
Elizabeth Cowie, *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011; 296pp, paperback £18.50; hardback £56

Thomas Waugh, *The Right To Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011; 336pp, paperback £20.50; hardback £61.50

Documentary, once largely neglected in film theory, has been a subject of escalating interest over the last twenty years. Partly due to documentary’s uneven yet persistent resurgence since the late-1980s, partly the result of intensified interrogations of the status of truth and authenticity in representation, a number of scholars - such as Bill Nichols, Brian Winston, Vivian Sobchack, Michael Renov and Linda Williams, to name a few - have helped recast the ways that documentaries have been analysed and taught. With *Intelligence Work* and *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*, Jonathan Kahana and Elizabeth Cowie, respectively, contribute important historical, political, and psychoanalytic insights to an area of inquiry still testing its parameters. Thomas Waugh’s *The Right to Play Oneself* (on at least one level a tongue-in-cheek reference, Waugh notes) performs a somewhat different task: ‘looking back’ while reasserting the value of Waugh’s longstanding contributions to the field of political - or what he has called ‘committed’ leftwing - documentary.

Much critical work on documentary - and the above books stand out - has relied on negotiating between established notions of the form as social practice (stemming in particular from the legacies of John Grierson and Paul Rotha) and transformations of the documentary idea as it interacts with its ‘publics’ and the changing public sphere. Documentary has long produced a kind of imagined space - and ‘real’ place - for social engagement. It designates more than just a cinematic ‘object’, as Sobchack suggests: ‘along with the obvious nomination of a film genre characterized historically by objective textual features, the term also - and more radically - designates a certain subjective relation to an objective cinematic or televisual text. In other words, documentary is less a thing than an experience’.1 The idea of documentary film as experience - as socially produced and apprehended through cognitive, psychic, and bodily processes - is crucial to the readings found in Kahana’s and Cowie’s books. In Waugh’s writing we get a profound sense of documentary

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film viewing as personal experience: a site of tension, both empowering and potentially troubling.

Kahana’s approach to US documentary recognizes the mobile status that the form has long held, travelling between the domains of ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ or ‘counterpublic’ iterations. Somewhat paradoxically, documentary owes its ongoing relevance to ‘its simultaneous appeal to both state and capitalist institutions and their critics’. Drawing on Charles Taylor’s concept of a ‘social imaginary’, Kahana engages documentary as a recognizable yet fluid ‘metageneric’ that ‘helps us envision the collective consequences of our thoughts and actions, no matter how ordinary or idiosyncratic’ (p1). The impact of documentary, then, lies in its ability to gesture towards worlds, experiences, emotions and structures of feeling beyond the ‘evidence’ it depicts. Documentary representation can make visible ‘the invisible or “phantom” realities that shape the experience of the ordinary Americans in whose name power is exercised and contested’ (p9). In this sense, documentary doesn’t just reflect social consciousness, it helps us imagine ideas and futures beyond its immediate framework and subject matter; it can make palpable - and transform - ideas of citizenship and relations to a national imaginary.

Critics such as Waugh, Paula Rabinowitz, and Patricia Zimmermann have been key to outlining documentary’s public functions, and Kahana rightfully acknowledges these contributions while laying the stress on a history of political slipperiness and ideological conflict in US documentary. Yet his intricate unpacking of documentary’s forms and functions never obscures a passion for the subject, nor does it elide an investment in what Waugh calls ‘committed’ filmmaking and its social potential. For Kahana, the currency of the documentary idea - and ideal - might be expressed in the multivalent senses of the term ‘intelligence work’ (taken from Walter Lippmann), where documentary joins other social media in ‘making visible the operations of groups and institutions to themselves and their publics [. . .]’, intelligence workers [according to Lippmann] would make possible more hospitable environments for social and political action’ (pp11-12). Elaborating on this process, Kahana’s approach navigates what might be called the interstices of political critique, revealing documentary’s multiplicity while marking its relative successes and limits. Expressing a wariness of ‘liberal commonplaces’ (p19), *Intelligence Work* is able to use documentary as a lens for highlighting ingrained paradoxes at the heart of US politics and their cultural expressions. Indeed, especially in its later chapters, Kahana’s book indicates that all documentary advocacy isn’t always necessarily ‘productive’ exchange; the very malleability of the documentary form (as seen in the conspiracy theory film *Loose Change* [2005]) sometimes finds it participating in ‘the foreshortening of the social horizon [. . .]’, the idea that the postmodern present is a period of collective confusion about how to [politically] act’ (p336).

One of documentary’s core functions, as John Corner has observed, has
been to contest established viewpoints and confront complacent investment in common beliefs. Yet there have also been longstanding tensions - visible for example in the 1930s, when street-level radicalism in the US was appropriated into New Deal state-funded projects - between political documentary as a mode of expression ‘in which radicals and progressive intellectuals grappled with the problem of how cultural form and social action could be related’, and documentary as a mode for organising audiences ‘in a hegemonic capacity, announcing crises and managing them on behalf of the state’ (p68).

Starting in the 1930s - as the documentary idea was gaining the attention of government bodies responsible for engineering solutions in the name of ‘the people’ - Intelligence Work moves through three ‘paradigmatic’ moments when documentary was mediating US political life while at the same time reinventing and reasserting its own capacity for truth telling.

The book’s first part, ‘The Sentiment of Trust’, examines the era of the Depression and New Deal, when documentary authority was harnessed to construct seemingly transparent unities amongst dispersed and often atomised political movements, coalitions and government aims. The second, ‘Lyrical Tirades’, covers the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, when documentary developed multiple strategies - such as direct cinema, insightfully critiqued here - for making visible, and intensely personal, the deep divides and abstractions of US political and social life. The book’s third part looks at the ‘public sphere of suspicion’ as manifested in recent years, during which documentary has commented on, and sometimes participated in, what Habermas calls the ‘New Obscurity’. Kahana’s historical and dialectical analyses are consistently shrewd: in stressing that ‘a politics of truth depends upon symbolic discourse’, his book becomes an apt companion to Maren Stange’s important examination of US documentary photography, Symbols of Ideal Life, where the documentary idea is seen as grounded in symbolic discourses and gestures that have both served left-liberal aims and acted as ‘state apparatuses’, contributing to the perpetual making and unmaking of hegemonic national interests.

A key critical intervention here lies in expanding the reach of criticism on political documentary while bridging ongoing gaps between political history and theory and film history and theory. Cowie’s work similarly brings theory and astute critical practice to bear on documentary texts while underlining their social and interpersonal nature. Recording Reality, Desiring the Real outlines what is at stake in documentary’s discourses of truth and authenticity, focusing more intently on the psychoanalytic and phenomenological implications of reflecting and constructing experiences of the world. Cowie’s reading thus posits a politics of the ‘citizen-spectator’: a desiring, knowing, embodied, and socially situated participant in the film experience. Here, documentary’s conjoining of desire and knowledge - its engagement with linked scopophilic and epistemophilic drives - marks out its distinctiveness as a filmic mode. Usefully, Cowie outlines a broadly applicable documentary impulse that isn’t limited to recent practices, nor even just to film, but that
implicates wide-ranging phenomena that unleash ‘the pleasure of the specular as access to knowledge’ (p15): the grand tour, the circus, the world’s fair.

Drawing on over ten years of research, Cowie’s book interweaves several threads relating to documentary as discursive practice and filmic experience. Her first chapter looks at documentary as a storytelling mode, asserting that fiction and nonfiction are ‘not simple opposites’ but might, still, be seen to circulate in distinctive ways. Meditating on what Kees Bakker and others have called the documentary ‘contract’ between producers and consumers, documentary becomes something more than fiction dressed up as truth; though ‘never an ontological fact’, documentary asserts the relevance of its reality inscriptions via its thorough ‘polemical assault on the nondocumentary’ (p45). The second chapter revisits documentary’s watershed years in the 1930s and, as does Kahana, homes in on the role of voice in 1930s documentary in addressing and encapsulating the vagaries of quotidian experience. Cowie’s reading, however, stresses the subversive influences of the European avant-garde, where documentary voice and aesthetics can be seen introducing the possibility of dissensus, rupturing social fixities and disturbing ‘the subjectivizing of objective discourse’ (p59). Ensuing chapters trace the contours of documentary identification, the inscription of trauma though documentary memorialising, and the ‘surreal of reality’ in Jean Rouch’s pioneering ethnographic work, all elucidating how documentary produces sites that speak to the ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ of human experience amidst the phantom displacements and slippages of filmic representation.

Cowie’s final chapter delineates documentary as an elusive yet persistently compelling art form that (re)produces the event as uncanny ‘presence again’. Documentary’s ability to elide temporal and spatial gaps engenders ‘specters of the real’, and Cowie considers questions of time and representation raised, specifically here, by both Derrida and Žižek. Meditating on film and gallery installations ranging from the overlapping images and sounds of Milica Tomeć’s Portrait of My Mother to the textual interweavings of Mary Kelly’s Post-Partum Document, Cowie gestures towards the aporias not only of documentary inscription but of psychoanalysis itself - the blank spaces and silences of history and subjectivity which animate desires towards recovery, towards (re)materialising reality and (re)making presence. Overall, the politics of documentary involve a complex yet distinctive set of strategies, both personal and interpersonal, which bring (as in Kelly’s work) aesthetic engagement together with processes of ‘coming to know’ the world.

Recording Reality, Desiring the Real takes us beyond the contexts, issues, and ‘messages’ of documentary ‘evidence’ to reveal how documentaries construct their realities, work as experiences, function aesthetically and culturally, reflect and engage the world around us. While on the surface Cowie’s commitment to densely theorizing the form might seem at odds with Waugh’s Marxism-inflected (in earlier essays), historical, and frequently anecdotal approach in The Right to Play Oneself, Waugh’s collection once
again reveals documentary as a potent art form: far more heterogeneous, involving, alive, and disruptive than allowed by those who characterise it as sober reflection or pure manipulation of social events. It makes sense, then, that Waugh’s and Cowie’s books appear in Minnesota’s ‘Visible Evidence’ series as volumes 23 and 24, respectively, reminding us that documentary analysis isn’t easily reduced to a single or unified critical framework. Ranging from meditations on Dziga Vertov, Joris Ivens, and Emile de Antonio already published and widely cited elsewhere, to ‘less traveled’ pieces such as 1990’s consideration of documentary performance, ‘Acting to Play Oneself’, Waugh’s prose bridges the divide between wry humour and political seriousness. In this sense his essays perform - and pay homage to - the off-centre, candid, and frequently confrontational views found in the documentaries that he writes about.

Waugh’s essays, framed here with historical and personal notes, are arranged roughly in chronological order of their subject matter rather than of the time they were written, providing a bumpy but always engaging journey through documentary activism that ranges from Kino Pravda in the 1920s, to New Left figures such as de Antonio, to Canada’s Challenge for Change program, queer documentary, Indian activist documentary, and finally to an overview of documentary’s radical legacies. Particularly interesting is the way that Waugh’s work on queer/LGBTQ documentary - which charts the ‘years of famine’ in the 1970s through the robust New Queer productivity of the 1990s - speaks to, and sometimes jars against, the leftwing documentary movements discussed elsewhere in the book. Here, telling tensions which Waugh discerns in issues of sexuality and sexual identity as he returns to de Antonio’s films only hint at what he might have done with ‘queer’ re-readings of Vertov or Ivens.

To paraphrase Bill Nichols, the task - the ever receding horizon, perhaps - of documentary relates to transforming spectacles, sights, sounds, testimonies and other kinds of information into forms of complex knowing, gesturing towards what Nichols calls ‘magnitudes’ beyond the immediate and visible. In documentary, at its best, ‘facts’ become experience. Of course, as I’ve suggested elsewhere, this process of endowing meaning and subjectivity to discrete fragments of filmed reality is a fraught process of negotiation, contestation and, frequently, manipulation. These days, documentary filmmaking can no longer rely on its tacit ‘contract’ with audiences: the public culture of trust built up by documentary from the 1930s through the 1970s increasingly appears to be eroding in the face of digital manipulations and exploitative, empty (to many critics) television reality programming. Still, Waugh suggests that the extent of this social disenchantment is actually ‘less than they claim’ (pxix), while Cowie attests to our ongoing ‘fascination with facts’ (p87). As Waugh sums it up, the ongoing popularity of documentary remains just ‘as interesting as it is precarious’ (pxiii). Documentary criticism continues to encounter areas - as

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in the theoretical implications of documentary animation (‘icon’ crossing ‘index’), for example - that, like postmodernism a couple of decades ago, seem poised to undermine the foundations of the documentary idea, but will likely just advance an ongoing process of critical revision and revitalisation.