

## Documentary Studies and My Project

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“Documentary has an ability to open our eyes to worlds that are available to us but, for one reason or another, are not perceived.” (Barnouw, 3)

Pinning down a definition of documentary is difficult. Over the course of my involvement with the documentary format, I have tried to analyze concepts, which help me understand the nature of the medium without simplifying or limiting its abilities. I have also tried to understand what my own personal interest in the documentary process has to do with my goals and ambitions. What exactly is it that attracts me to documentary film? Why is it important to understand the nature of the image? I hope to tie some of the pieces together, in a way that demonstrates at one level the intriguing possibilities of the documentary and in another how documentary reflects our society and the way we live.

In thinking of documentary and a reasonable method of understanding its function, I have found that the word itself, if broken down, gives clues to its uses. Bill Nichols tells us that any method can be utilized in the formation of a documentary film. It can be observational, with a concept that editing and interaction will be simplified. A documentary film can be completely fictional, using actors or even animation to create a subject through their performance. A historic event may be recreated to obtain access to the past. Regardless of the methods, what you have when you are finished is a unique production of fiction. It remains as a document, the first part of the word documentary, and is often tied to the forms of narrative understood in any text. This is an understanding of the document in a Gestalt sense, where the narrative is a sum of all its parts (aural, visual and temporal) and can be analyzed in a psychological manner as a whole. The second part of this analogy is that the finished document is a commentary, which

establishes its own arguments and perspectives on or about the “real.” The commentary on the real is equally as important as the document itself, for it is the reality-based commentary, which separates a documentary film from ordinary fiction.

What makes this notion of the document-commentary both confusing and useful is the further understanding of reality in relation to documentary. The existence of reality within a documentary film is a myth. As stated previously, a documentary is a special production of fiction. It is attached to the real world as an interpretation or representation, by that of the camera, sound and editing equipment. The special use of these technologies allows the documentarian to manipulate all aspects of the document. Time becomes a non-linear participant, as any order can be formulated from the master tapes. Time becomes simply a factor of motion and dictates how long, and at what speed, images will run. Sounds become like layers of paint, which when mixed together can formulate new colors and hues and can be superimposed over the images in any variation of thickness. The visual image is always a fraction of what can be seen, divided by those subjects beyond the scope of the lens. With these concepts in our theoretical toolbox, it is understandable that the substance of a documentary can never be fully trusted or stand beyond the realm of deconstruction. They are mere representations of what we accept as real.

Reality however, is equally a questionable structure. We are a society, which often comments on the “real world” as if it were positioned only in certain constructs a.k.a. “when I get out of school, I have to get a job in the real world.” This idea of an extra-

terrestrial reality can also be seen in the fact that much of our society looks toward the television screen in order to view *The Real World*, which is a popular reality TV program from MTV. What are the implications of having an image of reality? Theorist Jean Baudrillard would describe our current state of affairs as existing on the plane of hyperreality, a dizzying platform of mediation over mediation, resulting in reliance on the medium rather than the reality it was originally to represent. For Baudrillard the concept of hyperreality is most easily seen in the Church (or Disneyland.) Baudrillard theorizes that the church and its visual icons, stand as representations of God. These representations, in turn, are venerated and over time, become substitutions for God itself. The church then becomes the embodiment of God and what was originally God is lost. "All of the Western faith and good faith was engaged on this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange - God, of course." (Baudrillard, 353) But what does all of this have to do with documentary and me?

### **The Creation of an Image:**

I spent a respectable amount of time applying for various scholarships and projecting my proposed documentary on numerous interview committees. The funding was necessary to produce my video, and together I gathered around \$9,500 from grants, scholarships and selling my car. What I discovered, or observed, was that many of my interviews were in themselves simulations. The interview board, as well as I, each had our own roles to play in order to see that a proper transaction of funds took place. I was to project the image of

the ideal student; innovative, engaged, never tiring, endlessly seeking knowledge, and steadfast in my confidence of the successfully completed project. They were to be the objective jury, not succumbing to the first impression (but noting that first impressions are important), asking thoughtful questions, encouraging my development, and deciphering whether my project truly was deserving of their support. The interviews made me aware of my necessity to perform. In order to receive funding I needed to project my success and security about the finished product and its value.

In the actual interviews I found that I was sometimes tired. I had not always slept well, or was trying to balance my schedule. I did not want the interview to interrupt my day. I spent many hours preparing my budget, writing my proposals, and assessing the value of my project to the various scholarship programs. By the time the interview process had come, I had already presented my ideas a thousand times before. Indeed, after writing my first few scholarship applications, I simply had to cut and paste on my computer in order to satisfy the requirements of latter forms and questionnaires. I no longer composed my thoughts, but edited them. Therefore, a seven-page application took a mere fifteen minutes and seemingly no creative or cognitive effort. The interview process was no different. My presentation was an image of the work I had done and I started from the first anticipated question as if pressing play on a VCR. The entire process was more like a flamboyant performance or oration. The sum of my work was an image and the interview was a careful reenactment of some prefabricated reality. The idea of image production relates to how I presented myself within the interview process.

A documentary film creates a similar image and has similar effects on society. As a form of mass media, the document-commentary is composed with a specific audience in mind. In this sense there is always a dual concept of the ideal subject. The ideal subject is both the recipient of the documentary's message, or image, taking the form of the intended audience and the desired interpretation of the film. The ideal subject is of use to the documentarian as it directs the message of the documentary. For example, when imagining the ideal subject of "This is a University", my first documentary, I thought about both who I wanted the film to reach and what image I wanted to impart on them. In this case, the structure of the documentary relied on many images of the University of Tennessee. The buildings, which are seen in the short film, have their own presupposed symbolism and interpretations. The image of University of Tennessee's football stadium is a structure embodying pride, success, the ideology of fair and equal competition, and the masculinization of capitalism. I wanted to control and manipulate the responses to these interpretations and attempted to do so, by creating new relationships within the structures themselves. In a shot juxtaposing Nieland stadium and a worker, I attempted to show how the university can be an overwhelming oppressor to the point where the worker, literally in the shot, is lost and marginalized. In this case, I wanted the stadium to be a mocking image, demonstrating the undeserved and fabricated sense of pride.

The use of the university's structure to present interpretations requires that the audience of my film understand the presupposed symbols within the structures. This dictates that the intended audience will most likely be either from the university or the community of

Knoxville. With this ideal subject in mind, I can assume a certain level of understanding, and therefore pursue depth within the meanings of my document-commentary.

### **Social Documentary:**

It is the idea of controlling an image that is crucial to my interest in documentary (and my desire to do well in interviews.) In a visual society, where images dictate reality, the only way to truly control an image is to be involved in the process of its creation.

Unfortunately, because the medium of film is financially elitist, the few who do create hold a monopoly on the both distribution and production. There are counter-hegemonic media forms in existence, as minority producers, but they are not enough to subvert the negative stereotypes in our society. My interest lies in formulating my own opportunities for creating images from my location in society. I am intrigued by the deconstructive and reconstructive nature of the image. The documentary project, which I am undertaking and have received funding for, is an outlet for me to integrate myself into the process of creating positive images for society.

My studies of social documentary have directed me to an appreciation of revolutionary and counter-cultural image production. I have enjoyed working with Chris Holmlund and her knowledge of critical film movements. The global New Wave Cinema movements, etc. have all used the documentary as a form of social expression. These movements developed through technical advancements in the film industry. With the creation of

light hand held cameras, and less expensive small format film stock, filmmakers were able to produce films independently and on small budgets. Wartime footage, such as that of the Vietnam War was shot with small format film cameras. These cameras changed what images could be captured for the public.

Similar advancements have opened the field to experimentation. With the introduction of video and now digital video, images can be created with inexpensive, high quality and easy production. These advancements broaden who can come in contact with documentary and experience the medium as a producer. Understanding how images are manipulated and malleable helps us breakdown the cultural hegemony of mass media.

It is my belief that social documentary has a place in the university setting. Producing a multimedia product involves critical thinking and digital video allows anyone access to visual media accessible. With the guidance of a technical supervisor, any student could interact with the interdisciplinary multi-lateral nature of audio-visual production.

Students are already generally connected with computers by the time they reach the university level and digital editing systems are simply another program to learn. A documentary center could exist as a cross-disciplinary structure within the university. Students specializing in the medium could connect with the research tasks of other students to collaborate documentary projects. My experiences in documentary have always included the people around me, who generally are able to adjust quickly to thinking filmic ally. I have used other "inexperienced" students to assist sound recording, setup shots, perform voice-overs and interact with the intricacies of postproduction. In Urbino, I participated with the Sociology department in the documentation of Italian

popular festivals. As a group of eight students and a professor we documented a festival using sound recording, traditional journalism, photojournalism and video. As students, the experience connected with our creative and intellectual capacities. The process of documentation required an awareness of the subject and the interpretation involved in "representing" reality. Overt documentation requires the observer to be aware of one's presence in the culture. A class that watches a video about a particular culture is already at great distance from the actual process of observation. A class that produces a video is forced to acknowledge the differences in the document and the actual documentation. A final project is the culmination of countless hours of editing and selecting from source footage, but the source footage itself represents a selection process.

### **The Urbino Project:**

The Urbino project for me was the conglomeration of all of my interests and studies. Originally I happened upon the idea after speaking to Italian students about my experiences with the Urbino Summer Study Abroad Program. I was very appreciative of the opportunity to study abroad and was impressed by the organization and freedom provided by the programs administrators. Dr. Sal Di Maria traditionally asked former participants to promote the program and students reacted well to the comments of their peers. I realized during my presentations that most students were interested in my photo albums more than the comments themselves and I felt a video would enhance the programs appeal. After talking with Sal, I began contemplating the production of a video and adjusted my curriculum to include video production and more intense courses in

cinema studies. Through the video I would be able to produce a document integrating my studies in jazz, Italian, photojournalism and cinema.

The prospect of documenting Urbino lead me to consider other "city" projects. The documentary "Symphony of Berlin, " a German expressionist documentary from 1927, functioned as my introduction to both critical study of the documentary format and my concept of the representing the Urbino Summer Study Abroad Program. I wanted the video to be timeless in its focus. I did not want to focus on the growth of individual students, but the atmosphere of study abroad. I wanted to capture the excitement and stimulation of a new cultural environment.

I included with my project a year studying in Urbino, familiarizing myself with the town and absorbing my own study abroad experiences. I journaled about my concepts of time and space, drafted themes or fascinations with my surroundings, planned shots, surveyed the continuity between landscape and architecture and noted my shifting feelings about home and distance. I did not plan to begin shooting until students arrived for the summer program. This was because I wanted to consolidate production, in order to keep footage fresh in my mind. I also developed from my past experiences an awareness of the comfort of my subjects under the camera. I waited a week after students arrived to bring the camera to student functions. In an intimate filming situation, if one has the time, it is valuable to allow participants to adjust to their surroundings (or you) before subjecting them to the lens. This allows for them to know how to act naturally in their environment independently of the camera. Eventually, anyone gets used to the camera's obtrusion,

simply because it is strenuous to constantly be "on guard." Once the subject breaks from performance insecurity, the camera becomes less visible. Some people relax more quickly, others are self-conscious, but generally an informal attitude about filming can quicken the transition. This makes developing technical mastery of the equipment of extreme importance. If you are not comfortable with the equipment, the subject will be uncomfortable. I quickly learned to throw the camera together and prepare shots, while keeping conversations going and blowing off the visible technical aspects of preparing to shoot.

Equipment is always a factor. The better the quality, generally, the more flamboyant the gear. Flashy gear is generally a hindrance to subject comfort, but can be a positive towards getting credibility and access. I learned this quickly. In many cases, I was mistaken for an Italian (and in one case German) television crew. This allowed me to cross police lines at festivals, shoot in museums and even block traffic and drive the wrong way down one way streets. In all cases, I followed rules for documenting recorded persons or institutions and requesting permission and rights to footage. I would always whip out the camera, while I asked though. This worked in almost every situation. At one festival, the announcer actually commented to the public that "telecamera" was present. Playing the role of documentarian is a choice, and should be used as a tool to get the best footage possible. When I helped document the "Bove Finta" festival, I studied the traditional map of the parade route to preplan where I would be stationed and when I would move. I received permission from the mayor of this small town (Offida) to perch myself on a balcony in the cities main piazza. From this vantage

point, I was able to maximize my coverage and this planning resulted in some excellent footage. Research is crucial. The preparation required to capture moments is both luck and practice. Many instances, I would discover an event that unfolded as I shot, other times, I watched repetitive actions over days to get the right moment.

### **Interview Situations**

I love the intricacies of a good interview. I have spent a goodly amount of time listening to one of the great interview masters of public radio, Terry Gross of Fresh Air. Gross is a meticulous researcher. She has an open format interview style, where interviewees are given as much time as they need. Her interviews are extremely varied, but she finds depth in every field. Her questions combine asking informed questions and allowing for interviewees to move in their own directions. Gross also does most of interviews over the phone, but rarely does she interrupt or cause her interview to stumble. The interviews have an excellent flow of dialogue, which feels like they are close to each other, and offering visual cues.

That said, I also have developed a theory for interviewing based on experience and listening to good interviews. I planned to complete the interviews for the project at different times. I was bound to interview program directors from other states while in Urbino, but I planned to interview Sal in the U.S. I waited to start my interviews until the last week, after I had spoken with each of the program directors and after they were already reflecting on the summer's success. This allowed me to get their voices while in

the program. I saved Sal for after most of the editing had been completed, most of the interviews already positioned and sequences mapped. This utilized Sal as a source of continuity and as a filler for the voice over narrative. Because most of the footage was edited. I could tailor Sal's comments to direct my film and interact directly with the flow.

I think planning interviews in this way allows for mistakes, missed comments or misdirection, also it prevents having to redo interviews or travel to Connecticut to cover omissions. Comfort in interviews is difficult (here is where Terry Gross is amazing), you have to give cues to your interviewee visually. It is natural in an interview to respond to a comment by aural affirmation (i.e. yeah...or that's right...go on) but that interferes with footage. You have to push the interview by nodding, smiling, looking pensive or some other cue. How Terry conducts successful complex interviews over the phone, without significant verbal or visual cues, demonstrates her mastery.

The qualities of this project are expandable and I continue to rethink my methods and apply them in new ways. I love the challenge and intertextuality of documentary. Aural and Visual landscapes reach people at the level of our social psychology. I am dedicated to the pursuit of a documentary career as I believe it is my pen and paper. I have often remarked that the film project of the 20th century is the romance novel of the 19th century. If I write a twenty-page paper and say to my friends, "hey guys I have a twenty page paper, want to come over and I will read it to you?" I would not get a positive response, but when I tell my friends I have a new twenty minute video, the general response is, "oooh...lets have a viewing." It is an attractive form of communication and I

am satisfied within as a form of expression. I am pleased with my education and recognize that documentary and critical productions, with the help of accessible high quality media, will found their place in the university interdisciplinary education.

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