

Activating Change:
New courses in social documentary production and distribution

Presented to
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“The whole world is watching.” This popular chant, can be traced to the sixties anti-war movement, when watching was still largely done on television and 16 mm film. Today, the intense presence of video cameras and online networks have breathed new life into this idea, as it was repopularized during the World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle during the late nineties. As the watching and documenting becomes easier, the world grows smaller. As distribution opportunities become possible just moments after recording, the responsibility of the witness has reached new levels. However, one can not presume that awareness will effect behavior. As the global justice movement matured, it moved beyond challenging the system, and started offering alternatives. The momentum of Seattle spurred discussions about what those alternatives would look like. Perhaps unspoken, this moment also placed new expectations on media makers to use the power of their work to address these concerns. Furthermore, it has challenged social and political documentary makers to rethink production strategies as well as outreach and audience in ways that reflect the complex interconnectedness of contemporary issues. With radically new distribution outlets and production abilities, documentaries are no longer at the mercy of broadcasting, but have reemerged as necessary components to social and political organizing efforts. By giving a face to public policy, and a story to struggle, social documentaries are now in the business of helping to shape public opinion, attitude and understanding about a range of social and political problems in the world. In order to understand the genesis of this moment, it is useful to understand social and political documentary history in the US, as well as the influence of Latin American documentary and Third Cinema on current US social media practice.

Latin American cinema has been a natural place to look for ideas about how film can function as part of a social movement. Third Cinema as it developed in Latin America rejected both the First Cinema of the US (Hollywood), and the Second cinema of Europe (Art Cinema), and by extension, the cultural imperialism implicit in these industries and aesthetic forms. The contours of this new practice were rooted in the ‘imperfect,’ as a way to open spaces for new possibilities. At the core, Third Cinema was distinguished by its attention to praxis—the relationship between theory and practice, form and content. Filmmakers understood that to struggle for a different world it was necessary to create new ways to imagine and represent this world through cultural forms. According to Julianne Burton, documentary in Latin America:

“provides: a source of ‘counter information’ without access to the hegemonic structures of world news and communications; a means of restructuring historical events and challenging hegemonic

and often elitist interpretations of the past; a mode of eliciting, preserving and utilizing the testimony of individuals and groups who would otherwise have no means of recording their experience; an instrument for capturing cultural difference and exploring the complex relationship of self and other within as well as between societies; and finally, a means of consolidating cultural identifications, social cleavages, political belief systems, and ideological agendas.”¹

Cultural work in the US never carried the same weight as political filmmaking in Latin America where the act of making, and the making itself could be a revolutionary act, and was implicitly tied to political organizing and education work. *Hour of the Furnaces* remains the classic example, in which breaks in the film forced viewers to discuss the content within the screening venue. Whereas social documentary in Latin America has had a somewhat cohesive history and influential role in creating socially and politically transformative work, the social documentary tradition in the US has remained a lot more frayed. Many independent documentaries raise consciousness about an issue, investigate, observe, inform, but they do not always position the audience as agents of change. In the US, the relationship between documentary production, activism and social change has morphed considerably in the last 30 years. New efforts by makers reflect how changing conceptions of audience and a renewed vigor toward the potential impact of social documentary work is changing the ways in which this work is being done. Much of these efforts, reference trends of the 60s, from the US and Latin America, and reworks these ideas to meet current political, economic and cultural demands.

Committed documentary in the late 60s reenergized the newsreel tradition, of the 20s, and brought new attention to the “political use of film,” as evidenced by New York Newsreel, who emphasized the outreach component as strongly as the film itself². These films largely functioned within and to aid emerging social movements. Newsreel, one of the formative production collectives put forth the argument “that the film should never stand alone, and that the structure of the screening had as much priority as the structure of the film.”³ Although this principle never became fully implemented, this focus on context and use remained a defining feature of the Newsreel approach. As social movements picked up traction, many members of Newsreel decided to focus their efforts on organizing rather than making work, much production got absorbed by larger groups and Newsreel shifted their focus on training others in production. This focus toward context and outreach was picked up by some distributors in the 80s, who

¹ Burton, Julianne, “Toward a History of Social Documentary in Latin America,” in *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, ed. Julianne Burton (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990), 6.

² Nichols, Bill, “Newsreel, 1967-1972: Film and Revolution,” in “*Show Us Life*” *Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, ed. Thomas Waugh (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 138.

³ *Ibid.*, 138.

worked closely to connect films with appropriate screening outlets, and speakers. However, in the last few years, there is once again a return, out of necessity for survival of distributors, to playing a more active role in the outreach component of their films.

The emergence of video in the 80s provided activist groups with an outlet to further support their work. However the medium was marked by a distinct aesthetic look, different than film of the past decades. For example, “within activist groups like ACT UP the distinction between culture and politics reemerges whenever cultural work is seen as secondary to the work of ‘real’ politics of ‘direct action.’”⁴ In the US activist films tend to conjure up handheld aesthetics, protest footage, and a tone, which functions well to mobilize people, already in the movement, rather than those outside. One may recognize this type of work as more overtly political, while social documentary uses stories to do the work of creating sympathetic or compassionate viewers toward a given cause. While both are informative, the viewer may remain uncertain about how to direct their energy as it builds throughout the film. Often activist oriented work will provide more information or context for those who wish to get involved. The current trend within social documentary work reflects a desire to adapt more “activist-like” strategies in the production and distribution processes, such as, viral marketing, modular structures, using chatrooms and user-generated content. While these techniques are not new to political organizers or commercial public relations firms, they are slowly getting adapted by filmmakers who need to be more creative in securing audience attention and interest in their work. As the technology becomes more accessible, and more makers compete for funding and distribution, it is no longer possible for makers to take audiences for granted. Veteran filmmaker Steve James (*Hoop Dreams*), asserts, “it’s important to note a fundamental shift here for American documentary filmmakers. Increasingly it’s hard to get your project funded unless you have an outreach programme in place.”⁵ Although the economic motivation is important for makers, the cultural forces at play have also challenged makers to address their audiences differently. The volume of work being produced today outweighs the structured channels available to distribute and maximize the potential impact that these works embody. It is thus the responsibility of the maker to offer a vision that invites the audience to participate in this change and invest in a process beyond a passive viewing experience.

⁴ Cvetkovich, Ann, “Video, AIDS, and Activism,” in *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, ed. Grant Kester (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 185.

⁵ Grossman, Alan and O’Brien Aine, “Televisualizing Transnational Migration: *The New Americans*” in *Projecting Migration*, ed. Alan Grossman and Aine O’Brien. (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 98.

If the video technology of the 80s allowed for more personal, rapid production, the online technology of the 90s offered the opportunity for collaborative international organizing efforts. The rise of Indymedia and decentered modes of production and modular approaches to argumentation and distribution characterized collectives like Big Noise films, which used participant footage and networked communication to create documents of the WTO movement, which further circulated as organizing tools. This critical moment fused models of filmmaking and movement building that would not have gained international attention without the strategic use of online communication technologies, integral to the larger global struggle. As Gita Saedi, acclaimed PBS producer of *The New Americans* notes, “best intentions aside, to receive foundation support, your film inevitably needs to be more than just a film.”⁶ Gordon Quinn, who also worked on this project adds, “Foundations want to be in a position to gauge the film’s social impact.”⁷ Thus, the year 2000 was marked by a string of well-received documentary theatrical releases. An attention to new forms of documentary excited makers as well as audiences. Michael Moore, Al Gore, and others, provided politically urgent messages that brought alternative perspectives and critical issues into the public sphere. Even smaller productions like *Outfoxed*, *Control Room*, and *Supersize Me* stirred up lots of conversation. Nonetheless, the issue with many of these social documentaries remains a level of distance; the cathartic effect of social documentary work that leaves the viewer feeling more informed, but not motivated or activated to make change. As Patricia Zimmermann claims in her critique of political documentary theory and criticism, “whether these documentary works depend on realist conventions of expository documentary or more deconstructive, interrogative, and self-reflexive forms is inconsequential: their relationship to spectators remains identical. They pose as redemptive. They rescue the spectator from ignorance or passivity.” She continues, “texts are not central to activating politics”⁸. *An Inconvenient Truth*, for example, did much to bring the idea of global warming to mass audiences, but errs on the side of entertainment, rather than motivation—this thwarted opportunity is best captured as the list of ‘recommendations’ co-mingles with the final credit sequence. By contrast, *Outfoxed* was able to use the momentum of *moveon.org* to both create and further engage its audience.

The strength of these documentaries remains their ability to bring alternative discourses into the mainstream. The challenge that remains compels makers to think creatively about how to summon the

⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁷ Ibid., 98.

⁸ Zimmermann, Patricia “Fetal Tissues: Reproductive Rights and Activist Video.” In Kester, 250.

energy of their work toward substantive social change? In the last ten years there have been several interesting models of work that offer inspiration for documentary production as it integrates itself as well as its audience into a process of transformative action. The reemergence of the third party, the joiner between the film and the viewer, plays a big part in the effectiveness of a film. Working Films has been doing this work for over 10 years, joining social documentary work with grassroots organizing efforts. Outreach organizers and managers are coming back into priority for distributors as well as makers, who recognize a diffuse public as a potential audience. In order for distributors to survive they are more actively seeking new audiences and facilitating this exchange as well. However, despite the fact that distribution outlets have exploded online, filmmakers still recognize the value of face-to-face interaction and dialogue in order to carry someone from viewer to active participant. Grassroots work still needs to be done now more than ever to give context and life to contemporary social documentary practice. Active Voice remains one model of this type of work that emerged from Independent Television Services (ITVS)/PBS and POV productions. The decrease of public broadcasting viewership has pushed this exploration of audience beyond television. Active Voice is an organization that creates supplemental materials for films, as well as full-scale outreach/advocacy campaigns to move films “beyond the choir.” They create materials that allow films to be used by different audiences including educators, policy makers, and political organizers. Their campaigns range from raising awareness to changing public policy. The discussion guides and supplemental materials created for *The New Americans* provided ease of use for community centers, and churches to conduct screenings and open up dialogue around cultural difference. They worked with organizations and immigrant rights advocates to target specific pilot cities to further refine their materials and approach in order to make their campaign as effective as possible. In another Active Voices’ campaign, *A Doula Story* moved audiences from the screen to the living room. Toward their desire to make this film “an interactive training tool,” the director worked closely with the Chicago Health Connection, to create a film that would offer not only a fresh story, but advocate for prenatal support services and public health education. The work of Active Voice is heavily funded by large grants, and remains close to its roots--the majority of their projects come from “pre-approved” POV/ITVS productions.

While Active Voice take a more corporate communication strategy, Working Films remains the grassroots version of the this model. In 1995, the breakthrough film by founder Judith Helfand and

George Stoney, *Uprising '34*, set the tone for a new model of production and distribution. “Central to the coalition screening model is the principle of establishing a context for the audience. Because they wanted the film to be a vehicle to promote community discussions about labor issues, the filmmakers specifically tried to avoid casting it simply as a pro-labor film, an “us vs. them” exercise in historical blame.”⁹ The filmmakers, who both come from a history of community media and collaborative work, also have an understanding of how to navigate public issues of debate and influence. “Stoney and Helfand thought about the film’s potential use and impact throughout the entire process—through research, planning, production, and distribution.”¹⁰ By extension, therefore, their process was heavily informed by the potential impact and use of the film and thus became a participatory endeavor in its own right. Community members, activists, scholars, and unions were involved in the research, production and editing process. Working Films, now directed by Helfand and Robert West continue to provide consulting and support work to filmmakers seeking to develop not only a final product, but also a process that actively supports the larger goals of contemporary social movements. The unique contribution of Working Films remains their combination of character driven stories and social documentary with movement building activist techniques.

If filmmakers are being advised in the early stages of their production process, it is not uncommon that the recommendations will also effect production strategies. For some filmmakers who come from a political organizing background, these production strategies are often already imbedded in the production process. These filmmakers can straddle the activist-minded collaborative aesthetic, with the creation of a moving, character driven story. A strong example of this new hybrid approach to social documentary remains the upcoming film *9500 Liberty*. In this case filmmakers Annabel Park and Eric Byler decided in the early stages of production to create a Youtube channel to expand the dialogue and share crucial footage with the community, as debates over an immigration resolution were unfolding in Prince William County, Virginia. Originally the filmmakers wanted to make a straightforward feature documentary, but when they realized they were amassing information that was crucial to the community in order to make informed decisions, they decided to start posting clips on YouTube. The site reads, “We will respond to viewer feedback, including requests for more coverage on certain storylines, contextual

⁹ Whiteman, David. “Impact of The Uprising Of '34: a coalition model of production and distribution” *Jumpcut: A Review of Contemporary Media*. 45 (Fall 2002).

¹⁰ Ibid.

clarifications, and even perhaps on-site production. The aim of this documentary is to inform the public, and investigate alternatives to the intense polarization that is hindering progress on the immigration issue.”¹¹ To date, there are 74 clips edited by the filmmakers, and 10 video responses by individuals; thousands of comments, and over 50,000 views to the site, marking its success as a virtual town hall. In addition to the posted responses, Park adds, “people who watched the videos would talk amongst themselves...there was a lot of spontaneous discussion that was happening in the community based on our videos.”¹² Byler adds, the “YouTube channel was the first blow of resistance, the first voice of dissent in this community that has basically become Weimar Germany--- a lot of people who individually were afraid to come forward, but given that there was a forum, and a sense of community, they have really carried the torch, and in some ways they have taken on more responsibility and risk than we have...”¹³

The success of this project reaffirms the potential role and responsibility of documentary filmmakers to shape an issue as it unfolds. In this case concerning a specific piece of legislation, the timing becomes even more crucial. However this model also provides a challenge for filmmakers to insert themselves into the debate. If the ultimate goal is for the viewer to take action, what better way than to provide the audience with an opportunity to contribute to the debate. By shifting the relationship between the maker and the viewer, a shift in ownership allows the viewer-participant to take a stake in the work. Rough cuts of the feature have already started screening in the community and at college campuses. Friends and neighbors have been requesting the film because people want the information and want to share what was happening. Park reflects, “in a way we have already accomplished our goal of having a positive effect on what was happening in the community.”¹⁴ For the filmmakers a difficult question remains. While editing the feature, Byler asks, “How much does our impact becomes part of the story?” Will this become a document of a process of dialogue and development or will it showcase the role of the videos themselves in bringing the debate into the public sphere?

A recent series of conferences sponsored by the Center for Social Media at American University have been at the fore of advancing the discussion of shifting modes of documentary production in relation to social, political and educational goals. One trend that seems symptomatic of new viewing environments online as well as new uses for documentary has been the move toward shorter formats, as a result of

¹¹ Eric Byler, Jeff Man, and Annabel Park, “Liberty 9500.” <http://www.youtube.com/9500Liberty> (accessed March 20, 2008).

¹² Eric Byler and Annabel Park, interviewed by author, Philadelphia, PA, March 22, 2008.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

multi-purposing one's approach to documentary production and audience. This may take the form of 5-minute clips or "rushes" edited for YouTube, or a move toward modules that can be used as educational and organizing tools. This attention marks a return to the "production for use" ideals of Newsreel and radical collectives of the 70s who would aim to make "short newsreels for weekly release; longer more analytic documentaries; and informational or tactical films."¹⁵ Although the internal politics of these groups prevented the real work from getting done effectively, perhaps now, 30 years later makers are better poised to multi-purpose their work. In fact, they must, if they want to remain viable and present in a multi-media, networked social and political environment. The director of *Beyond Beats and Rhythms*, a recent ITVS production, used his background as a gender violence educator to create module lessons within his film to address the complex intersections of masculinity, violence, capitalism and homophobia in hip hop. The film served as a catalyst to bring together movement leaders to address the intersections of these issues. The diverse range of screening venues reflects the potential reach and cross talk of a tightly structured work.

Documentary makers outside of the US have also been experimenting with interesting models to address this shifting field. An example of innovative multi-purposing of social documentary can be seen through the work of Just Vision. After a successful international festival release of their feature film, *Encounter Points*, which featured portraits of Israeli and Arab citizens working toward conflict resolution, the makers realized that in order for these portraits to be useful to encourage more citizen work, they need to be shorter and have a quicker turnaround. As articulated on their website, their nonprofit work "informs local and international audiences about under-documented Palestinian and Israeli joint civilian efforts to resolve the conflict nonviolently." It is not surprising that one of the directors of the film/organization came from Witness, a groundbreaking organization that uses short form video for human rights advocacy. The Just Vision website regularly adds profiles and interviews as part of their online curriculum and continued grassroots work. In this way the film is part of a larger ongoing movement to bring attention to citizens working at conflict resolution; the film is embedded in this effort, and the effort is dependent on the media to do its work.

In conclusion, in order for media to survive in the 21st century, it must live on multiple screens and offer something new to its viewer. This does not mean that filmmakers necessarily need to balance

¹⁵ Michael Renov, "Early Newsreel: The construction of a Political Imaginary for the Left." In Kester, 208.

formal or stylistic decisions to make their work “accessible.” Accessible films, like *An Inconvenient Truth* can leave their audiences as paralyzed as more difficult works like *Darwin’s Nightmare*, for example. Makers must confront the economic reality in which their work now circulates. It may become less about the film, and more about the packaging, the supplemental materials, the context which allows these films to be seen, and to be used to activate further change. At best, filmmakers should reimagine audience and foreground audience use in their work, both throughout production as well as distribution. Makers should try to provide a vision through their practice that can match their political stake. Otherwise the best-intentioned films, like political trends risk becoming commodity entertainment. The changing face of social documentary work in the US requires a new commitment by makers to their audiences in order to remain relevant and engaged in current political and social discourse. Makers have a responsibility to position their work within movements and debates, so that their work can live beyond the viewing experience. Festivals or TV broadcast can no longer carry a film—particularly it can not carry a film into the hands of people who could benefit the most from its message. Documentary makers have always valued the power of speech and the ability to bring someone’s story alive. As documentary production becomes more accessible, makers must confront their responsibility to not only produce, but also to create the conditions that allow their work to be heard.