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In Focus: Documentary

edited by B. Ruby Rich

Documentary Disciplines: An Introduction



by B. Ruby Rich

This is an extraordinary moment for documentary. The world of theatrical releases, movie awards, and popular journalism is in the grip of a much-remarked documentary renaissance. Put the breakthrough down to Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the highest-grossing documentary in U.S. history. Or, to put it another way, credit the film's distributor, the old Miramax of the Weinstein Brothers era, for creating unprecedented profits with a breakthrough indie film, as they did originally with the film that put the company (and the Sundance Film Festival) on the map in 1989: *Sex, Lies and Videotape*; fifteen years later they repeated the hat trick. But that's not to say that documentary was unknown in movie theaters before then. Indeed, some of the first U.S. independent films to cross over to art house audiences were the progressive documentaries of the seventies: Jerry Bruck's *I. E. Stone's Weekly* (1973), Jill Godmilow's *My Antonia* (1974), and The Mariposa Collective's *The Word Is Out* (1977). Since that time documentary has steadily extended its range and reach from these early theatrical breakthroughs and festival presences (in the United States, the San Francisco International Film Festival's pioneering Golden Gate Awards and the equitable Sundance Film Festival incorporation of documentary and dramatic film into equal competitions) into ever increasing theatrical exposure, an expanded public television and cable presence (in which HBO and the ITVS have played no small role), and the ever more frenzied tallying of profits to be made with a previously "educational" genre.

The academy has been occupied rather less breathlessly with its own perpetual renaissance in documentary studies, one that spans many more decades and shows no signs of slowing down. Indeed, in the past fifteen years the field of documentary studies has expanded remarkably. The most prominent evidence of this seriousness of purpose has been the annual Visible Evidence conference and the book series of the same name published by the University of Minnesota Press under the stewardship of Jane Gaines, Faye Ginsburg, and Michael Renov.¹ The boom is broadly reflected in the world of academic publishing, with important volumes

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constantly expanding the universe of documentary inquiry, research, and theoretical implications, both within cinema and media studies and in such other crucial arenas as ethnographic research and historical inquiry.² University centers such as the Center for Social Media at American University, the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, and the Center for Media, Culture and History at New York University have been flagships that bridge academic, policy, and practitioner concerns and provide leadership on critical issues of documentary production.

I have experienced the new academic expansionism firsthand as a result of being hired to teach at the UC Santa Cruz Community Studies Department and its brand-new Graduate (M.A.) Program in Social Documentation and, more recently, of being asked to join the advisory board of the even newer Documentary Film Institute at San Francisco State University. All of this constitutes a remarkable change from the days when the only place to grapple with documentary issues was the annual (and still thriving) Flaherty Film Seminar, where documentarians, scholars, curators, and students have gathered to fight with and learn from each other for more than half a century. Today these debates go on in documentary film festivals around the world, from the Sundance documentary competition and panels to the Silver Docs, Double Take, and Hot Docs film festivals in North America and the leading international documentary festivals in Amsterdam, Sheffield, Thessaloniki, and Yamagata.

The landscape for documentary production, history, and theory is richer than it has been in the United States at any time since, perhaps, the last explosion: the direct cinema or cinema vérité movement of the early 1960s, itself now undergoing a striking revival with tributes around the country to Albert Maysles, D. A. Pennebaker, Richard Leacock, and Frederick Wiseman. Never mind that this revival thus far ignores the equally rich history of U.S. activist film: the Newsreel cycle of solidarity documentaries, the era of feminist documentary, the long history of early Latino and Asian American documentary, the distinctive contributions of gay and lesbian documentary, the Native American documentary tradition, the contribution of African American documentarians (especially to television, with *Eyes on the Prize* towering over all else), and all the struggles over representation, collaboration, audience, and exploitation that accompanied those movements.

The revivals thus far have followed the path of auteurism and, mindful of age, have been saluting the surviving founding fathers of the American documentary; while Shirley Clarke is no longer with us, at least William Greaves has seen a revival of interest. And, of course, equal attention still needs to be paid to the early New Latin American Cinema documentary movements along with the rich legacy of European documentary films inspired by a combination of Italian Neo-Realism, the French New Wave, and the post-Vertov Soviet styles.

Paradoxically, or perhaps predictably, the deep reflections on documentary within the academy—where Emile De Antonio, Joris Ivens, Agnes Varda, Fernando Solanas, and so many others are familiar names—rarely cross over into the popular press accounts of the documentary boom and aren't referenced in mainstream documentary reviews, assessments, or coverage. Instead, in keeping with the current state of U.S. independent film, documentaries are assessed one at a time, according to normative criteria: box-office performance, directorial intention, and preexisting

popular interest in particular documentary subjects. According to the logic of the mainstream media, *Fahrenheit 9/11* is important not for its organizing impact or political power (even though it didn't alter the last election results, it may well have hastened the Disney/Miramax split after the parent company forced the Weinsteins to buy the film personally for \$6 million in order to assign its distribution out of house to a consortium shared with Lions Gate and IFC Films) but rather because it grossed nearly \$120 million in ticket sales in the United States and nearly double that once its international release was factored in. *The March of the Penguins* is remarkable, in this world, not for its precedent as a remake (the U.S. distributor Warner Independent Pictures reedited and rescored the documentary and replaced director Luc Jacquet's original French talking-animals soundtrack with a new script voiced by Morgan Freeman in English) but rather because it scored second only to *Fahrenheit 9/11* in box-office grosses: \$77 million in the United States alone. The adoption of the film by the Christian Right as a contrary-to-science model of "creative design" and monogamy was the only other subject allowed to interfere with its unbroken march to theatrical success. These are two widely known cases, but the distortion of documentary in the media and the blogosphere is widespread. Journalists' disregard for the histories and strategies of documentary as analyzed and interpreted within academic discourses has led to the media's constructing its own myths, shaped entirely by market factors and, sometimes, personal tastes.

The kinds of documentary that become visible through the lens of the market-media complex are similarly ripe for dissection and evaluation. It is tempting to hazard a few suggestions of categories that might contain them. *Super Size Me*, for instance, has been welcomed into the fraternity of high-grossing documentaries despite its politics; it could easily anchor a new genre of "stunt documentary" that would include a spate of recent documentaries, up to and including Werner Herzog's hypnotic *Grizzly Man*. Such documentaries strategically capitalize on the viewer investment already mobilized by reality television and deploy it in more interesting directions. (Some of these films, and Herzog himself, showed up at a 2006 Williams College conference on "extreme documentary," clearly another category in the making.) Then there's the "competition documentary," a familiar category that clones the dramatic chronology of the contest for its own narrative structure: *Spellbound*, *Mad Hot Ballroom*, and so on. Above all, as the allure of the box-office hit catches on, documentary itself sometimes seems to be mutating into a new hybrid phase altogether, the "docutainment," which offers newly marketable pleasures to a fiction-sated audience: *Capturing the Friedmans*, say, or the too-many-to-name documentaries that focus on celebrities with name value or cult appeal. If all else fails, then the new documentary can brand itself through a combination of auteurism and on-screen presence: the Moore brand, the Spurlock brand, all following a lineage handed down by Nick Broomfield and Dennis O'Rourke—preceded, actually, by Jill Godmilow in her *Far From Poland* (1984) phase.

For every eager-to-please, eager-to-shock U.S. documentary celebrated in the press, however, there is a corresponding under-the-radar documentary, shot digitally, distributed through festivals or downloads, urgently delivering information that the mainstream media can no longer carry. These are the new "*samizdat*

documentaries” that are born daily to do the work that an increasingly centralized and controlled media cannot, playing to that sector of the American public that has begun to realize that truth is no longer guaranteed, not by twenty-four frames per second (to parse Errol Morris), not by satellite dishes or hundreds of cable channels, not by any official channels in this time of corporate control.³ Instead, then, viewers might turn to the latest Robert Greenwald opus (*Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* was released in September 2006) or peruse an imaginary “samizdat menu” to learn about election manipulations (*No Umbrella, American Blackout, Street Fight*), the manipulations of the media itself (*Control Room*), the manipulations of terrorism into conspiracies (*Loose Change*), the labor manipulations of cross-border globalization (*Maquilapolis*), the psychopharmaceutical manipulations of one’s own brain (*Tarnation*), the digital manipulation of actual news into a fiction thriller (*Death of a President*), or the foreign and domestic policy manipulations by the U.S. government in Afghanistan, Iraq, and New Orleans (too many even to begin to mention). New improvised-budget, low-budget, and no-budget documentaries are pouring out of camcorders and Macs into living rooms and festivals near you, and it will be interesting to watch for the evolution of distribution mechanisms to connect them to audiences: Netflix, GreenCine, and Ironweed, already established, but also YouTube, MySpace, and the evolving microcinemas, vblogs, and next-technology transmission channels, pioneered on iTunes and other sites.

Documentary history sometimes reads like a patent-office log in terms of its generations of machinery (35 mm, 16 mm, Bolex, Nagra, Moviola, Steenbeck, 8 mm, Super-8, Porta-Pak, Super-16, High-8, VHS camcorder, Avid, digital camcorder, Final Cut Pro, 24p camera, HD), with endlessly renewed promises of enhanced access that occasionally really does follow. Yet there remains a huge and often unspoken fault line: the gap that separates U.S. documentary from the rest of the world’s documentary visions. Sometimes the myopia is the result of technology itself, like the current mutually exclusive DVD “regions” that have resulted from both transnational conflicts over technology and corporate attempts to map proprietary markets onto the world, with new skirmishes over high-definition standards already reported. More often, however, the myopia results from the rapidly escalating U.S. xenophobia that cannot permit even the idea that there is another world out there behind the mirror, one that isn’t reflecting back our image and isn’t speaking English, either.⁴

In obeisance to this real and/or imaginary hostility the American marketplace rejects subtitles, making foreign-language feature films difficult to see and foreign-language documentaries even rarer. Not even the voice of Romane Bohringer (one of the original marching penguins) could be allowed into the United States intact. And yet, as Stuart Hall has long sought to remind us, contradictions are ever present, and shifts in regimes of power inevitably open up spaces, however limited or fleeting, for intervention. Thanks to these spaces, the excitement of Jean-Marie Teno’s films has been shared by U.S. audiences, from the 2005 Flaherty Seminar retrospective to screenings at the Pacific Film Archive and around the country; crucial Israeli/Palestinian documentaries by such figures as Sobhi al-Zobaidi, Hany Abu-Assad, Udi Aloni, Simone Bitton, and Rashid Mashawara have had even more limited but critical exposure.

The most recent such contradiction? It had to be the appearance of Hubert Sauper and his extraordinarily important documentary *Darwin's Nightmare* on Academy Awards night, one of the five nominees for best documentary feature made in the United States or the rest of the world. (And the winner? The penguins, again.) A case study of globalization, *Darwin's Nightmare* examines the invasion of a non-native fish as a sort of allegory for transnational trade, corruption, and deprivation as played out among the people of Tanzania on the shore of Lake Victoria, where arms trading, Nile perch harvesting, AIDS, dislocation, prostitution, and destitution mingle in the shadow of an economic miracle brokered by European Union trade ministers and trade-happy African politicians. In Europe Sauper won the European Film Award for best documentary; in France, his adopted country, he won the Cesar for best French documentary. He has been both praised and reviled, the attacks carried out by proxy writers aligned with foreign-trade interests. The viciousness of the attacks was reminiscent of those on the young Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*, except that Sauper had not reedited any footage or chronology. He had all his facts courtesy of African-based NGO sources. Most recently, the Tanzanian government has gone after both Sauper and his subjects in Tanzania, who have been punished with firing, arrest, and threatened deportation.

In the United States *Darwin's Nightmare* has been championed by other documentarians dazzled, in part, by Sauper's shooting his documentaries himself with a 24p camcorder under rigorous conditions, accompanied only by a sound recordist. But the production conditions are only part of the story. The late great Jean Rouch saw Sauper's prior film and praised it as an exemplar of the "cinema of contact" he had long advocated. What Sauper offers is a reciprocity of vision that returns the gaze, repays respect in kind, and recognizes that even African villagers can be world-class experts on their own society, life, and fate. Released in the United States in 2005–6 via a limited theatrical release, *Darwin's Nightmare* is poised to enter the academic canon in coming years.⁵

With internationalism onstage, at stake, and urgently needed, then, this issue's "In Focus" brings together a range of perspectives specifically trained on international documentary practice, its local specificities, and its place in the transnational system of distribution and exhibition. In each case, contributors bring specialized knowledge to bear on emblematic works, uncovering in the process key concepts and analytic approaches worthy of further research and analysis. Exemplary documentaries and digital strategies from Australia, Brazil, China, and the United Kingdom/Cameroon are represented, not only as documentary texts but equally in terms of their particular conditions of production, intention, reception, and social location. The essays share a concern with the everyday and the extraordinary, with representational strategies across media, and with the very nature of documentary production at this moment. The visions may be international, but the implications of this work are resonant for U.S. documentary, too, in terms of theoretical as well as practical methodologies and assumptions.

Their important contribution in this regard is to demonstrate the necessity of widening the scope of theoretical documentary analysis to look beyond the cinematic discourse. Whether it's Amy Villarejo applying Derrida to Brazilian documentary,

Patricia White invoking the writings of Chandra Mohanty for border-crossing documentary, or Faye Ginsburg trolling the language of new-technology prophets, the challenge is clear to enter into dialogue with texts outside the realm of documentary studies entirely. Curiously, documentary studies has tended toward a kind of isolation: from other directions in cultural studies, from international perspectives on its own traditions, and from alternative methods for assessing standards of truth telling and representational veracity within documentary traditions. In other words, the coherence of documentary studies as practiced most normatively is sometimes bought at the expense of imaginative possibility. That false coherence is interestingly undermined by Chris Berry's introduction to the work of Chinese digital maestro Wu Wenguang, for he is able to suggest not only the contours of contemporary Chinese documentary but, more surprisingly, the stark change in direction of Wu Wenguang's own documentary approach after his encounters with Frederick Wiseman in the United States and Ogawa Shinsuke in Japan. And Faye Ginsburg, seeking to rethink digital assumptions, rereads Ben Bagdikian, revisits McLuhan, and goes beyond the MIT Media Lab to consider the language of development and notions of civic engagement.

In her essay on digital technologies and ideologies as they intersect with indigenous practices of and options for representation, in fact, Ginsburg delivers a chilling reminder to pay attention to ways in which language functions as a sort of Trojan horse (my term, not hers) with which corporate interests smuggle in new orders of signification and delivery. Tracking the approaches of the Arrernte people of central Australia and their lawyer/filmmaker collaborator David Vadivello to self-representational work, Ginsburg discusses the use of documentary "to recuperate their histories, land rights, and knowledge bases as their own cultural property" as exemplified by their distinctive interactive project, *Us Mob*. At the same time she warns against imposing a positivist technological grid onto indigenous and Third World cultures, reflecting on the lacunae in First World vision that lead to a distorted view of technological implications. Calling for scholars to invent a new language entirely, her essay can be seen as a theoretical early warning system that signals us to be on the alert for a new generation of universalizing theories that can only replicate the errors of the past in new postindustrial garb.

Amy Villarejo performs an equally elegant dissection, in her case unpacking assumptions of television journalism and theories of "liveness" as played out in the exemplary Brazilian documentary *Bus 174*. Villarejo posits the documentary as, indeed, "a type of pedagogy," arguing that it performs a form of documentary writing not in the sense of being itself an "essay film" but instead, thinking rather more expansively, that it constitutes an essay on "the future of cinema" and "the limits of representation." She productively contrasts the film to the aforementioned *Super Size Me* and *Tarnation* in order to foreground its refusal of individualism, a veritable epidemic in U.S. documentary, in favor of a commitment to "the multitude" as a process of production as well as a condition of meaning. Though she notes the film's construction of television as a national medium, Villarejo allows us to see how those televisual elements are excavated, their former "liveness" converted to the archival and back again through their revivification in *Bus 174*. Applying Derrida's *Echographies*, on the other hand, she uncovers new meaning in the notion of the "phantom" that has implications for documentary devices of repetition and live coverage.

Patricia White, in closer parallel to Ginsburg's critique of digital orders, casts a cool eye on transnational systems of production as well as exhibition through her analysis of Kim Longinotto's *Sisters in Law*, the long-time British director's documentary on women in the legal system of Cameroon (as plaintiff, as lawyer, as magistrate). White takes pains to consider the frictions between traditional auteurist approaches to documentary and the kind of "feminist solidarity" called for by Mohanty and reflected in Longinotto's commitment to collaboration, not only at the level of identification but also instrumentally through codirecting. Positing that Longinotto's "subjects, methods, and emphases" are "transnational rather than global(izing)" enables White to trace systems of meaning that go beyond representational strategies. Her appraisal of how different systems of exhibition recast the status of the films under their banner delivers yet another prompt to move beyond the text in documentary study, something White can do so well because of her long history of involvement in the alternative distribution sector alongside her better-known academic scholarship and pedagogy.

Finally, Wu Wenguang's account of being reborn as a documentarian through immersion in the digital is a revelatory account from a noted practitioner of how the processes of documentary creation evolve on the ground of practice. His account is a modest and direct explication of his process, first of transformation and then of practice, culminating in his cooking a meal for the troupe in the film *Jianghu: Life on the Road*. His eloquent rejection of professionalism, manifestoes, competition, and notions of "independence" in favor of a dedication to an artisanal practice that he terms "individual filmmaking" reinscribes the digital into a kind of practice that is the very antithesis of its status in the West. When he ends his essay by literally thanking DV, he explains that "I've moved closer and closer to myself, my own inner world." Wu's version of digital documentary, however, should not be confused with the brand of U.S. individualism to which the digital is often in service. Chris Berry's introduction to Wu's work demonstrates his importance in constructing the Chinese documentary's *jishizhuyi*, or "new realism," defined by Berry as a term that "stresses its quality of recording things as they happen," a kind of spontaneous interaction with people and events in which the documentarian is submerged and where he or she, too, can participate, an equal among equals in a utopian notion of praxis, very different from the Cultural Revolution version of sending intellectuals back to the countryside.

In a sense, then, Wu Wenguang is not entirely unlike Kim Longinotto carrying out her ethical transnational work or David Vadiveloo in his equally cross-cultural work with the Arrernte or Jose Padilha in his cross-class encounters with the marginalized voices of Rio de Janeiro. Thanks to the insights of these contributors into practice, interpretation, and analysis, I have—like Wu Wenguang—regained hope that documentary is more vital than ever and, in my view, more than ever open to analysis, renovation, and reconstruction in spite of systems of governance intent on constraining and normalizing its very essence.

Notes

Jon Lewis asked me. That's the short explanation of how this "In Focus" came to be, and I am most grateful to him for his guidance, patience, and insistence. A longer explanation would

owe a bow and debt of thanks to my colleagues in the Program in Social Documentation and Community Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Particular thanks for conversations on these topics to my community studies colleagues Marcia Ochoa, Renee Tajima-Peña, Mary Beth Pudup, Nancy Stoller, and David Wellman; to the staff for its support, especially in arranging Hubert Sauper's visit; and to the first cohort of social documentation graduate students, the 007s, in particular my teaching assistant Florencia Marchetti. Special thanks to Lisa Rofel for her suggestion of the Wu Wenguang essay.

1. So many names to reference here! A hopeless task, no doubt, and a dangerous one. In addition to those already referenced via Visible Evidence(s), the founding fathers of our current thinking about, through, and around documentary include Eric Barnouw, Bill Nichols, Alan Rosenthal, Jay Ruby, Thomas Waugh, Brian Winston, and the late Sol Worth. After the paternity, the deluge: Paula Rabinowitz, Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, Stella Bruzzi, Rosa Linda Fregoso, Fatimah Tobing Rony, Patricia Zimmerman, and so many others. And all the documentarians who have passed on their wisdom and theoretical perspectives, whether today on the D-word website or, notably, in book form: David MacDougall, Edgar Morin, Jean Rouch, Trinh T. Minh-ha. Thanks to my documentarian friend Danielle Beverly (*Learning to Swallow*) for her many conversations with me on the subject.
2. For an up-to-date view see the "New World of Documentary," the exhaustive special section with introduction by Julia Lesage in *JumpCut* 48 (Winter 2006). Indeed, *JumpCut* has been a central player in documentary debates across three decades and shows no sign of stopping. In particular, note cofounder/editor Chuck Kleinhans's essay on audio documentary in the same issue.
3. I have borrowed the term *samizdat* from the vocabulary of the former Soviet Union. In a Library of Congress glossary on its website the term is described: "Literally, self-publication. Russian word for the printing and circulating of literary, political, and other written manuscripts without passing them through the official censor, thus making them unauthorized and illegal." I am aware that by employing a term from this era and location I am making a claim concerning media access, freedom, and strategy in the United States of 2006 that may be contested.
4. On this subject see Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour, eds., *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film* (Toronto and Cambridge, Mass.: Alphabet City and MIT Press, 2004), including my essay on this theme, "To Read or Not to Read: Subtitles, Literacy, and Monolingualism."
5. *Darwin's Nightmare* is distributed on film and video by the International Film Circuit and is forthcoming on DVD from another company.

Bus 174 and the Living Present



by Amy Villarejo

Jose Padilha's 2002 film *Bus 174* brings the resources of vigilance and clarity to the medium of television. Focusing on the hijacking of a bus in Rio de Janeiro on June 12, 2000 (Valentine's Day in Brazil), *Bus 174* sets into motion an analysis of the "incident" or "situation" as it was seen widely on live television in order to understand its constellation of rage, fear, poverty, and despair: all among the