission Testimony**

In a similar fashion, video recordings of the commission hearings that investigated the fire are edited to convey both the attitudes behind the police and MOVE members' actions and to comport with modern viewers' reassessment of these very attitudes thirty years on. Throughout the film this commission footage is interspersed with Michael Ward's deposition testimony and TV news reports aired live during the final confrontation between police and the MOVE group, creating juxtapositions and contrasting truths not available to any contemporary viewers nor the various people testifying or creating these news reports. In this way the viewer must decide which viewpoint or witness has more authority in recalling events truthfully, a judgement dependent upon the contextual perspective of that viewer and those giving testimony.

The public commission hearing footage lends itself to a level of gravity both conceptually and visually, one that implies an honest attempt to uncover the truth about what happened on May 13, 1985, with a host of community members

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25 Wolfe observes that "disembodied, this voice is construed as fundamentally unrepresentable in human form, connoting a position of absolute mastery and knowledge outside the spatial and temporal boundaries of the social world the film depicts" (1997, 149).

26 Jill Godmilow notes that one of the very first examples of documentary footage, Lumière's 1895 film *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, was in fact elaborately staged (1997, 93).



drawn from all sides and the hearings videotaped. Yet the motives behind this commission were more complex than merely a quest for the truth. Public reaction after the MOVE bombing and subsequent fire was extremely negative, centering not so much on the police response to the MOVE organization, but the fact that 60 houses of “innocent” people were destroyed. With a public relations disaster on their hands, and under the threat of numerous lawsuits, the city organized a panel of twelve community leaders to investigate how the city’s confrontation evolved from the police handling neighborhood complaints against MOVE into a full-scale attack which killed eleven people (*New York Times* 1991). These televised hearings become an expositional device through which the viewer learns about the MOVE organization, through testimony of former MOVE members, neighbors and police, along with the details of police actions against MOVE during the seventies and leading up to the events of 1985, and finally a step by step explication of how the police came to decide to drop an incendiary device on the building. This footage is cross-cut with various news reports filmed during the confrontation and Michael Ward’s deposition testimony about what was happening inside the MOVE house.

In editing this footage, the filmmakers utilize the re-contextualization process in creative ways, sometimes emphasizing modern attitudes and at other times subverting them. For example, testimony from former MOVE members who were not in the house during the police action but were still supportive of the group’s aims provides both a narrative on the nature of MOVE viewed from the inside and its relation to the white power structure. Commission member William B. Lytton, a visual emblem of white, elite America in his expensive suit and tie, asks former MOVE member Laverne Simmons about the “philosophy” of MOVE. Simmons answers simply “the absolute truth,” a response that is cross-cut to a skeptical look by Lytton, a look (and implied response) that might easily be shared by many white viewers of the documentary. Then another former MOVE member, Louise James, testifies to Lytton that John Africa “exposed the lie in the system.” When Lytton asks her to explain that system, she replies “The establishment. You.” Here the filmmakers cut to a shot of Lytton shifting his eyes as though guilty, an attitude perhaps shared by those same white viewers who found earlier claims of Africa’s “absolute truth” so ridiculous. The modern American viewer knows all too well, through the proliferation of video evidence and their own experience, that however crazy John Africa’s views might be when held up to a sophisticated

Western philosophy which denies absolutes, the truth of the systemic prejudice against people of color in America is one of the few “absolute truths” of American society.<sup>27</sup>

Immediately after the guilt-ridden look on Lytton’s face, there comes a dissolve into a campaign ad by the notorious Philadelphia mayor (and former police chief) Frank Rizzo. The ad utilizes classic racist code words, still in use today, decrying a “small minority among us that seeks to destroy the heritage of 1776,” and arguing that “we must be ever vigilant that this minority does not impose its philosophy on the unwilling majority of Americans.” This ad resonates at different levels depending upon the viewer’s contextual perspective. Someone who is of color knows “exactly” what Rizzo is referring to when he talks about “a small minority,” while anyone from Philadelphia of the historical era of Frank Rizzo and the civil rights struggles is well aware of the filmmakers’ intention on following this testimony with the notorious campaign ad. This linkage between the attitudes of the “brainwashed” cult members and the reality of the history of prejudice against minorities lends authority to their views, so that even if viewers share the educated commission members’ eye-rolling skepticism about John Africa, they understand how these views came about, and have another perspective on the “absolute truth” of these former members’ position and the MOVE incident.

### **The Authorial Voice of the Media**

The story of how the MOVE stand-off evolved into a fire is also delineated in *Let The Fire Burn* through various TV news reports that were broadcast live during the incident in 1985. The filmmakers use both dramatic irony and audio technique to give viewers a sense of growing dread as we watch TV reporters describe events in real time. Dramatic irony operates here because unlike the reporters who breathlessly comment on the stand-off almost as a sporting event we know from the beginning of the film that there will be a fire that kills eleven people and destroys sixty-one homes. We also watch these events with an eye on detecting how things went so badly, not merely as exciting live TV, especially when

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<sup>27</sup> See Jane Elliott ask American white audiences about whether any would stand up to assert that they would want to be treated like black citizens are in the United States. No one ever stands (YouTube 2016).

cross-cut with commission testimony by police and city officials. News footage of neighbors being evacuated the very day of the police action against MOVE is especially compelling. They are interviewed and offered a chance to explain that they were given no prior warning and hence no time to take their possessions.<sup>28</sup> We know what will happen as we watch these interviews; these people lost everything in the fire, and many had little or no fire insurance. Yet here again the filmmakers betray their premise of objectivity by putting ominous music under this footage to increase the suspense as events unfold to the tragic and inevitable outcome. This audio manipulation tells the viewer what to feel while watching these images, instead of allowing the found footage to speak for itself.

By using this footage under the timeline that it was recorded, and with our knowledge of the events to come, the viewer's contextual perspective shifts, and as we watch these news reports, the underlying bias of these news organizations in favor of the police becomes clearer. When barrages of gunfire erupt, the journalists report that MOVE members are firing on police, describing the scene as a "shoot-out," which infers that two sides are exchanging gunfire. But later, only four guns were found in the wreckage of the MOVE house and none had been in working order, a fact that the police chief is unable to explain during his commission testimony. TV reporters marvel at the equipment used by the police, and their interviews with neighbors tend towards the notion that the police are protecting the public from this menace. Yet later testimony makes it clear that it was the police who went into the confrontation looking for a fight, perhaps in retaliation for the 1978 killing, which led not only to the decision to drop the bomb but the mayor's notorious command to "let the fire burn" which led to the firestorm that consumed 61 homes.

## Conclusion

*Let The Fire Burn* ends with an especially powerful bit of testimony from the commission hearings, in which the commission chair, the Reverend Paul Washington, who had been involved in the civil rights movement in Philadelphia since the 1940's, questions two policemen about the final moments in the MOVE house. Michael Ward's mother pushed him towards police, then ran back into

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28 One elderly African American resident being moved presciently tells reporters that the only way the police will be able to remove the MOVE members is "to kill them all."

the burning house, presumably because she thought she would be killed. This is cross-cut with Ward's deposition testimony, recreating the horror of this moment through a child's eyes. Washington wonders why Ward's mother would go back into the fire.

Just as a human being myself, I'm just trying to imagine myself in that situation. Behind me there is a raging inferno, and in front of me are people saying "Come out. Come out." I'm trying to imagine what would cause me to turn back into the fire.

When a policeman comments that no one can know why MOVE members acted the way they did, inferring with his tone that these cult members were all crazy, Washington counters with a response that encapsulates the process of re-contextualization that *Let The Fire Burn* both explicates and gives rise to in its compilation style:

I knew a lot of those people as individuals and as human beings. A lot of people know MOVE from what they've seen, but I've had a lot of dealings with them and I knew them to be more than MOVE people. I knew many of them by name, as human beings. It's probably a rhetorical question; I don't think you, by the way you've responded can answer that.

Washington's eloquent response about knowing MOVE members as human beings, and the emotion of his resignation that the police simply cannot answer his question resonates even more from today's perspective, born from the Rodney King video and countless cell phone and YouTube clips of the police and their abuse of minorities. We understand the Reverend's incredulity and sadness in a way that might not have been possible thirty years ago, and it is a testament to the power of this thirty-year-old found footage to illustrate this contextual shift in culture and understanding, a shift that came in part from the technology that has made found footage so ubiquitous. Viewers now appreciate and believe in the authority of his words, even if they find the explosion of most found and self-generated media vacuous and vulgar. This contextual shift renders the experiment of *Let The Fire Burn* especially powerful, for viewers look at the witness

testimony and news footage from a perspective that lends credence to the words and concerns of marginalized groups in American society. Instead of lecturing its audience on the cultural attitudes and prejudices that figured into each step of the MOVE tragedy, the film lets the contemporaneous footage demonstrate these factors without commentary. The film does carry the burdens of its own time and place, and access to truth is often provisional and shifts with time. Temporal distance exposes the lies of the past, but we are trapped in our own set of assumptions and perspective. But perhaps it is a primal goal of documentary film to at least strive for such moments, however few, if only to assure viewers of subsequent generations that they still exist.

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