

Documenting New Visions:
Articulating an ethics of community engagement

Presented to
Dr. Chris Cagle, Sarah Drury and Mike Kuetemeyer

Submitted by Laura Deutch
May 26, 2009

When the Sony Portapak became available in 1967, it arrived just in time to document a moment of political unrest and social organizing in the streets. Creative guerilla video teams absorbed the new technological possibilities to document and contribute to the radical cultural moment that was emerging. This confluence of political and cultural change aided by increasingly accessible technologies was not a coincidence. Rather, the alliance of these two forces worked together toward a shared goal of strengthening democratic expression and building an engaged public who can undertake political action.

Digital video technology as it is thought of today, first arrived in late 1995. While marketed for home movie creation, this second round of even more accessible cameras found their way not only into the streets once again for protest, as was seen in the late 90s, but also absorbed by filmmakers interested in working with youth and communities to share their stories and empower them to create media. While the technology was priced for consumer purchase, it still remained out of mass hands for several years, until the technology further improved, prices fell, and camera size shrank. Today we are in a moment not only focused on the possibilities of personal video, but also of defining the power and potential of social media practices.

This moment was made possible because of the ways in which documentary practice has reached a new level of consideration, capable of influencing policy, cultural attitudes and social behavior. The role of documentary over time has shifted from presenting issues to mass audiences and focused more on assisting in the creation of publics. It may be obvious that documentaries are not made for commercial reasons, but rather seek to advance a particular social message or idea. Patricia Aufderheide, in her introduction to documentary, calls upon the ideas of John Dewey and his notion of the public. “A public is a group of people who can act together for the public good and so can hold to account the entrenched power of business and government. It is an informal body that can come together in crisis if need be.”¹

In 2004, the trend that had been growing amongst independent media and community organizations to arm teens and community members with cameras to document their own realities was brought to a mainstream audience, as witnessed through the success of *Born Into Brothels*. It was lauded for its depiction of transformative art practice in a marginalized community setting. The popular success

¹ Aufderheide, Patricia. *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: HOxford University Press, 2007), 5.

of *Born Into Brothels* coupled with a critical reception from within the South East Asian and documentary community represents an emerging problem within the field. One must evaluate the traditional ethics of engagement and reflect critically upon the unconscious role documentary plays in perpetuating problems it often seeks to address. How can documentary filmmakers responsibly engage with their subjects beyond just putting them on screen or giving them a camera?

Up until this point documentary ethics largely focused on ideas of representation. Resting on claims of identity politics in the 60s, makers used their access to resources in order to bring marginalized voices to the public eye. However, in this cultural moment in which everyone can become a producer, still not everyone's work makes it to the big screen. Documentary filmmakers continue to play a significant role as cultural gatekeepers who can access audiences and harness tools to engage new publics.

Four feature length documentaries, *Dark Days* (Marc Singer, 2001), *Refugee* (Spencer Nakasako, 2002), *Maquilapolis* (Vicky Funari, Sergio De La Torre, 2004), and *Born Into Brothels* (Zana Briski, Ross Kaufmann, 2004), offer case studies in production models that avoid traditional pitfalls in documentary ethics. However, they also demonstrate that documentary ethical discussions must move beyond issues of representation in order to address the responsibility of the documentary in the co-creation of the public which it strives to reach.

In order to understand the relationship between documentary and the creation of publics, it is first important to reflect on documentary history through the lens of the subject maker relationship. Second, in addition to the changing relationship between filmmaker and subject, the 'production of publics,' must be understood in the context of documentary distribution strategies. In order to move the discussion beyond an ethics of representation, a proposed 2-prong approach to community ethics strives to articulate a new direction. By establishing this context of documentary history, each case study will build on the traditional understanding of the subject maker relationship, and use the proposed 2-prong ethical approach to evaluate the challenges of putting this model into practice.

States of Engagement

Before diving in to the history of the subject maker relationship, it is useful to consider three general states of engagement, which can typify this relationship. The first state solicits the subjects' input

at the level of information. Often the filmmaker will have conversations, engage in research and use the subject for first hand testimony and experience, while maintaining a professional distance. Griersonian cinema operates on this level, wherein the goal is integration and education. This level seeks to offer new information to an audience, but overall maintains the status quo.

The second level of engagement reflects deeper integration into the community. The filmmaker, like Flaherty, for example, familiarizes himself with his subjects in order to identify social actors and gain trust. Work is often made for an outside audience, with the trust of the subjects. Individual characters are defined in order to provide a humanist and personal face to a social issue. There is a slight provocation of the status quo, which usually reflects the director's point of view, rather than the subject's needs. While the exchange is often respectful, major power structures are not altered. Most PBS documentaries adopt this model.

The third level of engagement between subject and maker involves the filmmaker as organizer, in which education and training are part of the collaboration and exchange. Rather than an authorial vision, focused on an individual story, there is a shared desire to articulate a new idea. Collaboration transcends the level of input and seeks to create new publics by unpacking not only the politics of representation but also by deepening one's understanding of the politics of image production. Work is made first for the community, but with a larger public in mind; power structures are challenged.

Patricia Zimmerman uses the open source metaphor to talk about the shifting nature of documentary production in the public sphere. "Open source is not so simply a way to access code democratically, and in a transparent, collective way, but open sourcing can be marshaled as a metaphor and a model to navigate the new complex media environment which requires thinking through new documentary strategies for opening up ideas, access, distribution, platforms."² The screen becomes one point in which communities can be formed and activated. "The 'production of publics' and the 'opening of sources' also suggests movement away from an auteurist model of documentary media production as artisanal self-expression toward a redefined model of documentary media activating participation in the production of new collaborative knowledges."³

² Zimmermann, Patricia. "Public Domains: Engaging Iraq Through Experimental Digital Domains." In *Redefining Documentary*, ed. Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong. (New York: Open University Press), 288.

³ *Ibid*, 288.

The historical trajectory of this negotiation begins with *Nanook of the North*, credited as the first feature length documentary. Yet with this credit follows a history of claims that continue to contest its ethnographic legacy, by revealing the presence of its staged sequences. It was an early collaborative production, which blended ethnography and performance to form a base for contemporary documentary practice. The Inuits received training on how to maintain the film equipment, assist with the production planning, as well as to give feedback on the film as it was being constructed. This intent comes from a defining ethnographic goal: “to grasp a native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of the world.”⁴ Flaherty was dedicated to training and educating his subjects about the process of image production, but ultimately his vision dominated the final film, creating a romantic statement, which celebrated a traditional Inuit way of life that was quickly changing. Yet while Flaherty was deeply engaged with his subjects, ultimately, one must ask if film does not really does ‘grasp the native’s point of view?’ One criticism has been that it does not take into account the self-determination of the Inuit people, nor does it reflect upon their current situation. Rather, what it seems to do is grasp the *filmmaker’s perception* of the native’s point of view?

What better way to honor one’s ‘vision of the world’ than to facilitate this self-representation of the subjects’ experience? This vision of a collaborative process was different from subsequent filmmakers who had a more authorial vision, and it set up a direction for documentary production that would further engage this question of subject/ filmmaker relations. In 1935, John Grierson in an attempt to use filmmaking to engage citizens in the public discourse pioneered a format, which allowed his subjects to speak for themselves through sync sound interviews, as documented in *Housing Problems*. By giving a ‘voice to the voiceless,’ Grierson gave a new agency to his subjects that previously had been denied. However, this ‘voice’ becomes a token gesture, and trivializes its potential, if it only exists on screen. While subjects may have the possibility to tell their stories, at times too much credit is given to this process. Jay Ruby analyzes the problematic nature that continues to underpin much of this practice:

“It represents a major shift in attitude about where one looks for authority and authenticity. It recognizes that the experts’ opinions and the filmmakers’ vision need to be tempered by subjects’ lived experience and their view of themselves. It is ‘speaking with’ instead of ‘speaking for.’ However, editorial control still remains in the hands of the filmmaker. Although new voices are

⁴ Malinowski (1922:25) in Jay Ruby. *Picturing Culture*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 198.

heard, traditional forms of authorship have not been significantly altered.”⁵

The Griersonian project most closely reflects the legacy of this second level of engagement, in which the telling of stories is used by the filmmaker to maintain a particular social order. The subjects are not given the agency to articulate their needs, unless they corroborate the vision of the filmmaker.

Post Grierson, documentary film remained somewhat didactic until a radical technological shift in the 60s allowed for more fluid relationships between filmmaker and subject. The political intention of this work also started to change. Bill Nichols’ modes of documentary remain useful when charting these developments in practice. The participatory mode of documentary production gained popularity during the 60s as political subjectivities were brought into the spotlight. This mode presented active and visible engagement between the maker and the subjects, further breaking down this relationship and bringing attention to the power dynamics, previously hidden.⁶ *Chronicle of a Summer* by Jean Rouch remains a classic example in which the filmmaker entered into the world of his subjects and developed close relationships, so that the filmmaking process becomes less about production and more focused on capturing the essence of lived situations. By sharing the editing process with the subjects, Rouch engaged their opinions not only in private, but also as part of the film itself, providing another dimension of reflection between subject and maker. This created a benchmark for the ways in which film can be involved in the creation of publics, wherein the filmmaker engages with subjects both through content and also formal choices.

The legacy of the reflexive mode went in the direction of personal video, whereas the legacy of the Griersonian project continues to inform industrial practices today. At its base, its claims to truth, coupled with the underlying desire to maintain normative social structures, make it a powerful industrial tool to perpetuate ideology to a mass audience. The artistry of Flaherty and Grierson, elevated aesthetics and traditional narrative form, often at the expense of evaluating the underlying power structures of their production. Brian Winston affirms the problematic legacy of the Griersonian project by arguing that “running away from social meaning is what the Griersonian tradition, and therefore the entire tradition

⁵ Ruby, 204.

⁶ Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 34.

does best.”⁷ By focusing on the individual, the problem moment structure, and aesthetic control, these realist portraits favor social integration over social meaning and analysis. ⁸ The impact of this legacy can be seen for its ability to support and maintain the institutional power structures, under the guise of social change.

Documentary Enters the Public Sphere

In addition to the changing relationship between filmmaker and subject, the ‘production of publics,’ must be understood in the context of documentary distribution strategies. Early in his career, Grierson was quick to note the impossible relationship between documentary audiences and theatrical mass distribution. The economics of commercial theaters and distributors must privilege box office returns over social impact, which often proves immeasurable. In 1933, Grierson started planning alternative circuits for documentary viewing. Yet while the non-theatrical audience grew in church halls, film societies, and specialized theaters, the numbers never came close to competing with theatrical audiences. Unlike independent filmmakers of the 60s who embraced 16mm production and built exhibition opportunities and cine-club culture from a point of opposition to commercial production, the Griersonians did not embrace the medium, and failed to create a vibrant culture around their documentary project.⁹ While 16mm remained the format of newsreels, which often preceded feature films in the theaters, the Griersonian dream to build an alternative audience was never reached.

The newsreel legacy continued to hold an important place in social activist circles, often viewed in alternative settings, as part of larger organizing campaigns. Social movements recognized and strategically organized their media work toward the creation of new publics who could engage in the issues of the moment. The failure of this work to reach mass audiences perhaps reflects largely on the impossible ideological contradictions of this proposition. In order to create sustainable social impact, filmmakers must work on a scale that stays true to the needs of the communities at stake, rather than favoring a mass box office audience. Furthermore, similar to the 60-min constraints of TV broadcast,

⁷ Winston, Brian. *Claiming the Real*. (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 37.

⁸ Gary MacLennan http://www.drifline.org/cgi-bin/archive/archive_msg.cgi?file=spoon-archives/film-theory.archive/film-theory_1996/96-11-24.024&msgnum=86&start=4287&end=4414

⁹ Winston, 62.

documentary films are subject to similar structural filters and expectations not far removed from the narrative films that share their screens. These filters are not in the form of traditional journalistic standards of objectivity, but exist in relation to how issues are framed, aesthetic choices are made, and how the relationship between subject/maker is developed. Often these elements include: character-driven plots, individual conflict, protagonist/antagonist structure,

Nonetheless, for the general public, documentary and social issue reporting found a home on public access, and educational television. These outlets also meant that works produced had to be broadcast quality, limiting the content to professional producers contracted by PBS. In 1988, P.O.V became the official showcase for independent documentary films on television. During this time, documentary became synonymous with PBS, as it remained the primary exhibition outlet. If documentaries could secure distributors, the cinema was not bound by the same strict adherence to guidelines of objectivity that defined and restrained the content of PBS productions.

In 2004, Michael Moore's *Farhenheit 911* broke all previous records and expectations about the possible success of political documentary in a theatrical setting. The political moment and the circumstances surrounding the release of this film contributed to its success. It also set off a wave of political and social documentaries that succeeded in the theaters, and challenged viewers to rethink ideas of documentary form and content. People once again recognized the power of documentary to inform and shape public debate.

However, where as a distribution plan can make a difference in a film's impact, filmmakers do not have to wait for distribution to create impact through their work. In fact the more integrated this work can be within the production process the more effective the long-term impact will become. Given the accessibility of these new tools, documentary filmmakers and artists interested in the social impact of their work must navigate a new set of ethical concerns.

Toward an Ethics of Community Engagement

This new set of community ethics can be evaluated as a 2-prong approach. First, it is important to

define an ethical relationship between the filmmaker and their subjects. In order to have a sustainable impact, which involves the engagement of a public, an ethical relationship must involve the filmmaker acknowledging and working in good faith with the community they are representing. Secondly, part of this work involves an awareness that although these are individual stories, when taken into a mass viewing context, they represent and reflect larger communities. Although a bit more theoretical, this second ethical commitment involves a discussion of the politics of representation and image production. This exchange needs to happen between the filmmaker and their subjects. It is not necessary to give the camera to the subjects, nor is to say that this automatically creates a deeper understanding of media production. Rather, it is important for filmmakers to be honest about the power dynamics between the filmmaker, and subject, and be clear about the ways in which these images will circulate once out in the world.

Engaging New Publics: 4 case studies in documentary practice

To begin, *Dark Days*, a quiet film that briefly circulated through festivals represents an interesting model of the intersection of artistic vision and collaborative production. The filmmaker first engaged with his subjects, not as an artist, but rather as a curious and interested outsider, who was introduced to the world of homeless residents making a space in the abandoned NYC train tunnels.

The production and creation of *Dark Days* was understood as a collaborative project from the start. Singer also took on the role of activist and advocate on behalf of the housing issues of his subjects. This transformation from a medium state of engagement to a more active state speaks highly of his ethical commitment to the homeless community, which he represented in the film. Perhaps his role as a sympathetic outsider, rather than a dedicated filmmaker facilitated his willingness to address the power dynamics between subjects and maker. The participant/subjects engaged in the filmmaking process, and the film was made within the scope of their available resources. Much of the film stock and the 16mm camera were donated by supporters of the project. Like *Nanook*, Singer engaged not only the residents' stories but also their resources and skills as the production crew who would participate in all aspects of the 16mm filmmaking process, including rigging the power supply, constructing dollies and helping facilitate all aspects of the production and editing. This was a necessary economic decision, but equally an

organic one, that reflected his confident relationship with his subjects. He also viewed the necessary lessons of teamwork as valuable skills that would be transferable into the job market. Despite the collective living situation, much of the homeless lifestyle depends on solitary survival; the collaborative production process provided a way to engage and invest them in the project.¹⁰

As a portrait of homelessness, Singer was committed to creating complex character portraits, that did not fall into the downtrodden, drug addict, victimization that homeless representations usually perpetuate. This ethical commitment was particularly tested when looking for funding to finish the film. Singer was not willing to sway to funder's early demands on content, including, "more drugs."¹¹ Singer imagined that a film could be a way to raise money and change the circumstances of the residents, but not at the expense of exploiting their stories or image. The subjects honestly relay their hopes, struggles, and personal stories in conversation to the camera. Collectively they create a portrait of how they form a surrogate family to survive, while debunking many stereotypes about the ambitions and values of homeless individuals.

The film documents a critical moment for the residents who were under threat of dislocation when Amtrak decided to purchase the tracks in which they were living. Their struggle and negotiations with the Housing Authority demonstrate their positive commitment to bettering their lives, and changing their collective situation without compromising their dignity and human rights. The film documents the meetings with the Housing Authority who agree to relocate the participants facing eviction from their space. The epilogue of the film reveals a portrait of individuals, many of whom are now working steady jobs in various social service and labor industries, living in their own apartments throughout the city.¹² The film had a successful festival run. The subjects gained valuable life skills that have helped transform their situation. The film created a micro working model, not evident to the viewing public, but one that undoubtedly impacted the lives of the participant subjects. *Dark Days* remains an often overlooked example of a successful independent documentary film that understands that engaging people in the

¹⁰ Singer, "The Making of Dark Days."

¹¹ "The Making of Dark Days," *Dark Days*, DVD, directed by Marc Singer, (2000; London: Optimum, 2001).

¹² "Life After the Tunnel," *Dark Days*, DVD, directed by Marc Singer, (2000; London: Optimum, 2001).

filmmaking process can be a crucial element toward organizing and engaging new ‘publics.’

Spencer Nakasako, a community-based documentary filmmaker also accidentally stumbled upon a unique relationship with his subjects. In 1995 in a video workshop, he allowed one of his students, Don Bonus to take the camera home to film. The resulting video diary, *AKA Don Bonus*, premiered on Public Television, introducing audiences to the world of Don Bonus, a Cambodian refugee teenager. This work largely established a new practice of providing subjects with cameras to document their own experiences.

Nakasako’s work goes largely unnoticed by both mainstream audiences as well as community media makers. His emphasis on community building and personal expression overshadows his interest in professional production values. Although some may see Nakasako’s success as riding on the backs of his students, the organic and nonhierarchical process of collaboration speaks to a different model. This model approaches community work from a grassroots level, where power is exposed and shared between maker and subject. This is a great example of creating new publics, by engaging people in the image making process. In the case of *Refugee*, the kids also benefited by their travel opportunity, in exchange acting as crew for the film. While Nakasako recognizes the power of broadcast and festivals, their chosen distribution model speaks to the dedication of the project. The Vietnamese Youth Development Center self distributes the DVDs for a donation to directly benefit the organization’s work. The discs include both Nakasako’s films, as well as those made by youth at the VYDC, in addition to clips from the video classes that could serve as a teaching guide for other interested makers and youth.

Nakasako’s films, among other recent examples borrow from strategies of community organizing, alternative media, and open source culture in ways that force a reevaluation of the direction of documentary practice. When getting ready to produce *Refugee* in 2001, Nakasako was unsure if the film would be shot objectively by himself or a hired cameraman, or if the subjects would shoot themselves like in his prior films. After a lot of tests, he decided on a hybrid model in which both the subjects would have cameras as well as Spencer who would be along on their trip to Cambodia.¹³ This would free up the subjects from filming at times when they are physically and emotionally involved in a

¹³ “Director Commentary,” *Refugee*, DVD, directed by Spencer Nakasako, (2002; San Francisco: Vietnamese Youth Development Center, 2005).

moment. The result is a fortuitous mix of multiple cameras and mics, capturing different perspectives, yet always remaining present in the scene. While often multiple cameras are invisible, this decision reveals the filming process, in a way that is even surprising to makers. To the viewer, there is no clear distinction between the camcorders used by the subjects, and a 'professional' filmmaker point of view. Through this, he exchanges the idea of 'filmmaker knows best,' to embrace a more symbiotic collaboration.

Technology was critical to changing this relationship because it was no longer only in the hands of the formally trained director. One can witness this process of undoing through Nakasako's reflections:

"... it was footage I would never be able to get on my own. They were either familiar with who they're filming or they're familiar with the geography. One of the things that was very apparent was they had access. Also, it was fascinating to me how they viewed the world. ... Some were very silent behind the camera and collected footage. Don [Bonus] was interactive behind the camera. He would talk to his subjects.... It was clearly a subjective camera. I was taught that's a no-no. Nobody's supposed to know who's behind the camera — that was the whole point of objectivity.... Though I was excited about the footage we were getting and the ways a lot of these young people were choosing to shoot their stories, it made me think about the term 'collaboration.' It's not just a word to put on a grant proposal..."¹⁴

The ways in which Nakasako allowed his own critical and professional sensibilities to be changed by his students speaks to a different tendency than Zana Briski exhibited when filming *Born Into Brothels*, for example. Whereas she maintains the role of teacher, and access point to a larger art world, Nakasako was not afraid to transfer control and power to his subjects, reflect on his own biases of image production, and question the realist, authorial tradition of documentary practice. Perhaps this is also why his work does not meet unspoken ideological criteria for mass distribution. The ethical commitment of Nakasako to not only his student/subjects but to the larger community of which they are apart exemplifies his ethical compromise to this work. His willingness to give them determination over their image and representation speaks to a confidence of practice. Nakasako is not afraid to deconstruct existing assumptions of power, in order to reconstruct positive visions, which reflect the mutual needs of filmmaker and subject.

While experimental forms can find an outlet at festivals and public television, the legacy of

¹⁴ Fox, Michael. "Video Diary Pioneer Spencer Nakasako in SFIAAFF spotlight." SF360. <http://www.sf360.org/features/video-diary-pioneer-spencer-nakasako-in-the-sfiaaff-spotlight> (accessed March 1, 2009).

cinema Vérité and the realist Griersonian tradition still dominates popular documentary production. Gordon Quinn, a veteran documentary maker reflecting on the legacy of this style explains, “They believed that if you hold a mirror up to society, if you show how it’s functioning and what its problems are, that would be enough to create social change.”¹⁵ But Gordon later concluded, “what we hadn’t taken into account is power relationships and if you don’t understand the power relationship within a social context, not much change can take place.”¹⁶ Vérité furthers the claims of objectivity without questioning the larger image making or social structures controlling the production and distribution of representation, and by extension economic and social systems of control. Again, while giving people the power to speak, the major power structures are not altered.

For many socially engaged makers, the new possibilities of documentary production provide a way to recuperate imbalances of past exploitative relationships. However, one could argue that the popularity of *Born Into Brothels*, and its Academy Award winning status, speaks to the institutional and political limits of these changes. *Born Into Brothels* neatly falls into many traps established by the Griersonian tradition of ‘creative actuality.’ One must examine, not only the film, but also the photography project, which Briski offers as a solution. Whereas the Griersonians used the problem moment to set up government and industry as benevolent solutions, the tendency within the framing of community engaged projects is similar; rather than the government as solution, the art becomes the solution. Furthermore, in many cases, such art programs are often tethered to a particular person or organization coming from the outside. The way this model gets received positively and popularly over models which seek to transfer power to individuals and communities using their own resources, speaks to the way film operates as a microcosm within a larger system that ultimately rewards individual ideology, assuages conflict and debate. The very fact that the film could not be shown in India, perhaps due to privacy concerns, or lack of ethical consent, forces the viewer to reflect on what a US audience would gain from this message. The film delivers a message in favor of individual programs that do not address structural problems, but rather continue to aestheticize the symptoms.

A blend of stylization and realist narrative certainly carried *Born Into Brothels* to the level of

¹⁵ Parrish, Rebecca. “Crafting Stories that Promote Social Change.” Kartemquin Films. <http://kartemquin.com/newsletter/2008/08/crafting-stories-that-promote-social-change> (accessed March 10, 2009).

¹⁶ Ibid.

theatrical recognition. In avoidance of addressing the real social circumstances of difficult situations, art becomes a way to negotiate and differentiate one's project. Even the photography classes focused on elements of composition, color, texture without outward discussion of the politics of image production. The power dynamics of the camera were joked about but not discussed. Michael Frann discusses many of the aesthetic elements at length. In particular his analysis of the opening sequence starts to dissect how the film uses visual metaphors to expose certain truths that go unquestioned.

“In the opening shot/reverse shot sequence, as I have noted, the disparity in image quality between the shots of the children's eyes and the seeming point-of-view shots of the city seems intended to suggest the sad purity of the children as against the chaos of their environment, and the danger that they may succumb to that upon which they look. But the disparity might also be taken to reveal that what we are being shown is less a picture of what the children themselves see, and more a picture of what the documentarians see, and allow us to see of the district and of the children”¹⁷

Once again, like Flaherty in *Nanook*, while the intention was to show the ‘native’s point of view,’ in reality the film reflects more on the director’s perception of this point of view, rather than the subjects themselves. Furthermore, one could argue that the stylistic choices and seamless editing decisions obscure any possible critique of ethics within the narrative.

While Briski’s character reflects openly on her actions and the difficulty of navigating the foreign territory, the formal choices do not corroborate the tension and difficulty she encountered, slightly undermining her sincerity. The result has the same effect as realist films produced in the Griersonian tradition. “In the major films of 1935, the Griersonians, once again following their nineteenth century painterly predecessors, shifted their focus from the heroic to the heroic victim, a move which allowed for the poetry of poverty and the exoticism of the underclass to be displayed, washed over with ‘social purpose.’”¹⁸ While the voiceover provides an internal reflexivity, which lends social purpose and meaning, it also provides an updated version of this ‘poetry of poverty.’

While the reflexivity of Briski’s thought process and narration in *Born Into Brothels* comforts the viewer by its honest sharing of personal moments, it also detracts from a critical reflexivity between the viewer and the text. Although *Born Into Brothels* tries to combine many modes of documentary, it

¹⁷ Michel, Frann From "Their Eyes" to "New Eyes": Suffering Victims and Cultivated Aesthetics in "Born into Brothels" *Post Script - Essays in Film and the Humanities* 26:3 (Summer 2007) p. 53-61

¹⁸ Winston, 40

ultimately falls back into the Griersonian model, focused on problem moments and the individual subject. Particularly striking, is the use of several problem moments, which focus on Briski's struggle to remove the kids from their current situation, to participate in the classes, and seek a visa so that one of them can participate in the international exhibition. In these problems, the audience follows Briski as she negotiates the bureaucracy and the social structures, which remain obstacles in her quest to expand the opportunities of these children. Meanwhile, the parents are shown in a particularly negative light. Each time we return home, they are seen yelling at the children, who are confined in these tight living spaces, compared to the breezy room and cityscape where the photography workshops take place. The solution to remove these children from their environment perpetuates the idea that individuals, when given the opportunity can thrive outside of their social and cultural context. There is no attention given to the fact that Songachi has a known history of successful HIV awareness and health improvement programs. Rather the environment is constructed to create empathy for saving the children; the viewers have no choice but to side with Briski as she takes on the cause. "To be fair, Briski does acknowledge in the film that she's not a social worker, yet she seems to forget that once she becomes invested in the kids' lives. Though Briski is clearly a temporary presence in the children's world—and though she comes from a different cultural background and does not fully understand the subtleties of their situation—throughout the film she seems to feel justified in trying to "rescue" the kids by pulling the young photographers away from their families for a life they know little about."¹⁹

Unfortunately because of its decision to not engage the community in the production of the film, the film denies the possibility of truly engaging new publics in resolving the problems depicted in the film. Rather, the directors took the liberty to pursue their vision and create a portrait of their project, in the way that they understood it to operate. The creative license, while appealing to mass audience sensibilities, denies a critical context to understand the situation of the young students, further perpetuating their image as victims. While Briski does fight for a new vision for the children, this vision remains largely western-centered in its philosophy, borne from her own intuition. The relationship

¹⁹ Ikeda, Ken. "The 'Rescue' Dilemma." Youth Media Reporter.

www.youthmediareporter.org/2005/04/the_rescue_dilemma.html (accessed April 1, 2009)

remains respectful of her subjects, but ultimately disrespectful of the larger community conditions.

To date, *Maquilapolis* remains a strong model of community engagement and documentary practice. It most closely reflects the 3rd level of deep interaction, which also offers a vision about the direction of contemporary documentary practice. While still few, increasingly there are compelling models of films produced in a more deeply collaborative manner. The film speaks to many ‘publics,’ but primarily emerged by adapting the grassroots community organizing model that was already in place, by its partner organization, Grupo Factor X. From the start, film production was connected to leadership skills, human rights training, and community development focused on the women of Tijuana Mexico. The film was scripted collaboratively by the women and the filmmakers. Filmmaker Vicky Funari recounts:

“The project provided a way for the promotoras [community leaders] to expand upon the skills they were already learning in their promotora training. Some of them talk about the Maquilapolis project as having been an important part of their growth and development as women and activists. They gained some skills that some of them do continue to use, including video, computer literacy, public speaking, and organizing skills. But the project of course did not alleviate their poverty or change their condition as workers at the bottom of the global system. I think the biggest benefit is intangible, and is the same for the women as it is for the filmmakers and the audience: to participate in and learn from an ongoing dialogue about our roles in the global economy.”²⁰

In addition to the working model that was established between the filmmakers and the women participants, the video workshops helped to develop a deeper understanding of media production and consumption. These discussions about image production and representation manifested itself through a series of creative production decisions. The formal choices reflect a consciousness of image production and a desire to work through these issues in the film. Unlike the previous three films which largely maintain a seamless presentation of reality, *Maquilapolis* challenges the truth claims of documentary by the way it punctuates the construction of ‘reality’ with the construction of obviously staged sequences. The decision to use both DV camcorder footage, taken by the women, as well as 16mm high production performative sequences, creates a jarring distinction, which offers the viewer a moment to reflect on these formal choices. The realities of the womens’ lives are not concealed by high gloss reproductions. There is

²⁰ Funari, Vicky. “Questions.” Email to the author. March 1, 2009.

no poetry in *this* poverty, but there is poetry in the dream, and the struggle, which the women articulate both through their words and actions. There is a poetry in the strangeness of the reality in which these women are living. The camcorder sequences reveal moments at work, at home, which are not pretty, yet the viewer must face, which are clearly recorded by the women themselves, sometimes covertly. These images serve as visual reminders of the economics of image production and how our understanding of “good” quality, remains innately connected to economic resources and the value our society places on artifice, fantasy and desire. In one sequence, the women rotate on small displays, their labor in hand, making a connection to the way our production system objectifies and reduces its workers, as if they are as disposable as the products they produce. The last sequence, returns the viewer to the open field where the film begins, each woman recreates the movement of her work through hand gestures. This time, the women articulate their hopes and dreams, in a beautifully filmed 16mm sequence, before turning to return to the reality that awaits them.

According to Funari, “The originating ideas for these sequences came from discussions between Sergio and me, and they were designed, expanded upon, and honed over the whole the course of production, from 2001-2005, with the participation of the promotoras, our DPs and other crew. This type of image has to arise from a deep listening process, where the filmmaker tries to be a conduit for the subjects' dreams and experiences, to express them with clarity; but the filmmaker also tries to synthesize it all, to imagine into a new realm.”²¹

Although *Maquilapolis* was funded by ITVS and broadcast on television, the community outreach campaign was equally if not more important. Several of the promotoras traveled with the film along the border presenting their work in community screenings, engaging in dialogue with diverse groups about the continuing impact of these issues. A bilingual resources guide was produced to further create connections between groups throughout the US and Mexico fighting for workers’ rights and environmental issues intensified by the impact of the global economy. The film creates an effective balance of personal story and social struggle. The formal techniques provide evidence of a creative collaboration and educational process embedded within the production of the film. *Maquilapolis* most

²¹ Funari, “Questions.”

strongly showcases an ethical practice of community engagement. The new vision it presents for documentary practice has much to offer social documentary filmmakers.

For filmmakers interested in creating social change through their work, this decentralized process often becomes tantamount to the finished product. Filmmakers who embark on this kind of work recognize the investment in the project larger than the film. In order to create new publics and new institutional models of media production, the film must be set into action. Otherwise, the work remains isolated and serves to further fragment potential momentum, built by social networks engaged in this work on a daily basis, without the exit strategy that filmmakers are often afforded. Media makers invested in social change must negotiate the various 'publics' which are created, represented and impacted by the film.

The possibilities of amateurs and nonprofessional to obtain accessible technology and produce their own work, has greatly pushed the conversation around the shifting relationship between subject and maker. Since the birth of documentary practice, makers have navigated ethical and pedagogical concerns to define the relationship to their subjects. It can be said that documentary has moved from documenting people, to documenting with people, to documenting people documenting themselves. Increasingly, documentary makers are implementing new models of collaborative production that offer active subjectivity and agency on the part of the participant subjects.

These films balance the role of the artist, who still has a significant role to play in regards to resources, vision, and technique, but each approach offers a unique ethic of practice and creative strategy. Where as once this shared authorship was only to be found in the realm of community media work, these trends are now impacting independent, industrial and institutional practices.

The conventions are also changing. Participatory culture in the realm of Web 2.0 has exhibited a shift in cultural production, further blending the distinction between amateur, professional and artist. Mass exhibition opportunities may also no longer be at the multiplex. Documentary makers interested in engaging mass audiences while working with diverse communities also have a lot to learn from viral video and new distribution techniques online, which may offer a more creative space for experimentation

and expression. In this moment, filmmakers must realize the tension between older models of production and distribution, and emerging strategies, which engage multiple publics and open source methodologies. For makers invested in the social impact of their work, this remains a crucial shift in strategy while offering a new realm of possibility.