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The documentary film book

Malin Wahlberg

Despite its confident title *The Documentary Film Book* (London: BFI & Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), edited by Brian Winston, opens with a modest disclaimer: '[t]his volume is not an encyclopedia, dictionary or guidebook, much less a handbook, thesis or (hopefully) tract.' Rather, it presents an overview of 'the present agenda of concerns in the emergent field of documentary studies' (p. 1). The 41 chapters of the book certainly provide an impressive survey of the field. Among the contributors are many leading documentary scholars, also filmmakers, curators, and television editors. 'Evidence', 'narrative', and 'ethics' are the identified key elements of documentary cinema. These aspects also informed the organisation of the chapters into six sections: Documentary Values, Documentary Paradigms, Documentary Horizons, Documentary Voices, Documentary Disciplines, and Documentary Futures.

Winston's overview on the history of documentary cinema, its present attractions and community work in a diversity of media cultures and the current tendencies that he and his co-authors discuss, is informed by the accumulative knowledge of more than two decades of academic work and conferencing. It was not a coincidence that this book was completed to mark the 20th anniversary of Visible Evidence as an important conference as well as an expanding international network of documentary scholars and practitioners. As one of the initiators of Visible Evidence, Winston looks back at the collective achievement of many years of related scholarship, though not without a critical reassessment of dominant paradigms and traditions.

The Documentary Film Book sets out to review the canonised examples of documentary history while indicating the limiting geography suggested by accepted mappings. Critical revisionism, a historiographical meta-reflection, can be traced in many of the chapters, recalling the bias toward Anglo-American contexts of film production in classical readers of documentary history. Even the section Documentary Paradigms is enriched by contributions that bring more detail and new compelling questions to familiar contexts. Charles Musser's critical reassessment of 'the beginnings of documentary' is already an important reminder of the problem of historiography and the canon in course books on the history of 'documentary cinema'. Musser locates the origin of the documentary tradition in the

17th century, exemplifying 'the remarkable series of technological innovations' that gradually formed its related practices in the realm of modern mass media and mass culture (p. 126). Julia Lesage's chapter adds to this criticism by questioning the preconceived notion of 'documentary cinema' and the documentary canon of auteurs from a feminist perspective. 'Feminist Documentaries: Finding, Seeing and Using Them' stands out as an important reflection on the marginalisation of female practitioners and feminist documentaries in this history. Referring to her own and others' scholarly and activist strategies to question and to change this imbalance Lesage illuminates the role of film distribution, feminist activism, and alternative media platforms. The final section of the book, *Documentary Futures*, is dedicated to digital platforms and online documentaries, though its focus on social commitment and reflexivity is put in dialogue with longstanding documentary ideals of intervention, collectivity, and struggle for social change. Helen De Michiel and Patricia R. Zimmermann's reflection on 'open space documentaries' re-directs the expected hopes associated with the digital and the web to an inspiring account of agency and participation that is more closely associated with relational aesthetics than with new technology per se.

Winston's categorisation of documentary history into the eras of 'Griersonian Practice', 'Vertovian Practice', and 'Post-Griersonian Practice' (p. 25) ties the understanding of 'evidence', 'narrative', and 'ethics' to the expected but somewhat static dichotomy between observational/realist and reflexive strategies. Many of the excellent chapters in the book seem to balance and even contradict this in stimulating ways. As such, Winston is generally successful in bridging the English and United States scholarship with authors and perspectives from other parts of the world. Abé Mark Nornes, who is also the author of two books on Japanese documentary, provides an important reflection on historiography and the challenge of 'representing "The East" in this hefty tour d'horizon' (p. 209). Nornes illuminates the problematic prospect of 'the Griersonian' perspective in relation to the historical contexts of the Asian region. In doing so he gives an elegant introduction to the post-colonial critique that unfolds in dialog with the film examples recommended in the *Documentary Horizons* section. For example, N. Frank Ukadike offers a compelling reminder of the ways in which an entire continent has been represented in simplistic overviews of African auteurs of documentary cinema and from Western perspectives blind to the effects of colonial history. Instead, Ukadike is careful in distinguishing between 'Africa-as-producer' and film culture in the service of colonial powers, which means that generally speaking, throughout the first half-century and even more, 'the continent's image was to be imagined, reproduced and interpreted by non-Africans' (p. 217). A helpful guidance to historical and more recent films from Nigeria, Senegal, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Cameroon makes this chapter particularly inspiring for anyone en-

gaged in contemporary film culture and post-colonial cinema. Among the more well-known filmmakers mentioned here is Jean-Marie Teno and his *Afrique, je te plumerai* (I Will Fleece You, Africa, 1993), an example which ties in nicely with Alisa Lebow's discussion of first-person documentary and the 'First Person Political' in Chapter 4.1.

A reflection on documentary tendencies in more recent times develops throughout the chapters of the book, perhaps notably so in texts by Bill Nichols and Michael Renov. Echoing their groundbreaking and oft-quoted theoretical work on documentary modes and functions in the early 1990s, Nichols and Renov have been called to further contextualise and conceptualise the volume's attention to, respectively, 'veracity' and 'ethics'. Nichols' chapter 'The Question of Evidence, the Power of Rhetoric and Documentary Film' refers to the debate on indexicality and documentary truth claims, though the subject of the text is rather how and with what means and emotional effects the evidence is being forged and framed in documentary. Inspired by Aristotle's preference for 'artistic proofs' rather than 'inartistic proofs', Nichols shifts focus from the veracity ascribed to the photographic or filmic record to 'the ethical credibility of a speaker', stressing the author's committed voice and point-of-view and related strategies 'to move' rather than 'to show' (pp. 35-36). The key function to move an audience is located in 'the expressive mix of passion and knowledge' that Nichols associates with the aesthetic strategies by which the subjectivity of the filmmaker infuses 'the body of the film', a position which also seems to chime with Vivian Sobchack's important emphasis on *documentary experience*.

Documentary strategies tend to be the necessary artifice with which the image's striking reference to the real turns into significant and affective sign-effects, telling traces of the past and compelling social testimony. Narrative imagination is needed in order to forge frame-breaking events, cinematic shocks, and visceral moments that may encourage and ignite the viewer's interest in the subject of the film. A renewed interest in the aesthetic and affective realisations of the documentary's 'voice' is notable in Nichols' take on documentary veracity and filmic strategies that are effected to make the viewer think, react to, and engage with 'the artistic proofs' of the film. As he concludes, documentary tends to be about conveying knowledge, the memory of image, and critical points of references to lived and shared experiences, but with the impact of 'ecstatic truth', a term borrowed from Werner Herzog (p. 37).

Many of the authors posit the creative art of documentary and its projects to engage with the world by means of framing, invoking, enacting, orchestrating, and expressing it. For example Andy Glynne, the director of the animated series *Animated Minds* (2004), is less concerned with the definition of 'the animated documentary' than with what the animated sound-image may achieve in bridging the

external world with the internal realm of memories, dreams, and anxieties. Glynne refers to many of the films in the late 1990s that brought renewed attention to the possibilities of animation in documentary while also indicating the importance of ‘animated inserts’ in the history of documentary. However, he fails to mention Annabelle Roe Honess’ fascinating monograph *Animated Documentary*. Also speaking from the position of the artist-filmmaker, Pratap Rughani’s chapter manages to cover most of the ethical issues commonly discussed in documentary scholarship. To this he adds a set of key questions that point more directly at the responsibility of the filmmaker, such as the challenging negotiation between participant consent and authorial control, and to what extent the material of the film will also include the participant’s ‘thoughts, feelings and responses to their representations’ (p. 106).

Judging from the anthology’s many perspectives regarding *the creative treatment of actuality* and the different meanings ascribed to these words since Grierson’s original formulation in 1933, it is somewhat strange to find ‘Art’ listed as the fifth and last of the Documentary Disciplines. As Renov is eager to pinpoint, it is ‘important to note that expressivity is always the support of the other discursive goals. The greater the expressive power of the piece – the more likely an audience is to feel persuasion, educative value or revelation’ (p. 346). The title of his chapter, ‘Art, documentary as art’, refers specifically to the social, cultural, and institutional frameworks of *the art world*, the historical influences of experimental cinema in documentary film culture, the re-use of documentary images in video art, and new aspects of documentary spectatorship spurred by the politics and phenomenology of moving images in the art gallery. Renov highlights the testimony as a filmic motif and a subject of longstanding concern for experimental documentary, and in relation to its salience in the art gallery he adds ‘the ethical function’ to his previous list of documentary functions: ‘to record, to reveal or preserve, to persuade or promote, and to express’ (p. 346).

In conclusion, *The Documentary Film Book* is successful in combining tradition and new horizons in ways that will be inspiring to anyone interested in documentary film and media studies. With the content of two normal pages packed into one reading the book was quite a challenge. I would still recommend it for teaching because it is helpful to have so many perspectives and pedagogical overviews collected in one book. Furthermore, the awkward layout is balanced by the fact that *The Documentary Film Book* is available at a relatively low price (expensive publications tend to be a problem in considering edited volumes and readers for course work).

The Documentary Film Book stands out as a sympathetic and encouraging achievement in the ways it proposes an open-ended dialogue between the present and the past as well as a will to transgress boundaries while suggesting new

avenues for both scholars and filmmakers. Typical of the thriving market for documentary publications in the past few years there are two anthologies forthcoming in spring 2015: *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film* (edited by Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow, Wiley Blackwell), a reader on documentary theory and contemporary film cultures, and yet another thick book, *The Documentary Film Reader* (edited by Jonathan Kahana, Oxford University Press). The complex workings of documentary politics and aesthetics in contemporary media culture still await new perspectives and conceptual roadmaps. This includes an advanced analytical toolbox in addressing the formative role of documentary spectatorship, the workings of documentary film as spectacular and moving screen attractions, as compelling film narratives, and documentary practice as (potentially) a reflexive and critical component in the production, re-production, and negotiation of cultural memory.

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