VISUAL STYLE AND SPATIAL ARTICULATIONS IN *BERLIN, SYMPHONY OF A CITY* (1927)

MATTHEW BERNSTEIN

The pervasive use of narrative and fictional techniques in documentary film supports Bill Nichols' observation that the documentary "does not form a simple opposition to the term narrative."[1] Documentaries in which social phenomena are organized around central "characters" and conflicts, or in which appropriate actions are staged constitute a central critique of such rigid oppositions; the compromises and mutual "borrowings" of techniques between fiction and documentary must be accounted for. While the bulk of documentary criticism has usefully developed the terms of this difficulty, such discussions have emphasized what Annette Kuhn calls "the conditions of immediate production", i.e., the shooting stage, at the expense of other production activities.[2] The crucial techniques of visual style have been generally overlooked.

Specifically, the use of continuity cutting and analytical editing[3] for the construction of spatio-temporal coherence in documentary proposes an extraordinary problem for developing critical notions of documentary, especially since they appear in the lengthier documentaries of the twenties. Often, such editing techniques and spatial constructions accompany staged actions to essay a conventional realism as developed in fictional films. Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), for example, effects a total appropriation of analytical editing. Consider the series of six shots used to establish Nanook's morning routine in preparing for the seal hunt:

- —Title: "Breaking camp, Nanook and his family, ever on the quest for food, prepare to start for the sealing grounds at sea."
- —Long Shot: Nanook's igloo. A long dark ridge is visible in the distant background. Dogs rest in front and around the side of the igloo, against which a pole rests. The dogs lift their heads as a knife blade quickly flashes from inside the igloo, moving horizontally and then vertically.
- —Medium Shot: A head-on angle shows the block of ice carved in the previous shot being pushed forward slightly. The knife blade briefly reappears, cutting across the top of the block. The "door" is then pushed screen right as Nanook appears behind it. He begins to pull himself out, then looks at the camera and pauses.
- —Long Shot: As in the first shot of the igloo. Nanook pulls himself out of the igloo as the dogs get out of his way. He stands beside the igloo "door", looks around and sticks a finger in his mouth. The camera begins a pan movement to the left.
- —Medium Shot: In a reverse-angle shot, Nanook removes the finger from his mouth and turns his hand in the wind. At the end of the shot, his hand is held in profile with his face.
- —Long Shot: As in the first and third shots, with the camera pan to the left

MATTHEW BERNSTEIN is a doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin in Madison where he is writing his disseration on the independent producer Walter Wanger. He is also editor of *The Velvet Light Trap.*

completed. Nanook's hand begins parallel with his face. He continues to turn it in the wind, then lowers his arm and turns towards the igloo.

Earlier documentary criticism might stress how Nanook's look to the camera in the third shot of this series indicates Flaherty's close direction of his actions. The "dramatic" quality of Nanook's emergence from the igloo (heralded by the flashing of his knife and the anticipation of the dogs' looking up), the careful placing of the seal hunting pole outside the igloo near the "door", even the circular arrangement of the dogs around the igloo, all these elements of the *mise en scene* suggest that Flaherty has carefully orchestrated the staging of events in this scene.

But the most striking aspect of the scene is Flaherty's painstaking effort to achieve smooth continuity using all the standard techniques associated with the spatio-temporal continuum of fiction films. These include Flaherty's respect for the axis of action along which his shot choices are arranged (the axis is visualized in the shot by the ridge in the background), and the matches-on-action used for shot transitions. The latter create a flow of action which reinforces the careful staging of events: Nanook's movement out of the igloo and his turning of his hand in the wind are both edited with sufficient overlapping movement to provide smooth cuts between shots. In fact, Nanook's brief look at the camera at the end of the medium shot before he pulls himself up provides the overlapping action for the cut to the succeeding shot. These continuity cuts enhance the logic of analytical editing which dictates the shot ordering: establishing shots, cut-ins, and reverse-angle shots create a diegetically coherent space. In this way, Flaherty ensures the spatial orientation of the viewer while Nanook establishes his bearings.

Nanook of the North, is, of course, an extreme example of the incorporation of analytical editing into documentary. Flaherty's narrative documentary registers a consistent impulse towards analytical editing (although never so fully realized as in this scene). The use of the "invisible" style here constitutes one aspect of Flaherty's attempt to familiarize a western audience with an exotic culture. Other major components of Flaherty's strategy include the focus of the film on a single character, the conflict of Nanook's struggle against a cruel landscape and the arrangement of events into a series of adventures. Thus, the first feature-length documentary used several pertinent characteristics of fiction films, in order to make Nanook's milieu digestable to the ethnocentric film viewer. The use of analytical editing is a major technique in the film, but one which has been overlooked in favor of discussion of Flaherty's staging of actions.

The process of appropriating visual techniques of fiction films is, however, not always so comprehensive in silent documentary. When we turn to *Berlin, Symphony of a City* (1927), a non-narrative city symphony, we still find diegetically coherent spaces, but the conventions of analytical editing have been distinctly modified. Since it dispenses with characters, plot constructions and (with one exceptional sequence) staged actions, *Berlin* is conventionally discussed in terms of its "rhythms"; through editing technique and shot composition, the film is able to extract the abstract characteristics of its subject.[4] Yet such descriptions of the film, though they do attend to visual style (if only because there is little staged action to compel attention), hardly represent a satisfactory manner of addressing *Berlin.* The imprecision of the blanket description "rhythmical" accounts for only the most general characteristics of the film. Attention to patterns of shot articulation and spatial constructions reveals that the film's exposition follows the general

principles of analytical editing. Naturally enough, *Berlin* sustains relations of spatial contiguity between shots through its exploration of a specific, unified locale in the course of a day; the initial presentation of that locale utilizes conventions of spatial presentation common in fiction films. Moreover, the rhythmical editing and abstract patterns of movement, mass and tones occur within a system of shot orderings which can be described as modifications of the analytical editing system. The dominant modes of shot relations in *Berlin* are best described as what Christian Metz has called "bracket syntagma" of the image track, an ordering of shots which renounces the detailed examination of space associated with analytical editing.[5]

The modifications of analytical editing to be found in *Berlin* primarily concern its extensive use of medium-long and long shots. The predominance of this shot scale and the use of bracket syntagma function to create spectacular, pictorial connotations which have inspired reviewers of *Berlin* to discuss the film in terms of its abstraction. The spectacular quality of events emphasized in the film is central to its formal concerns. The modification of the analytical editing system, as well as the unique instance of its use (during the staged "scene" of a woman's "suicide" in the afternoon segment), formulate those concerns.

In proposing that bracket syntagma function in *Berlin* as a modification of analytical editing, I am alluding to the general dominance of narrative and fiction film throughout the history of documentary. The dynamics of that dominance have been conceptualized differently in the course of documentary criticism, and an oppressive sense of the dominance of narrative, an all or nothing proposition, is what Nichols repudiates in his essay. It is more useful to read the presence of analytical editing schemes and their modification in documentary films as an appropriation of techniques which particular films rework to a lesser *(Nanook of the North)* or greater *(Berlin)* degree. The most helpful terms in which this process has been posed is the Russian Formalist concept of aesthetic "background" or conventions against which an individual work produces formal operations.[6] In this analysis of *Berlin,* the norms at issue are spatio-temporal articulations, analytical editing and continuity cutting, which are invoked and modified for the organization of "actuality" footage. It would be surprising to find a city symphony which completely embraced these conventions of fiction films. The presence of such techniques in *Berlin,* however general or modified, suggests the varying degrees to which norms of fictional films were assimilated by documentary films of the twenties.

The general organization of *Berlin* around "a day in the life of the city" is preceded by a prologue in which a train enters the city. The spatio-temporal continuity of *Berlin* is introduced through the editing of shots of passing scenery and of locomotive machinery for consistent scene direction. Shots of fields, posts and shacks are taken from the right side of the train as it moves. The relations between these shots imply vaguely contiguous space and continuous time, characteristics of nearly all shot relations within the film. Conceptually, the train ride emphasizes that the locale, Berlin, is a unified space to be visited; the linear, coherent presentation of space in the train ride encourages viewer expectations of a linear and comprehensible articulation of spatial and temporal relations in the rest of the film.

After the train reaches the Berlin station, the city is shown in a series of shots which function analogously to the establishing shots of a fictional scene. Four aerial shots of the city are followed by two shots (in long and close-up scale) of a clockface reading five o'clock, and by several street

level shots of empty avenues. The logic of shot ordering in this introduction to the city is that of analytical editing in fictional film scenes, offering clear signals of spatial and temporal orientation as the series of shots brings us closer to the streets. The first aerial shots function as establishing shots and in this sense all subsequent medium shots of events in the course of the day assume the function of close-ups in proportion to the aerial views. Significantly, during the afternoon segment of the film, we again see aerial views of Berlin from the vantage of a plane ride over the city. These shots reaffirm the grandeur and spatial unity of the locale much as the repetition of a master shot reiterates the spatial relations of a fictional scene.

On the level of shot-to-shot relations, however, a different logic is apparent. The film organizes innumerable events around the general scheme of a daily routine, but the actual shot ordering often connects unrelated activities consecutively. To take a random sample, near the conclusion of the five a.m. segment, three shots show (1) a girl skipping down the front steps of a house, (2) a man hosing down his car, and (3) a delivery boy approaching a doorway. How can we describe the spatio-temporal relations between these shots? In his early work on film semiotics, Christian Metz described different categories of syntagma which usefully characterize the predominant inter-shot relations in *Berlin.* Metz describes one type of shot ordering in which different events are shown sequentially, and the very difference among events defeats any certainty of the specific temporal relations between shots. Metz describes the bracket syntagma as:

> . . .a series of very brief scenes representing occurrences that the film gives as typical samples of the same order of reality . . . None of these scenes is treated with the full syntagmatic breadth it might have commanded; it is taken as an element in a system of allusions . . .[7]

Metz notes that the bracket syntagma can function in a frequentative mode; in the case of *Berlin,* such shot orderings allude to the daily occurrences in the city and their brief presentation emphasizes their status as events which occur on a daily basis. The "same order of reality" to which they belong is that routine. The frequentative mode is ensured by the general structure of the film around the clock hours from morning to night. The presentation of events in long shot or medium-long shot without further elaboration indicates that such shots show events that are typical of city life at that hour; but no more definite temporal relation between them (either of simultaneity or of consecutiveness) exists.

At varying points *Berlin* does include multiple shot elaborations on single events. Generally these take the form of what Metz calls alternating syntagma, or cutting between simultaneous events.[8] For example, just prior to the shot of the clockface reading eight o'clock in the morning, a series of shots cross-cut between two different school entrances, where different children greet each other and enter. Another example, in a non-symmetrical series of shots, occurs during the afternoon segment of *Berlin:* we are shown in separate shots a yawning hippopotamus, a dog sitting down to sleep in slow motion, a polar bear rolling on its side, an elephant already on its side and a man dozing on a park bench. The simultaneity of these events is implied by their similarity. Their spatial co-existence in implicitly contiguous space is sustained through the very notion of a unified locale which motivates the entire film.

A second type of elaboration on individual, sample events entails cut-ins from the initial medium or long shot

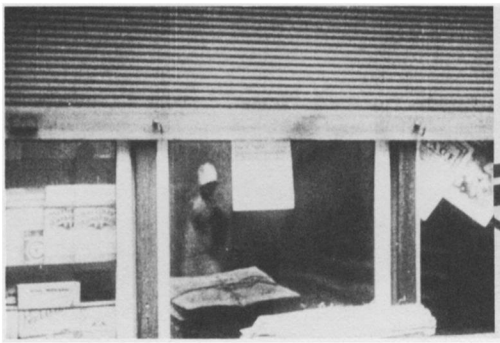
which show such activities. In general, the refusal to cut-in from longer shot scales constitutes the bracket syntagma and the pictorial qualities of most shots in *Berlin.* One exceptional instance of cutting-in occurs as workers cross a bridge on their way to work at the factories: several long shots, a close-up on a blind organ vendor by the bridge, and medium shots from under the bridge elaborate on this procession to construct a stable, coherent space. In a subsequent series of shots in the later morning segment, two men begin fighting on the street. We see their altercation in alternating high angle and street-level shots as a crowd gathers around them. In both of these examples, matches-on-action provide smooth continuity between several shots in the series.

The exceptional status of multiple shot elaborations on particular events in *Berlin* illustrates that the "superficiality" often ascribed to the film is an effect of the interrelation of shots through the bracket syntagma and the refusal to cut-in on most of the events shown in the manner of analytical editing. The "allusive" function of the longer shot scales and the distance they produce from events create connotations of spectacle which is central to the film's rhetorical strategies. The notion of the city as spectacle is constantly suggested in *Berlin* by both the shot scale and the selection of events shown. The sheer amount of footage devoted to the "waking up" sequences of the morning segments, as opposed to the 'closing down' of offices, factories and shops in the late afternoon, reflects the film's emphasis on spectacle. The longer shot scales of the bracket syntagma afford a general picture of each event in the film and connotes their spectacular function, but the events themselves convey those connotations.

In the morning segments, for example, doors and gates are constantly opened while Berliners repeatedly appear out of doorways and vehicles such as cars, streetcars, and pushcarts emerge from garages. Three sets of garage doors open before the Postdam train comes forward on its tracks towards the camera. The revelation of such appearances extends beyond the architecture of city buildings and garages to the frame itself: often a shot begins on the empty street or sidewalk, onto which a Berliner or a vehicle appears. The frame empty of movement anticipates the emergence of a "performer", dramatizing the process of appearance and beginning. In addition, the repeated opening of shops is indicated by the raising of curtains, shades or guard rails on shop windows in a movement which resembles the raising of curtains on a theatrical proscenium; the window displays and the reflections of city life in the glass underline this association (Figure 1). By contrast, only three shots show the shutting down of factory machinery and only one shot shows an office being closed. When combined with the literal pageantry of street parades, the drama of men in a streetfight or that (staged) of a woman's suicide attempt, the interest of *Berlin* in phenomena as visual events becomes clear.

The outstanding sequence within the system of long shot scales and bracket syntagma, however, concerns the dramatically staged scene in which a woman commits suicide. In seventeen shots, the space of a bridge and a river are contiguously linked to construct an implicitly coherent space. The disruptive cutaways which occur are motivated as point-of-view shots, and further elaborate on this dramatic event:

- —Medium Shot: A woman stands hunched over an arched railing, staring down screen right intently. (Figure 2).
- —Medium shot: Swirling water (in a clockwise direction).
- —Close-Up: The woman's eyes are open wide, looking down, screen left (Figure 3).



The spectacle begins: a half-opened shop window reflects city street lights. (Figure 1).

The suicide sequence: contiguous space and point of view constructions are edited with matches on movement. (Figures 2-8).

Berlin, Symphony of a City (1927).

—Medium Long Shot: The camera rolls down and up the slope of a roller coaster track (Figure 4).
—Extreme Close-Up: The woman's eyes widen, looking down, screen left (Figure 5).
—Medium Shot: The camera repeats the movement on the roller coaster.
—Extreme Close-Up: The woman's eyes widen again.
—Medium Shot: The water continues to swirl clockwise and the camera loses focus.
—Extreme Close-Up: A twirling barber shot sign fills the frame (Figure 6).
—Medium Shot: A splash in the water.
—Long Shot: A group of people run up the stairs of the bridge along the railing from the left to right. One man near the center of the frame pauses to point downward (Figure 7-8).

Six subsequent shots show a crowd gathering on the bridge from different directions and looking downward; the sequence concludes with a cutaway to a fashion show.

Although it remains the only obviously staged "scene" in *Berlin,* the suicide is presented in a modified version of analytical editing, i.e., without establishing shots which would unify the space of the bridge and the river. Instead, the ordering of shots emphasize "character" psychology through point-of-view constructions. The strongest continuity relations occur as matches-on-movement between the widening of the women's eyes and the up and down movement of the roller coaster, or between the swirling water and the barber shop sign.

The emphasis of this "scene" on subjective perception and the intensity of the close-ups distinguish the suicide from the rest of the film, but ultimately the fictional scene reinforces the emphasis on spectacle which informs the film. The suicidal woman registers the impact of the city's frenzy, and this is the expressive function of those extreme close-ups. At the same time, the shots of gathering observers and the conclusive cutaway to a fashion show indicate that the suicide is finally just another spectacle in the city. The single instance of dramatic proximity to an event, with the scrutiny of analytical editing and the shot ordering for a point-of-view construction, is ultimately recuperated into the broader context of visual events. The use of conventional shot articulations from fictional film practice functions as exceptional technique of editing which proves the rule of bracket syntagma operative in *Berlin.*

Thus, *Berlin* transforms the procedures of analytical editing both in its general pattern of shot relations and in its outstanding, staged "scene," rather than appropriating those procedures intact as in *Nanook of the North.* Moreover, the analytical editing in the suicide "scene" functions reflexively at the same time that it forwards the action shown. In this instance, at least, *Berlin* approaches the parodic strategies of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), which remains the absolute term of comparison for any city symphony. The most useful characterization of Vertov's film has noted that it effects "the ceaseless displacement of one pattern [of shot orderings] by the next. . ."[9] *Man With a Movie Camera* juxtaposes different types of spatial and temporal articulations, occasionally utilizing analytical editing only to "explode" coherent spaces with more dynamic varieties of cross-cutting. During the "leisure" segment of *Man With a Movie Camera,* for example, Vertov compares a beer hall with a worker's club and uses analytical editing and alternate syntagma in the respective locations. The worker's club is rendered in a dynamic space of cross-cutting as if to suggest the greater productivity of time spent in that space.[10] Similarly, a couple obtaining a

divorce earlier in the film are shown in establishing shots, point-of-view constructions and close-ups, and Vertov utilizes the conventions of Western fictional film as if to denounce the proceedings. While *Berlin* does not construct a parodic presentation of fictional film scene constructions, the suicide "scene" does function to implicitly compare its modified version of dramatic scene space, as commonly constructed in fictional film, with the consumption of visual everyday events in the city.

The use of analytical editing in silent documentary is a fascinating phenomenon whether that use is identical to the conventions of fictional film or a modification of those conventions. Particularly in the case of documentaries lacking staged footage, the decision to arrange shots into the familiar practices of analytical editing and continuity cutting demonstrates the prevalence of narrative films as a background to documentaries. Whether those practices are used to create a conventional sense of realism, as in *Nanook of the North,* or to comment upon other methods of spatio-temporal organizations as in *Berlin,* their presence demonstrates that the issue of narrative conventions is by no means confined to questions of staging and plotting of action. The documentary film has sought to differentiate itself from the narrative film for film audiences. The charting of developing strategies of visual form in the twenties' documentaries serves to enhance our understanding of that complex process.

Notes

[1]"Documentary Theory and Practice," *Screen* 17, no. 4 (Winter (1976/1977): 36

[2]"The Camera I: Observations on Documentary," *Screen* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 76. Kuhn's remarks primarily concern *cinema verite* and ethnographic films, although *Berlin* in many ways conforms to her definition of the observation film. Generally, however, both Kuhn's and Nichols' categories of documentary do not address the specific features of documentary film which I am concerned with in this essay.

[3]By analytical editing I refer to the familiar practice of spatial articulation in narrative and fiction films using master shots and cut-ins (though not necessarily in that order) which respect the 180° axis of action. By continuity cutting I refer to shot transitions marked by matches-on-movement and matches-on-action to promote the illusion of a spatio-temporal continuum.

[4]General descriptions of city symphonies which rely on the notion of rhythm include Jay Chapman, "Two Aspects of the City—Cavalcanti and Ruttmann," in *The Documentary Tradition,* ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), pp. 37-42; and Richard Meran Barsam, *Non-Fiction Film: A Critical History* (New York: Dutton, 1973), pp. 28, 30-32. The only close analysis of the concept of visual rhythm in *Berlin* is by Jiri Kolaja and Arnold W. Foster, "Berlin, the Symphony of a City" as a Theme of Visual Rhythm," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1965): 353-358. This analysis is exceedingly precise, and the general progression from linear to circular movement which they find in *Berlin* is a useful description of the film.

[5]Metz presents his syntagmatic categories in "Problems of Denotation of the Fiction Film," in *Film Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 124-133. The positioning of bracket syntagma in relation to analytical editing is unique to this paper; Metz's synchronic analysis does not posit specific relations between the syntagma he describes.

[6]The concept of background operates for the Russian Formalists on three levels. As enumerated by Kristin Thompson, these are:

> the norms of general aesthetic usage (other artworks), the norms of everyday language, and the norms in some way determined by "life" or "reality."

Thompson discusses norms at length in *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 46-53. I am concerned in this paper with only aesthetic norms, although documentary in general can be read against "realistic" norms, or read as the counterposing of aesthetic to realistic norms.

[7]Metz, *op. cit.,* p. 126. Metz distinguishes the bracket syntagma as an a-chronological ordering of shots, i.e., the relationship between such shots is neither precisely simultaneous or consecutive. Hence the modification of analytical editing, which Metz categorizes as a chronological syntagma, achieved by the bracket syntagma also affects the implicit temporal relations between events in successive shots.

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or Another focuses on the problem of social marginalism, the question of machismo comes in through the story of the evolving relationship between Mario, a worker from a marginal district, and Yolanda, a teacher of middle-class origins drafted to teach in the district. The film uses the metaphor of slum clearance and construction in a film which operates a certain "deconstruction." Gomez weaves fictional and nonfictional segments, professional and non-professional players, in a multi-levelled reflexion on the relations between the sexes, between classes, between generations, and among workers, in a film which Julia Lesage correctly describes as "dialectical, revolutionary, feminist." Some of the issues worth discussing include: Does the film's emphasis on romance compromise the film's feminism? What is the film's attitude toward Afro-Cuban religion and toward "marginalism" generally? How does the film treat the ethics of one worker "informing" on another? How do the documentary and fictional segments relativize and mutually critique one another?

Reading:

Lesage, Julia, *"One Way or Another:* Dialectical, Revolutionary, Feminist," *Jump Cut,* No. 20 (May 1979).
Kuhn Annette, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema,* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, pp. 162-167.

I hasten to add as a final note that the preceding represents a highly personal mix of films, based on personal preferences and affinities. One might easily spend more class time on Indian Cinema, or less on Brazil. One might include China or the Phillipines. Many specific substitutions are possible as well. Pontecorvo's *Burn,* despite its limitations, might serve as a didactic introduction to the themes of the course. Glauber Rocha's *Barravento* or Rui Guerra's *The Guns* might be substituted for *Vidas Secas* as examples of first-phase Cinema Novo. *Emitai* might substitute for *Xala,* and both *Lucia* and *Portrait of Teresa* would be worthy substitutions in the Cuban section. Littin's *The Promised Land* could replace *The Battle of Chile.* The course as formulated lacks militant documentaries dealing with current struggles in Central America and in Southern Africa (a lack easily compensated in cities where such films are shown frequently and can be recommended to students). My emphasis has been on major Third World industries and on the fiction film, neglecting documentary, to a certain degree, and the avant-garde. One final practical note: most of the Third World films are distributed by the following distributors: Cinema Guild, Grove Films, Icarus Films, Libra Cinema Five, New Line, New Yorker Films, Mypheduh Films, The Southern Africa Media Center, Hurlock Cine-World, and Third World Newsreel.

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[8]Metz, *op. cit.,* pp. 128-129.

[9]Stephen Crofts and Olivia Rose, "An Essay Towards *Man With a Movie Camera," Screen* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1977), 21. The complexity of Vertov's film has encouraged numerous excellent close readings, and the film stands as the most closely analyzed documentary in film studies. The Crofts and Rose essay is a comprehensive examination of the film.

[10]I am grateful to Vance Kepley Jr. for first indicating the formal interest of the beer hall sequence to me. This essay has further benefited from Professor Kepley's comments on an earlier draft.

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tor's assumption of the name "America", representing people of all occupations, national origins, and religious beliefs. Broadcast over CBS in November 1939, Robeson's performance immediately popularized the work. But his "theatrical" performances of the piece in Harlem and Washington over the next few years had a polemical edge; a visibly black American was asserting his right to represent all. Similarly Robeson's appearance in the epilogue to *Native Land* may have brought a social specificity to his role as commentator that was masked in the original text.