

Total Recall

HISTORY, MEMORY & NEW DOCUMENTARY

When social documentary re-emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s it was associated with a New Left perspective that viewed the media as an ongoing source of false ideology. Canadian producers tried to resurrect a critical practice from the shards of a CBC television and National Film Board liberal-nationalistic documentary tradition. Information from a radical perspective was perceived as a pivotal force with which to change social consciousness — the lies of the mass media could be replaced by a politicized and correct (or at least more correct) representation of historical reality.

HISTOIRE INFAME

Nicole Giguere 8 min. 1987

HOLY JOE

Joe Sarahan 11 min. 1987

**THE WAY TO MY
FATHER'S VILLAGE**

Richard Fung 38 min. 1988

COMPTINES

Diane Poitras 4 min. 1986

JUNGLE BOY

John Greyson 15 min. 1985

PIE Y CAFE

Jan Peacock 5 min. 1984

OUT OF AIR

Robert Milthorp 8 min. 1987

NEZ, GORGE, OREILLE

Elsa Cayo 14 min. 1986

WHITE DAWN

Lisa Steele/Kim Tomczak 9 min. 1988

The scope of this process was greatly expanded by the introduction of the portapac in the late sixties. Even the relative availability of 16mm film had been too daunting (financially as well as due to the complexity of its production and distribution system) to be a viable tool for local community based production and organizing. With video, it was not immediately necessary to guarantee wide distribution in order to recover the costs of production; thereafter it became possible to make works whose targeted audience didn't have to go beyond that of very narrowly defined communities of interest. As critics such as Martha Gever have suggested, content not structure was the locus where critical intervention first occurred.

A number of strategies and forms of work have developed in this context, some of which mirror the concerns seen in film work, others are more video specific. Advocacy tapes generally attempt to compel people to act, while personal testimony and verite works have attempted to create alternate histories, by clearing a social space for individuals and groups to speak. Unlike authored documentaries, these works are more

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often produced in a community context, requiring intensive collaboration between artist and subject. The video process makes media accessible to the disenfranchised — tapes work to and for a specific audience and are fundamentally aligned with the perspective of specific social groupings. Finally, some works were designed to counter disinformation systematically cranked out by a dominant media increasingly willing to privilege the policies and opinions of the State. This work was greatly accelerated by the availability of home VCRs.

At the same time, video documentary works developed a tough critique of its perceived other, television — particularly its use of the unseen but authoritative journalist/narrator and their accompanying gaggle of “experts.” This critique either came in the form of discrete “deconstructive” works, or increasingly, were operative components of advocacy or alternate history works. It should be noted however, that the insistence of deploying a direct critique of television has declined somewhat in recent years. This may be due to a realization that broadcast television was never video’s “frightful grandparent” in the first place. What they shared as a technological form was perhaps less telling than what they didn’t share regarding broadcasting privileges and mass reception conditions.

Video of course cued in to the longstanding, on-going debates about documentary form. This critique questioned the notion that essential elements resided in the represented subject. For example, why do so many producers believe that a working class speaker was somehow more truthful or honest than one from the middle class? Testimonial works, which gave evidence of abuse or oppression often employed a falsely optimistic use of closure, while network news documentaries gave a false sense of knowledge due to their authoritative means of production and their unwillingness to reveal their ideological affiliations. The ensuing competition of truth-contents was problematic not because of the relative value of

the positions taken, but because the manner in which the various meanings were constructed were not made clear to the viewer. Thus even cinema verite works, which in one sense seemed to be as free of editorial intrusion as documentary could get, was no less free of hidden bias as any other form due, ironically, to the very lack of editorial intrusion, and the accompanying lack of evidence of the producer’s decision making process.

Finally, the application of semiotics to the analysis of Western myth, most significantly advertising (“Capitalist Realism”) showed that certain formal operations could communicate ideological meanings quite insidiously — but very effectively — and with a high degree of aesthetic economy. The committed documentary unwilling to disclose the manner of its own constructed meanings was itself vulnerable to such an analysis.

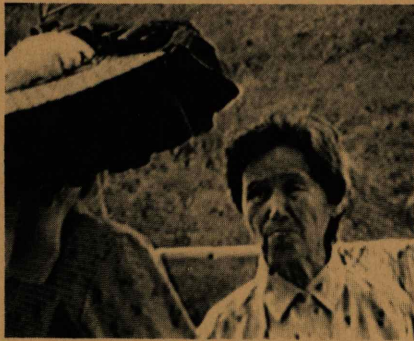
What this tradition of critique has revealed however, is that there is no single strategy that is effective in all cases. Instead, any critique necessarily requires an accompanying analysis of the concrete conditions of audience and reception conditions. In addition, the critique of documentary must itself be examined for its ideological biases, with the knowledge that whatever their alleged formal weaknesses documentaries have played an important role in social and political mobilization. Criticism comes in part from the desire to make true documentary’s own promise to weld the mobilizing impulse of works into a more effective political tool. But the critique comes from sometimes contradictory directions: from modernism, semiotics and feminist film theory, and from within a critical documentary tradition. While modernism has centred on realism as an outdated form — a problem given the dominance of the latter in cinema and television — the first two currents have argued that even critical documentary evokes passivity on the part of its audience, because of its reiteration of narrative structure.

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Semiotic criticism, while rejecting a unifying political project, echoed concerns about realism expressed by an earlier generation of artists. The historical avant-garde, active in Europe during the 1920s and 30s, had contributed a challenge to both modernism and realism. This avant-garde had a very different concept about the social role of art than did Modernism: they opposed the separation of art from life central to Modernist practice, and wished instead to "reintegrate it into the praxis of life" (Peter Burger). The "institutions of art" which prevail in any historical period, and which frame and regulate the artwork regardless of its content, were the target of the avant-gardist critique, their having a central role in maintaining the separation of the "aesthetic" sphere from the "practical" sphere. This analysis — along with the avant-garde's failure in overthrowing the institutions of art — throw into relief the importance of understanding the production and reception conditions of a work.

The preoccupation with truth, and the general disregard of the regulating influence of the institutions of art, asserted itself in the formal concerns of modernism. The search for the essential organization of experience and matter moved modern art out of nineteenth century realism into abstraction. Modernism had engaged in a quest for truth within the materials and forms of artistic production, eclipsing realism as a form. The legacy of modernist art practices asserts a strong influence within video art. In positive terms it has encouraged a consciousness about video as a specific historical form, including the characteristics it shares with television, and has expanded experimentation. In negative terms it is represented in a refusal to acknowledge the integral role that community documentary production has played in forming a language of video practice and in doing so challenging the institutions of art.

In the 1980s, with the decomposition of the optimistic and holistic political vision of the previous decade, personal ideologies



The Way to My Father's Village, Richard Fung

appear and are experienced in a far more fragmented form than previously, and dissent itself is more pragmatic. Within socially instrumental art works and documentary, a greater blending of documentary realism and experimentation, with a stronger sense of subjective positioning has emerged — artists tend to blend the realism of documentary with narrative, experimental and appropriated elements. A new documentary has developed which directly and openly employs subjective processes in various forms of fantasy and fiction and yet operates within the construction of an analysis, and in the ethics of contributing to social and political movements.

It is impossible to characterize the diversity of video documentary forms that have been developed in the last decade, except to say that they often employ a high degree of heterogeneity. This has been made possible in part due to the expanded syntax of post-production in video, and the relative inexpense (compared to film) of "special effects." The once dominant codes of realism of documentary have given way to the proliferation and juxtaposition of codes, which can then be deployed within a single work. Realist narrative sections exist alongside verite sections; political motifs exist alongside non-political "fantasy" sections; fiction tries playfully to pass itself off as documentation; etc, all of which can then be combined in highly layered collages.