

Introduction

Doc Conference: TIFF

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It is a testament to the vitality of the documentary form that we can inaugurate this fantastic cinematic temple, the Bell Lightbox, with a conference on the documentary – and this in the context of one of the most important film festivals in the world. Now, documentarians tend to be a naturally lugubrious lot. They marry a Rousseauian idealism – the world should and can be perfect – to a Hobbesian pessimism: The world is brutish, nasty and particularly out to destroy documentarians. We regularly announce and denounce the sorry state of support for the documentary. Yet in their creative endeavours, documentarians continue to astound and dazzle. They push the boundaries of form and content; they will, with enormous courage, explore forbidden and often highly dangerous worlds; they record reality in order to challenge reality. With notable success. Documentaries have changed laws, righted wrongs, shifted public opinion. They have demanded and received attention. Both Cannes and TIFF are devoting increasing attention to the documentary. Hot Docs, the largest and most important doc festival in North America, has seen its audience grow significantly year over year. There is startling work coming out of China, East Asia, Africa and Latin America. Ironically, even as one of the traditional forms of funding POV docs and reaching audiences – television – is retracting, docs themselves are entering a golden age.

At the National Film Board, known as one of the most important homes for the documentary, we are more committed than ever to the form. We have, in various stages of production, provocative, challenging films by some of our best-known directors: Jennifer Baichwal adapting Margaret Atwood's book on debt; Léa Pool taking on the corporatization of cancer charities; Sarah Polley in her first effort at docs scrutinizing the stories families tell each other – a kind of home movie you might say; Charles Officer uncovering a story of race and heroism; Richard Desjardins digging at the sore spots of Quebec industrialism; Fernand Dansereau searching for hope among schoolchildren... the list goes on. With the Canadian Film Centre, we launched a program a couple of years ago to create a space where seasoned directors could have greater freedom to explore the nature of the doc, with input from some of the finest filmmakers from around the world. John Walker, Yung Chang, Sarah Polley and Shelley Saywell spent six intensive months of tugging and stretching their creative synapses; the projects are now moving into various phases of production. We've just announced the call for the second season of this program. Again the focus is on pushing the boundaries of the creative documentary. This is ongoing work at the NFB. But what I'd like to talk about today is something else we're doing: exploring new possibilities for documentary art. It has to do with the impact of the digital space – not as platform but as a distinct and emerging medium of creation. I want to sketch out the elements of a completely new documentary art form.

But before I do that I would like to give some sense of historical context. When, for example, I look at the history of the NFB, some of the most exciting and innovative moments came at the conjuncture of a number of different factors:

First, technological change which allowed for significant new modes of creation;

Secondly, intense and rapid social transformation which destabilized accepted modes of social and artistic interchange;

Thirdly, the emergence of artists who seized on the new means of expression to respond to social change;

Fourthly, a public searching for ways of comprehending the changing world about them.

Out of this, artists made work that redefined society's horizons of significance – the necessary context for social meaning.

Here are a couple of specific examples:

In the late 1950s and early '60s, Canada was waking up to a new sense of national identity. In English Canada, for example, it found expression in the economic nationalism of a key figure, like then Finance Minister Walter Gordon, who announced a program of ensuring that Canada was owned by Canadians. In Quebec it was the Quiet Revolution, with its call for Quebecers to take ownership of their destiny. Artists like Michel Brault, Tom Daly, Pierre Perrault and Colin Low, liberated by the new lightweight cameras and the possibilities of sync sound, created new expressions of what a nation could be by literally giving voice to that nation. Cinéma-vérité redefined the rules of doc filmmaking.

A decade later there was a different kind of social explosion, with strident demands for social justice and equality. Video and the Sony Portapak became the creative weapons of choice. The very notion of artist was questioned as filmmakers sought to fashion a new way of responding to the needs of the day. The films that came out of Challenge for Change and Société Nouvelle set the rule book for cinéma engagé.

We revere many of the works of these eras as canonic; they are the classics that stand as beacons for documentary filmmakers. But at the time, many of the filmmakers were derided and their works scoffed at. Those artistic shifts were characterized by fierce struggles and aesthetic and ideological battles.

Over the last 20 years or so we've seen something very different emerge which has posed quite a different challenge to the documentary. The growth of the cable and specialty channels opened the door to an extraordinary burst of what we now call factual entertainment and its derivative, reality programming. They may be the bastard offspring of direct cinema, but in terms of audience and economic power they have displaced their legitimate heirs.

Documentary series have become the bread and butter for documentarians, but necessarily the form became industrialized. Bibles were written, formats created and a massive industry generated. This

became the training ground for documentary filmmakers, and the notion of what the documentary is became contested ground.

Just last month our broadcasting regulatory body, the CRTC, called for comments on the definition of “documentary,” because some broadcasters questioned the exclusion of reality TV from public funding for the documentary.

Then into this mix comes a technological tsunami in the form of the digital revolution. It is a massive, disruptive force. It turns worlds upside down. It undermines the idea of the orderly marketplace. And it seems to change the rules almost daily. That’s not always bad. For the NFB, whose work for years has been mediated and obscured by traditional broadcasting, the digital world opened a powerful new way to reach our audiences directly through our online screening room – NFB.ca – and our iPhone and iPad apps. We could dispense with the 42-minute doc with predetermined commercial breaks. But for us, that was only the beginning. We recognized also that the digital space affords open-ended, unexplored creative opportunities. I think we are at one of those juncture points of social upheaval, technological change and artists emerging, ready to seize the day. And the audiences? They are already there, primed and waiting.

The digital interactive documentary is at that point that cinema was when montage was being discovered, elaborated upon and fought over. The modes of the new art form are scattered across the digital space, but I am not sure we have yet found our Dziga Vertov, Lev Kuleshov or Sergei Eisenstein to formulate the practice and theory of the new documentary art form.

I refer to these figures for their historical significance, but also for a different reason. As I was trying to come to grips with the multiplicity and complexity of the interactive form, I found myself going back to them and particularly to Vertov. There, I found affinities to our endeavours today. So much so that I was excited to discover a group of academics and creators who call themselves digital formalists and who base their inspiration on Vertov. That detailed exploration of the links with those great experimenters I will leave for another time.

Right now I would like to sketch out very briefly some features of the interactive documentary.

1. Navigation is to interactive what montage is to cinema. It is the fundamental structural principle and the defining aesthetic. It is also the determinant of the relation with audience. Interactive adds complexity but it does not liberate the public from the imaginative work of the creator. The POV resides as much in the ways of constructing the experience of navigating the doc as in engaging with the content of the doc.

2. The approach to organization of information is radically different. The organization of information is one of the central problematics of the classical documentary, particularly in an era of an overabundance of shooting, where ratios can mount to 100 to 1 or greater. Editing is a sculptural process where excess material is progressively pared away. I’m sure that many of you have, like me, sat through assemblies of four, five or six hours or more for a film that had to end at under one hour. At the end of the day everyone bemoaned the loss of all that unused material. The advent of online led some to believe the

solution had been found. Docs would be extended into the digital space by means of an information dump. All the unused material could be made available and audiences could troll through it at will. There is a value to that, but it has the same relation to a formal interactive digital documentary as a collection of random alphabetical letters has to a work of literature. The interactive documentary may accommodate a great deal more material, but the organization of that material in a coherent artistic form remains fundamental, albeit very different from the cinematic documentary. This has to do with time and space.

3. Time and space. To use categories defined by Harold Innis: Cinema is about time; interactive is about space. Cinema has an inexorable forward-moving trajectory; interactive is about spatial movement, even as that spatial movement is virtual. This leads to radically different artistic principles for these two art forms and to different modes of relationship with the public. Narrative is as important in the interactive doc, but it is defined and constructed differently. In some senses the interactive doc is closer to a work of installation art than to the traditional documentary.

4. The building blocks. Cinema is about the moving image and, since the '30s, sound. The interactive doc moves happily among image, text, sound and graphic design. The moving image is not necessarily privileged. If cinema uses text and graphics it is as a subset of the moving image; cinema converts these into the moving image. This is not the case with the interactive work.

There are obviously a lot more things to say and explore, from questions of aesthetics and grammar to how audience is incorporated into authorial, POV interactive work and the nature of the viewing experience. The work and the theorizing have only just begun. But most crucially, what I wanted to do was lay out a sense of possibilities and to indicate that the birth of one art form is not the death of another but its enrichment.

So, even as we energetically pursue the cinematic doc, we are also interested in exploring these new doc forms. You can see the results in works like *Waterlife*, which won the Webby this year, and *GDP*, a year-long experiment in telling the stories of a nation in economic crisis, or in the David Suzuki test tube project launched this week alongside the Sturla Gunnarsson feature doc about Suzuki, *Force of Nature*, playing here at TIFF this week. Later this fall we are launching a host of other interactive works, each with a distinctive authorial voice, each recognizably documentary yet different, each part of a process of constructing a new art form. All can or will be found at NFB.ca or ONF.ca.

Just before I conclude, I'd like to go back for a moment to Vertov. His most famous film, *Man with a Movie Camera*, continues to astound with its sheer cinematic inventiveness. It is in a category of film known as the City Symphony, alongside works like Strand's *Manhatta*, Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* and Ruttmann's *Berlin*. Today, one of our newest interactive projects is in the process of revisiting the City Symphony. It is called *High Rise* and it is about living in vertical spaces. The first phase, *Out My Window*, will soon be available on our site. It is interesting the extent to which the work of early innovators like Vertov is directly in line with and relevant to what we are trying to reinvent.

The interactive doc is the offspring of the cinematic one, but it is different and its modes of expression will continue to evolve and develop their own distinctive forms. Inevitably it will enrich, in yet unknown

ways, the whole documentary ecology. And the two streams will cross over and nourish each other to all our benefit. Thank you.