Poetics & Politics: Documentary Research Symposium, May 15–17, 2015, UC Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA

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SYMPOSIUM REVIEW

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The *Poetics & Politics: Documentary Research Symposium* was a jam-packed, three-day conference highlighting a wide range of approaches to documentary practice within an academic context. Co-curated by Aparna Sharma (UCLA) and Irene Gustafson (UCSC), this symposium explored the question of how audio/visual production can be understood as academic research. As such, panels often contextualized the work presented as part of a larger trajectory of research continuing throughout a filmmaker/scholar's career. The diverse approaches to documentary media-making ranged from single-channel film, to still image audio slideshows, to new media online projects and represented work from a range of academic contexts including the social sciences, arts and humanities. Rather than highlighting finished projects, the panels often presented short, work-in-progress edits and discussed unfinished works. Embedded within this framework of documentary-as-research, screenings and panels foregrounded questions about the role which aesthetics plays in framing content.

In her opening remarks, Sharma suggested that in contrast to the invisibility of politics at many established documentary conferences, she and Gustafson made an express attempt to highlight the underlying political agenda for works presented. As such, most panels were organized around socio-political themes such political revolutions, labor struggles, contestations around the definition of 'the archive', ethnographic ethics, body politics and urban gentrification. In thinking through the question of poetics and politics, Sharma foregrounded the question of how aesthetics can be a method for political engagement.

During the first evening's presentation, Sharon Daniel (UCSC) presented clips from her work-in-progress about a native Alaskan community living under precarious conditions. She described her work as being that of a context provider who allows 'those excluded from the political order' to speak for themselves. Daniel suggested that her subjects are not presented as individual exceptions, but rather, within their surroundings, as participants in their socio-economic and environmental context, adding that she thought of her interactive interface design as a form of argument.

Daniel's emphasis on the aesthetics of agency for her subjects was echoed by many of the subsequent interactive works presented, where a collection or archive of material provided alternatives to narrative confines. This question of the political and aesthetic role of narrative structure was an ongoing point of discussion throughout the conference. During the opening Q/A session, Alissa Lebow (University of Sussex) questioned whether there was something neoliberal about the hegemony of a single character story arc. Daniel agreed that a single character paradigm tends to put responsibility for social problems on individuals rather than on social structures. A political aesthetic against character-driven story was echoed in many subsequent presentations. During a panel showcasing a poly-vocal, non-linear approaches to documenting national political struggles, Irene Lusztig (UCSC) suggested that privileging conversations between diverse participants counters the standard monologue structure of the film interview and wondered how exhibition practices could counter the 'neoliberalism of a single person clicking on a website'.

The, ethnographic concern over objective methodologies, or whether one should high-light's one's subjective role in the documentation process, was also raised in many panels. However, with a number of the online projects in particular, there was a palpable interest in exploring ways that new media might present methods for achieving 'objectivity' through allowing the viewer to navigate material for themselves.

As the keynote speaker of the conference, Kevin Jerome Everson (University of Virginia) brought the question of aesthetics and the role of artifice into high relief, suggesting that his works resist narrative or ideological closure by recuperating the act of observation, relying on extremely long takes of unedited wide angle scenes. To the ever intractable question of whether the act of staging an event might trouble the notion of documentary as a form of 'reality-based' media, Everson suggested that he felt 'reality' was a formal device, and suggested that his work troubles an ideology which assumes that a black artist would necess-arily represent 'the real'. As such, Everson contextualized his emphasis on artifice as a technique to place the audiences' experience onto their own perceptions and judgements.

The question of the role of performance and re-enactment was also taken up by a number of the panels. Andy Rice, who documents an annual lynching reenactment in Georgia, described his work as exploring 'the ethics of presence' for the performer participants as well as for the audience of the live event and the media. In counterpoint to many of the ethnographic projects presented, there were also performative, essayistic approaches, such as in presentations by Julie Wyman (UC Davis) and Erika Mijlin (Bennington), who both used humor and playfulness to prod their audience to question assumptions about representations of 'reality'.

Other essayistic projects engaged with various kinds of politics of the archives, highlighting questions of what is and is not included in official notions of history. For example, Matt Soar presented a brief, sublime collage made exclusively from 'archival' film leaders, a normally dis-counted aspect of film production, exploring the literal boundaries of film and re-contextualiz-ing film leaders as an analog form of metadata. Other projects brought questions of inclusion and expansion of the notion of 'official history' by mining commercial, online media 'archives' such as YouTube into their research and analysis of both history and recent contemporary pol-itical events.

In privileging, not just the process of research and collection, but of ethical responsibility to one's subjects, many of the works sought to foreground the structures of collaborative and interactive media-making with one's subjects. This emphasis on collaboration and interaction was also evident in the organization of the conference itself: as there was only one panel pres-entation per time-slot. In this way, a spirit of cohesion and an atmosphere of intensity and intel-lectual collaboration flourished during these three days of concentrated exploration.

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