'This great mapping of ourselves' – New Documentary Forms Online'
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Chapter for BFI Companion to Documentary
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INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets out to analyse the distinctive documentary forms emerging in

the context of the social web, the environment known as "Web 2.0". There are

some features that online affords that merely continue or intensify already

existing cultural forms and practices. But there are also some forms emerging

that point to major new developments for documentary as the new century gets

into its stride. Media production *platforms* have different affordances that offer

different possible processes of production, different cultural forms and genres,

and different audience or user experience. As a platform, online is a new site

where all kinds of media material including documentary can be uploaded and

potentially seen. In this straightforward sense online offers documentary more

distribution possibilities. However the seemingly revolutionary fact that every

documentary producer can now run his or her *own* Vimeo or You Tube Channel

is only the start of what we argue is significant for documentary form in the

affordances of online. We will show here how the *processes* of documentary

production can change through new forms of collaboration, how the *forms* of

documentary are changing through software design and interactivity, and how

the *user experience* of documentary can change through the new facility for participation offered by the online environment. The Chapter will contextualise these developments by reference to the growth of vernacular media cultures, leading to the recruitment of increasingly interactive audiences co-producing meaning in new modes of participatory documentary production. Although our interest here is in what is distinctively novel we will have recourse to history to emphasise the ways in which new technologies often re energise previously marginal cultural practices.

The Rise and Rise of Vernacular Video

The new potentials for documentary referred to above are all evolving in the context of the unprecedented increase of Vernacular Video. For most of its history documentary has been produced by a privileged cadre of artists, technicians and producers who have used their access to the means of media production to observe and interpret the world on our behalf. However the very category of documentary as a distinct form with distinct traditions (however much we might argue over them) is surely under question when the media ecosystem which constituted this distinction is itself mutating so wildly. In short when the rise of vernacular video is characterized by more hours of 'actuality' footage than we can either measure or imagine then surely the forms of its 'creative treatment' will also change. Online documentary finds its traditions of evidence, argument and rhetoric intermingling with the burgeoning practices of the newly video literate.

Vernacular video is demotic, promiscuous, amateur, fluid, and haptically convenient, technology at hand and in the hand. These material qualities and affordances are important. Its also a set of practices that have come to be characterised by naïve attachments to indexicality, or 'zero degree simulation'. (1).

We derive the idea of vernacular video from Jean Burgess' 2007 doctoral work and subsequent work with Joshua Green on You Tube where where she defines vernacular creativity as 'the wide range of everyday creative practices (from scrapbooking to family photography to the storytelling that forms part of casual chat) practised outside the cultural value systems of either high culture or commercial creative practice'. (2)

This idea of a 'vernacular' form of moving image expression has at least three historical tributaries. As Sorenssen (2008) points out it was an avant garde dream as long ago as 1948 when Alexandre Astruc published his essay calling for the 'camera-stylo', a system of cinema that would have the flexibility of the written word bringing about ..several cinemas just as today there are several literatures, for the cinema, like literature, is not so much a particular art as a language which can express any sphere of thought.' (3) These visions of a film and video culture available to everyone also underpinned radical media access movements in North America, Europe and Australia in the 1970s and 80s.

The second history concerns that of the amateur. The category of the vernacular also has something in common with the practice of amateur film, where the amateur signifies an everyday cultural activity for which one is not paid. Taking up Zimmerman's work on the history of amateur film and using Bourdieu to frame the investigation Buckingham Willet & Pini (2009) have undertaken recent research into amateur video production. Their detailed work concludes that during their survey period (2002 – 2008) categories of the amateur were losing whatever stability they may formerly have evolved and that 'amateur media production is likely to play an increasingly significant role in the future cultural landscape. Studying this phenomenon as it evolves will raise significant new questions about creativity, identity and culture;' (4). This seems to us a drastic understatement in the face of the development of so called 'user generated content' in the 2005 – 2010 period. The category of amateur rested upon a set of settled notions about what constituted the professional. Astruc's 1948 essay was a utopian call for the dissolution of boundaries between amateur and professional. Now that media literacy in the crude sense of basic reading and writing has become so very widespread, in the developed west, his prescription is being lived out. However given that very little online media of any kind actually makes money the vast majority of it must by previous definitions be understood as in some way amateur. In reality of course we find a whole range of ways that online allows users to move along a ramp from viewer, to posting comments, to exchanging material, to uploading material to shooting, editing and producing

actuality based video works as part of an extended online social network which the producer learns to manipulate in order to draw attention to the work.

Finally the online forms of vernacular video also develop from what one of the current authors defined as 'camcorder cultures' of the 1990s (5) and display many of the same characteristics. The grammar of this vernacular is characterised by affect, intimacy, desire and display. Like any demotic it is mercurial, endlessly inventive, driven by the self-replicating memes of web culture. The ubiquity of the video camera in everyday life ensures a fluidity of subject position that film cameras could never sustain. The sense that the video camera can simply be handed back and forth and turned on by whomever facilitates this intimacy. (Indeed Jennifer Fox's project *Flying* makes this basic affordance the starting point for what she argues is a whole new mode of production and communication. (6))

Camcorder Cultures facilitated the rise of artists' first person documentaries such as Sophie Calle's 1992 *No Sex Last Night*, Robert Gibson's *Video Fool for Love* 1996 and Jonathan Caouette's not dissimilar 2003 *Tarnation*. In the case of vernacular video practices miniaturisation and mobility appear to have the effect not of effacing the presence of the film maker (as in the dominant late 20th Century aesthetic of Direct Cinema) but of emphasising it. The vernacular video document is often nothing *but* an inscription of presence within the text. It announces 'I was here' , 'I experienced this', 'I saw that,'. Camcorder culture paved the way for this documentation of embodied presence, 'Everything about

it, the hushed whispering voice over, the incessant to camera close up, the shaking camera movements, the embodied intimacy of the technical process itself appear to reproduce the experiences of the shooting subject. We feel closer to the presence and the process of the film maker. ' (7) This presence has taken on precisely structured forms, has begun to further develop its own grammar online.

So, over the period 1995 – 2005 camcorder culture became part of many people's 'everyday creative practices', (8) part of a cultural vernacular and indeed became a part of mainstream televisual and art house documentary film practice. More space would allow us to trace the ways in which these forms infiltrated the web during this period (9) but it is clear that since the launch of You Tube and the penetrations of broadband we have experienced a sudden, awesome growth of moving image culture online. In the subsequent period we have seen the vernacular forms of video that had developed as part of camcorder culture turbo charged, digitised, and uploaded as phone cams, webcams and hi definition Flip Cams are added to the already highly dispersed tools of image generation and cheap, easy to use editing programmes become part of domestic data apparatus. 52% of all US adults have watched video online with 14% of net users uploading video in 2009 compared to only 8% in 2007. (10)

We argue that this new context for documentary challenges its traditional epistemologies. Where 20th Century documentary depended for its functionality

on an idea of the observer fixing the world with his (sic) camera, this new epistemology is entirely relational. It accepts that all knowledge is situated in particular embodied perspectives, the 'actualities' of online are the symbolic expression of this multi perspectival, relational knowledge. One hundred years ago documentary did not exist – just the beginnings of the distribution of single reel actuality films bringing the wonders of creation to your nearest travelling show or nickelodeon. These fragments were then worked and reworked until in Bill Nichols' words documentary invited us to share the film's interpretation of our shared world, 'Look, the world is like *this,* isn't it ?' . (11) The documentary enjoined us to see things as they were as if there was one way of seeing them that would capture the totality once and for all. Though many documentary film makers and theorists have challenged the common sense of such a claim the world of vernacular video online may finally, and perhaps regrettably, have put paid to the idea that the documentary can be anything but relational, situational and personal. As Michael Renov has put it,' …the VERY IDEA of autobiography reinvents the VERY IDEA of documentary.' (12)

Navigation and Interaction

One of the problems brought about by such a superabundance of actuality based material is navigation, just finding a way to what the viewer wants to see is a problem in itself. The user finds herself increasingly subject to the human machine assemblage of search engines, meta tags and databases where

programme choices are filtered by algorithms and user recommendation. The online media consumer is likely to develop a very high tolerance to fragmented and aleatory media experiences. Thomas Elsaesser (2009) has written a wonderful account of navigating You Tube asking how the traditional forms of narrative organisation hold up in the 'boiling sea of magma' (13) that is You Tube, where our journeys are dominated by 'the workings of contiguity, combinatory and chance.' (14) In the essay he chooses to investigate one video and is lead on a 'rhizomatic' journey circling round sources, forking off into new territories and returning to the same names and themes. This experience he concludes, 'is to find oneself in the presence of strange organisms, pulsing, moving and mutating, depending on the tags one enters or encounters, as You Tube sorts, filters and aggregates the choices I am not even aware of making.' (15)

This beguiling post human description somewhat under emphasises our role in navigation – after all our choices are determined by a powerful mix of affect and epistephilia. We want to know something or we want to feel something; joy, desire, connection. So our search and navigation experience begins with a goal oriented desire but we must be willing to digress and to wander in the hope of a serendipitous encounter. These dynamics are at play in the development of the interactive documentary.

The click driven experience of online media navigation has spawned its own form of documentary based on the user interacting with documentary materials which have been shot and edited by a documentary team following many of the traditional demands of documentary as information, education, or poetry. In the interactive documentary however the material is then assembled in short clips held in a database. The viewer is offered the choice of what order to view the clips in; this choice is made available to the viewer through links. Each clip can be linked to another by its tags, the descriptive words that the database uses to classify the material. So having watched a particular clip the viewer is offered a choice of what to see next based on links between the just viewed segment and others in the database. These links can be structured through content, colour, space, time, character; any number of values. In this emergent form of the documentary the nature of the links programmed into the clip collection and the nature of the interface design become significant new determinants of the documentary experience. The art of documentary rhetoric is being retooled with the techniques of database design.

Miami / Havana: Times Are Changing (2010) for example is a well funded, Arte (France) backed project designed by Upian (Alexandre Brachet) which ran 'live' online from February – June 2010. The project follows the lives and aspirations of twelve young aspirational subjects, six in Havana and six in Miami, of Cuban heritage. Divided by only ninety miles of sea the project seeks to portray the common hopes and fears of younger generation of Cubans and their Miami

counterparts. The user can choose to navigate the two minute clips by timeline, people or topic. The Upian design is brilliantly elegant, making for an easy and attractive user experience. The screen is divided into thumbnail shots with the Miami material above and the Havana material below. The innovation of the timeline creates the sense that the viewer is comparing lives in a diary like chronology across the divide. We are also able to navigate up down and sideways in the media player adapted by Upian for the project in ways that create a very fluid experience. The format here is adapted from a previous Arte/Upian project *Gaza Sderot: Life in Spite of Everything* (2008) which consists in eighty clips uploaded over a three month period from towns just three kilometres apart on either side of the Gaza/Israel border. *Miami/Havana* will also become a full length conventional documentary to be transmitted in Autumn 2010. The overall effects of watching *Miami/Havana* are complex; first of all we are definitely *not* in Elsaesser's 'boiling sea of magma' dependent on contiguity, combination and chance. It is more as if the linear documentary has been re-constructed in space, like a gallery piece where we are free to wander about inside the film, discovering links and resonances. (In this sense the metaphor recalls of course *Welcome to Kuba* (2004) the documentary installation by Kutlug Ataman which did just that – recording he testimonies of residents of the Istanbul district and then mounting them on individual monitors for the viewer to wander through and experience the area as a kind of semi autonomous zone.) *Miami/Havana* is certainly a diverting twenty minute experience, but in terms of documentary traditions it's a curiously static one; that is to say we are impressed by the shared aspirational yearnings

and desires of the subjects on both sides of the divide which delivers a very simplistic humanist solidarity message; we all share common hopes and fears whether capitalist or communist (like the Jew and the Arab of *Gaza/Sderot*). However beyond that the viewer would look in vain for argument or analysis. The astonishing difference in setting between third world Havana and first world Miami is unaddressed, the abstractions of history or policy left untroubled by the documentation of ordinary life. In this *Miami/Havana* merely replicates the absence of analysis in most reality based TV forms. However the appeal to essentalist humanism of these new 'post human' documentary forms is a theme to which we will return below.

Works producing using the Korsakow system for interactive documentary represent a slightly different form and aesthetic. The Korsakow system is an open source software written by Florian Thalhofer. Nina Simoes used it to make *Rehearsing Reality* as part of her doctoral work at the University of London; (2008) the project is an account of the use of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed techniques with the MST **(**Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra**),** Brazil's landless peasant movement. The piece opens with an introductory homepage explaining what she calls the 'docufragmentary' project then a movie window opens giving the context of the MST; at the end of this sequence three windows open beneath the viewer window; we choose. Following Act 1 shows the viewer a group of workers re enacting land seizure, the landlord's agents (as performers) intervene, they hold guns to the heads of the

actors. The watching crowd is chilled, some women start to cry. The frame freezes – we are offered another set of choices. These include reflections on Boal's method by academics and activists as well as in interview with Boal himself. Each section, once chosen, runs for its own length, during which we are not offered the choice to stop or skip. The strands of the work follow the peasant group working through a Boal based exercise, other parts reflect on this process. The experience is moving, interesting, satisfying; though fragmentary it feels thorough and complete. The project succeeds due to the 'meaningfulness' of the associative links offered to the viewer combined with the power of each individual clip. We are offered a combination of linearity and interactivity that balances. Although we are not sure what kind of choices are being offered to the viewer there is still satisfaction to found in the intriguing journey that we discover for ourselves.

The Korsakow software allows the author/producer to programme links into video clips, so that at the end of each clip thumbnail choices are offered that are called up by the relationship between their tags and the tags of the previous clip. The user follows a variety of navigational paths which are determined through the associative links programmed into the database by the author. Clips are tagged with text strings of words; whilst viewing one clip the system searches for associated key words. So the art in the overall construction is in writing the key words and tags that provide interesting, useful, pleasing juxtapositions. The art of montage becomes the art of database authoring. (16)

Thalhofer's own work using the system he has written tends more toward the poetic and the subjective; however his works arguably have a common thread of recognisably documentary investigation, *What is life like in Bavaria? 54 little stories on what it is like to grow up in a small town ?* (*Kleine We*lt 1997), (17) *What is life like being drunk? A research on the phenomenon of alcohol.* (*Korsakow Syndrom* 2000) (18) , *What is life like in the ghetto?* (*13terStock* 2005) (19) *What is life like in shopping heaven?* (*13terShop 2006*) (20) The works have a very strong aesthetic – they are whimsical, subversive, amusing, critical. Presenting at the *Documentary Now* conference in London in January 2010 Thalhofer was confronted by a familiar set of critical responses from documentarians. Wasn't he just abdicating control? What did he really have to say about his subjects? Why wouldn't he let the audience just sit back and relax, what is this compulsion to make us interact? His defence is primarily aesthetic rather than theoretical or critical,

The world is a cloud that is constantly changing. One cannot fully grasp it, because as long as one is part of this world one cannot view its exterior to understand its shape. Theoretically you could examine all of the cloud's molecules. However, this would require a lot of time. Time during which the world would change again. One would have to freeze the world to watch the molecules in peace in order to understand the world this way. But that is not possible either. The whole world is much, much too large. One could try to freeze and understand smaller sections. And I think this is what we are doing

here. We are trying to freeze small sections of the world in order to understand it. (21)

The aesthetic of the network has been the object of critical attention and excitement ever since hypertext methods of writing first made their appearance twenty years ago. Thalhofer's critics are essentially responding to the challenge at the heart of hypertext studies – *how can we evaluate a text that never reads the same way twice*? This is a fundamental question that haunts the relationship between the linear media forms (e.g. the 19th Century Novel or the Classical Hollywood Film) and the database. On one hand it produces anxiety about the disappearance of authority and meaning, and on the other a celebration of the same qualities as answering the Post Structuralist prescription for textual liberation and the death of the author. In this sense the documentary field is absorbing the lessons of New Media Studies apparent in e.g. Landow, Moulthrop, Aarseth, Reiser & Zapp. At the outset of these studies great excitement was generated at the apparent homologies between post structural literary theory, especially Foucault and Derrida, and their apparent literary correlatives in hypertext experiment. We now find some similar kinds of writing in critical responses to the interactive documentary,

In particular the database model facilitates selection and recombination of 'documents' thereby offering a mode of documentary that more closely resembles an archive which in Foucault's terms 'defines at the onset the

system of its enunciability' and 'causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated.'(22)

A few lines later Derrida's archive fever makes an appearance in support of the argument that somehow digital technology of itself produces 'polyvocal, unstable, and contested meanings.' This an easy form of technological determinism that makes the homologies between post structuralism and technological affordance the basis for an aesthetic and political critique,

   …digitality, then, implies an opening to ways of conceiving one's place in the world that is not constrained to the linearity of most analogue formats and has the potential to challenge the historical legacies that have deployed such technologies as they have intersected with colonialism, racism, ethnocentricsm, sexism, class oppression, homophobia, religious fundamentalism and war. (23)

Whilst, as we have argued above, polyvocality and relationality do seem to us be important features of the Web 2.0 ecosystem for documentary this kind of hyperbolic enthusiasm for the political potential of technology is questionable to say the least. New Media practices are about experience design, where creating coherence from technologically afforded fragmentation is the key challenge. From the points of view of the producer of interactive documentaries the challenge is to design interfaces and databases that offer a meaningful user

journey for their viewers. This is certainly a different mode of authorship where the production team have to work with their imagined users in order for the text to become meaningful, to a degree therefore authorship can be said to be distributed and meaning co produced. However this is more often than not a process of programming constraint and direction into the database rather than infinite polyvocality. As ever this is an editorial process in which some voices/ideas get silenced whilst others are given a platform. The examples discussed above really point up that yes the interactive documentary may afford polyvocality but it is still editorial control, rigourous work with metadata, imagination, and a grasp of database aesthetics that creates meaningful documentary experiences. Without these qualities, far from challenging 'racism, ethnocentricsm, sexism, class oppression, homophobia ' we are merely left back in Elsaesser's magma.

4 The Poetics of Collaboration And Participation

The generation of web technology known as Web 2.0 is sometimes called the 'social web' for its characteristics of participation, dialogue and sharing. As documentary producers begin to take advantage of these affordances of the network we are beginning to see the emergence of a new poetics of collaboration and participation.

As in the case of vernacular video, discussed earlier, the cultural practices we

see emerging within so-called 'new media' are not without precedent. Henry Jenkins argues that, 'You Tube may represent the epicentre of today's participatory culture, but it doesn't represent the origin point for any of the cultural practices people associate with it.' (24) Typically, 'new media' reconfigure media histories giving sudden prominence to forms previously considered marginal. There has always been the potential for collaboration and participation within social documentary. After all the documentary project is based on a relationship between the documentary maker and the human subject (or perhaps, object). While making *Nanook of the North (1922)* Robert Flaherty went to great lengths so that the rushes could be processed on location. 'It has always been most important for me to see the rushes' he said in an interview in 1950, 'but another reason for developing the film in the North was to project it to the Eskimos so that they would accept and understand what I was doing and work together with me as partners.' (25) Flaherty's partnership however ended with the shoot, and conventional documentary practice has generally followed this pattern. The producers needs for access leads to a carefully negotiated arrangement around filming, but the human subjects have no involvement or leverage on what meaning is made from the content after the rushes have been *captured*. 'This is the world as *I* see it', says the documentary maker, and that auteur position has been strictly guarded, with some noteworthy exceptions.

The French ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch saw documentary as a collaborative undertaking between producer and subjects and, from the 1950s,

expressed a post-colonial attitude by working in collaboration with participants in a series of films in West Africa in a process he called 'shared anthropology'.(26) The pioneering American artist Wendy Clarke has been exploring the therapeutic potential of video since the 1970s, creating contexts for people to express themselves to camera. As well as her epic *Love Tapes* project for which, since the late 1970s, over 800 people have now recorded short video statements, other key projects have been within disenfranchised communities – prisoners, teens, AIDS patients. In the UK, precedents derive from Community Media and Access TV, which sought to bring unheard voices into media – in the co-creative practices of the BBC's camcorder projects *Video Diaries* and *Video Nation,* for instance. The latter was itself inspired by and to an extent modeled on an earlier collaborative 'documentary' experiment - *Mass Observation*, the 'anthropology of ourselves' for which diary writers around Britain recorded everyday life from 1937. (27)Now the architecture and culture of the web bring the potentialities of participation and collaboration for documentary centre stage.

If we look at online documentary today we can find examples of collaborative activity within pre-production and production – in the research stage and in video production – with many projects involving aspects of both. Projects opening up the research phase include the BBC's *Virtual Revolution* and Brett Gaylor / National Film Board of Canada's *rip!: A Remix Manifesto*. While the major outputs of both have been conventional linear documentaries - the BBC's four part series looking at 'how the web is changing our lives', *rip!: A Remix*

Manifesto, a feature documentary, investigated 'how culture builds upon culture in the information age'. In both cases the producers have employed crowd-sourcing to draw in ideas for stories, interviewees, content, and in the case of the BBC project, the series title. Both projects deal with debates in digital culture and the producers have, one could say wisely, have looked to harness the opinions and expertise of the online community through social media platforms – blogs, You Tube, facebook, twitter.

On the *Virtual Revolution* blog, series presenter Aleks Krotowski shared developments and emerging plans, and hosted debate, so that the project scope was effectively user-tested by the some of most discerning potential viewers. Meanwhile, the producers pushed the boundaries of television practice by sharing rushes from interviewees with web luminaries including Howard Rheingold and Tim Berners Lee with the audience online in advance of the series for download and reuse, under a form of creative commons license. In the production of *rip! : A Remix Manifesto*, people were able to both access and contribute content through opensourcecinema.org, a video remix community established by Brett Gaylor, and some contributed sequences made it into the finished film – identified by on-screen graphics.

The strategies of participation that were employed for *Virtual Revolution* and *rip! A Remix Manifesto* – user-testing ideas, sharing project scopes for comment and critique, crowd-sourcing research material and content – harness the affordances of social media platforms to enable a dialogic process of research and

development. *rip!* in particular uses social media research methods to discuss remix culture – a form which has come of age in social media. In the celebrated 2009 You Tube hit *ThruYOU,* for instance, the Israeli musician and composer known as Kutiman worked with eclectic samples of videos made by You Tube musicians. By layering and interweaving the music tracks and picture cutting playfully and rhythmically he created unique afro-beat, funk, and reggae mixes. While You Tube recordings are not, formally speaking, offered for reuse under a Creative Commons license, Kutiman treated them as if they were, with the interface design on his website displaying the YouTube link and credit for each recording as the clip plays. (28) *ThruYOU* thus expresses an open-source aesthetic, and enacts a collaborative relationship between Kutiman and his co-creators despite the absence of an overt participatory interaction. 'I had a great time searching for you and working with you', says Kutiman in a piece to camera on the final track of *ThruYOU*, thanking the musicians who 'took part' - this virtual creative community he conjured out of search terms.

At the meeting of participatory culture and documentary we are thus seeing the emergence of new arrangements within the production process and innovation in documentary form. Projects offer participants varying degrees and modes of editorial influence and control. Where participation is part of the process we can see the networking of aspects of linear production, as in the open research processes described above, and forms of distributed authorship whereby participants produce modules within a non-linear project. Where the documentary

experience is reconfigured as a user-journey through non-linear content, we would argue that the computer becomes a further non-human participant in the production of meaning. These emerging practices can all be seen as forms of co-creation in which documentary storytelling is shaped not by an 'auteur' or by a collective but within a network of relationships.

Clay Shirky provided one of the first popular commentaries on the collaborative culture of the web in his 2008 book *Here Comes Everybody*. His account covered major emerging social media platforms Wikipedia and Flickr, small, short-lived groups like flash mobs, and large, long-term involvements like the story of the development of Linux open source software. As Shirky describes it, there is no recipe for success in a collaborative project,

> every working system is a mix of social and technological factors', yet each project must have 'a successful fusion of a plausible promise, an effective tool, and an acceptable bargain with the users. The promise is the basic "why?" for anyone to join or contribute to a group. The tool helps with the "how" – how will the difficulties of coordination be overcome… And the bargain sets the rules of the road: if you are interested in the promise… what can you expect, and what can be expected from you? (29)

While the documentary projects under discussion here are not necessarily collaborative ventures across the whole production process, the 'Promise, Tool,

Bargain' model is relevant to particular aspects of production. In a participatory interaction, Shirky notes, the terms of the bargain will differ widely, but what matters is the transparency of the arrangement. This can be a challenge for the conventionally closed world of documentary production. On *Virtual Revolution*, for instance, the multiplatform producer Dan Gluckman, saw making the rushes available for reuse as a major part of the offer to the online users, but wasn't able to make that offer at the start, as negotiations with BBC lawyers over the terms of release of the rushes took a long time to work through. (30)

Beyond the pre-production phase, the opening up of video content production within the online network is a significant and growing trend. Participants can be seen playing a variety of roles in what becomes a process of co-creation. In the case of the *Global Lives* project this was an effective means to crowd-source production effort in distributed locations. This American initiative set out to, 'collaboratively build a video library of human life experience that reshapes how we as both producers and viewers conceive of cultures, nations and people outside of our own communities.' (31) To make this happen the producers recruited more than 500 volunteers who, between them, followed an agreed template to record twentyfour hours in the everyday life of ten individuals selected to reflect global demographics so that six out of the ten are Asian, for example. Through this major distributed collective effort ten twentyfour hour films were successfully co-created and then brought together as an immersive installation in a San Francisco gallery in Spring/Summer 2010, with an online

content archive planned. The documentary material as described by the producers, is in the tradition of direct cinema, with, 'no narrative other than that which is found in the composition of everyday life…we invite audiences to confer close attention onto other worlds, and simultaneously reflect upon their own.'

While the volunteer filmmakers who made *Global Lives* worked in a direct cinema style that effaced their individual perspectives, the call to action for *The Message,* the first You Tube collaborative piece to gain substantial attention and homepage promotion, invited participants to express a strong point of view. The anonymous creator of *The Message*, MadV was, significantly, already a star on You Tube, popular for illusions, performed in a Guy Fawkes mask. Then he saw the montage video *Youtubers* by Mike B, which 'triggered the thought that maybe a deliberate collaboration (as opposed to an edit of pre-existing clips) could be possible – with moving effect.' (32)

In Autumn 2006, Mad V posted a brief video showing the words 'One World' written on his hand, and offered an invitation, 'to make a stand, make a statement, make a difference. Be part of something. Post your response now'. He received over 2,000 replies - the highest number registered on YouTube at that time. The piece he created from those vernacular video responses, *The Message*, is a four minute montage of webcam recordings of mostly teens and twenty -somethings, showing their own written notes and slogans, accompanied by a track by Mugwai. 'Respect, Compassion, Integrity, Honor, Altruism...' they

read, in an outpouring of yearning for positive values which culminates in ideas around human connectedness – 'Together as one, United as One, We're all in this Together... One World.' (33)

The Message can be seen as a breakthrough in the development of the *Collab* form on You Tube. It was described in *Wired Magazine* as a 'curious mongrel form...a new language of video', (34) and inspired a host of imitators. Most recently, in 2010, the Collab has made a decisive move from cultural margins to mainstream. Filmmakers Ridley Scott and Kevin Macdonald have partnered with You Tube and the Sundance Institute for a 'historic global experiment to create a user-generated feature shot in a single day.' (35)

Through a multi-versioned promo available in twenty languages they have invited You Tubers around the world to record on July 24 2010 for *Life in a Day*, a portrait of twentyfour hours on earth. Macdonald will cut selected contributions into a feature documentary to premiere at the Sundance Festival and on You Tube in January 2011. The promise to participants is that those featured will receive a credit with twenty selected to fly to the USA and join Macdonald at the premiere.

Life in a Day is the latest in a spate of projects aspiring to capture life on earth which have been shaped by the affordances of digital video and participation. These include the Global Lives project discussed above, Yann Arthus Bertrand's

6 Billion Others, for which he and his team travelled the world shooting over 5,000 interviews, with gallery visitors invited to add their contribution at the touring exhibition. In what is fast becoming a cliché of online documentary, the web interface of *6 Billion Others* presents its myriad of micro portraits as a mosaic, a screen full of faces which seems to attempt a literal reflection of the multitude, the diversity of human life.

'I want to attempt to log mankind', says Bob Geldof in a video introduction to the forthcoming *Dictionary of Mankind* project, expected to launch later in 2010

'...We've just simply arrived at a key point in human history at the beginning of the 21st Century where new technology has allowed us to involve everyone of this great mapping of ourselves…We need every single human being that's alive on the planet if we intend to map all of mankind, and so that means you… come onto the site and tell us about yourself, tell us about your family, tell us about your histories and be part of this massive experiment that we all want to create together.' (36)

Like the work of Upian discussed earlier the projects above (*Dictionary of Mankind, Global Lives, 6 Billion Others*) have a thoroughgoing humanism at their heart. They recruit the potential viewer to understand him or herself as a common part of a common humanity 'Together as one, United as One, We're all in this Together... One World'. As Geldof notes above, the affordances of the web have made a different and exciting kind of global consciousness available as

those with broadband access are able to create everyday symbolic resources with others from around the world. However his messianic tones should remind the documentary scholar of an earlier debate about documentary photography occasioned by the great *Family of Man* documentary photography exhibition held in Paris in 1955. Where then photography was being celebrated as the medium that could capture humanity and reveal universality, now it is 'new media' technologies that are being cast in that role. But the critique of the humanistic project, articulated by Roland Barthes at the time of the Paris exhibition, is pertinent for these contemporary projects,

'This myth of the human 'condition' rests on a very old mystification, which always consists in placing Nature at the bottom of History. Any classic humanism postulates that in scratching the history of men a little, the relativity of their institutions or the superficial diversity of their skins (but why not ask the parents of Emmet Till, the young Negro assassinated by the Whites what they think of The Great Family of Man?), one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature. Progressive humanism, on the contrary, must always remember to reverse the terms of this very old imposture, constantly to scour nature, its 'laws' and its 'limits' in order to discover History there, and at last to establish Nature itself as historical.' (37)

Barthes insight should offer us some critical purchase on these Borgesian attempts to map all of humanity. His critique reminds us that common humanity

(as 'nature') is an historical construct determined through discursive

assemblages and therefore through power. In celebrating our connectedness we

should also remember the massive inequalities of wealth, gender and race that

celebrations of 'one world-ism' ignore. It is not too hard to go one step further and

understand this upsurge in globalising documentary projects as the inevitable

corollary of a globalized economy driven by the web.

While sitting on non-linear platforms, in formal terms, *Global Lives, The*

Message, Life in a Day and even *ThuYOU* provide types of linear viewing

experience, with beginnings, middles and ends. But producers are increasingly

looking to non-linear forms to express the polyvocal nature of participatory

content, exploring curatorial strategies that allow the viewer to navigate their own

documentary experience through databased content, like the interactive

documentaries discussed earlier.

An attitude to database as a creative opportunity for participatory documentary is

core to the realisation of *Mapping Main Street*, a collaborative project developed

as a response to American politicians invoking Main Street to stand for 'ordinary

America' during the 2009 election campaign. Main Street has long been a

contested space, 'a shifting metaphor for what constitutes traditional American

values and the 'average' American experience'. (38) *Mapping Main Street* was

designed to reflect the diverse realities of Main Street America, unsettle

assumptions, and foster dialogue in and about community life. In other words, the

work is not intended to present or investigate a particular view but to provide a stage for debate around the idea of Main Street.

The four creators of Mapping Main Street are a transdisciplinary team, their combined skills spanning old and new media. Kara Oehler and Anne Heppermann are public radio producers, multimedia journalists and sound artists. Jesse Shapins is an urban media artist and theorist. James Burns, information architect and data engine developer of the Mapping Main Street website is an economist, photographer and mathematician. They've been exploring the potential of participatory non-linear documentary for some years. Shapins was one of the creators of *Yellow Arrow*, a hugely successful global collaborative public art project, started in 2004. Oehler and Shapins first worked together on the *Yellow Arrow* offshoot *Capitol of Punk*, a non-linear documentary mapping Washington's music scene. Shapins articulates the role of the producer in these projects as 'leading and designing frameworks that do have very specific constraints and that have very specific thematic and geographic focuses that then create a context for many different voices to come in.' (39)

Mapping Main Street kicked off in May 2009 with the team taking a 12,000 mile journey across the country to visit Main Streets and gather material. The project was then promoted to the team's networks and, through a National Public Radio series, to the wider public. Audio stories with stills made by the team act as seed content to inspire and encourage contributions to be posted on Flickr or Vimeo.

These take the form of micro documentaries or slide shows with music or voice over. These are drawn in to the *Mapping Main Street* website using public data feeds often known as APIs (Application Programming Interfaces). The website is structured to allow content to be experienced as a lean back experience, on-demand, through generative paths offered as journeys across a map, or through alliterative themes - in an approach the producers have called 'algorithmic curation'. Thus a search for the city of Buffalo brings up a brief documentary about a drag club on Main Street which prompts another short film about the micro-brewery tradition in the city, followed by another on public art on Buffalo's Main Street. Alternatively, the 'Path' option takes one on a content journey away from the city. As options are taken, "related routes" are generated based on metadata in the content currently on view for example Architecture, Children, Night.

The user experience is one of shifting frames, modalities and identifications, as one makes a unique journey through modules of content by diverse authors. (There are around 500 items of content at the time of writing, with new contributions still coming in.) For the producers of Mapping Main Street, the affordances of the digital space assist the realisation of a polyvocal aesthetic, 'What the database enables in the context of public media arts is open-ended, indeterminacy. Instead of simply representing a singular thesis, the database allows for multiplicity… a framework that brings together multiple voices and multiple media formats. ' (40)

As information architecture meets participatory content we can thus begin to see the emergence of 21st century documentary forms which are founded in a poetics of the database. This creative territory is one which is being explored by a number of digital media artists interested in factual storytelling, among them the celebrated American information architect, Jonathan Harris. 'One thing we have in common is the desire to express ourselves…' Harris has said, 'in the last few years a lot of those individual acts of self-expression have been moving onto the internet, as that happens people have been leaving behind footprints…I write computer programmes that study very large sets of these footprints.' (41)

Harris became well known for works including *We Feel Fine* (2006), *I Want you to Want Me* (2008), (both created with Sep Kamvar), and *Universe* (2007), projects which apply a generative treatment to the participatory content contained in public datasets. In the case of *We Feel Fine* he created a live portrait of human emotion by searching newly posted blog entries for the words 'I Feel' or 'I am Feeling', offering these for exploration by visualizing data feeds based on these terms through a series of playful interfaces. *I Want You To Want Me* took a similar approach to the content people posted on dating web sites. These engaging, innovative works fuse art and documentary, micro and macro perspectives, spectacle and intimacy, offering a 21st century reinterpretation of what the 'creative treatment of actuality' might entail. (42)

More recently Harris has been moving into creative territory and working with

types of content (stills, video) that can be identified more easily in relation to

histories of documentary practice. For *The Whale Hunt* (2007) he explored a

classic documentary theme. During nine days living with an Inupiat Eskimo family

in Barrow, Alaska, he documented the hunt, from preparation to the kill, in a

sequence of 3,214 photographs, taken at five-minute intervals, and more often in

moments of intensity. His purpose was; 'to experiment with a new interface for

human storytelling', and he used the stills to create an open interactive work that

each viewer would experience and understand uniquely. Harris also describes

the project as an opportunity for him to reflect on the role of the computer as co-

creator in his creative output,

'Much effort is spent making computers understand what it's like to be human

(through data mining and artificial intelligence), but rarely do humans try to see

things from a computer's perspective. I was interested in reaching some degree

of empathy with the computer, a constant thankless helper in my work.' (43)

For his most recent work, *The Sputnik Observatory* (2009). Harris has applied

'algorithmic curation' to a substantial video archive of interviews with leading

thinkers on 'topics and ideas that may seem fringe and even heretical to the

mainstream world…Sputnik is dedicated to bringing these crucial ideas from the

fringes of thought out into the limelight, so that the world can begin to understand

them.' (44) In *The Sputnik Observatory* Harris locates the participatory

involvement as an activity in response to the archive, which he allows the user to

experience through an interactive browsing experience or through curated paths. In addition to taking these offered routes the committed user / viewer can, by becoming a project member, add their own paths through the content as well as leaving comments or contributions in the form of text, audio or video. He thus invites the user into a collaborative relationship which opens up the curatorial perspective.

In these projects we can see the emergence of a variety of participatory and collaborative forms that draw upon histories of documentary and documentary arts practices, as well as upon the affordances of networked social media. In *Mapping Main Street, The Whale Hunt, The Sputnik Observatory* the producers employ non-linear structures designed to reflect polyvocal content and provide a satisfying though open-ended interactive experience.

In these co-creative practices the documentary project is not an expedition into the field to capture and bring back content/data, instead it becomes a co-creative venture in the emergence of meaning. This collaborative practice presents a challenge to the observational with its social scientific perspective, and to the totalising vision of the auteur. It offers instead forms of insight created by participant observers and an open text. The role of the artist/producer in these collaborations remains central – but shifts towards a curatorial position, a role of setting up rule sets, boundaried digital processes that establish the conditions of emergence. The intervention of the artist/producer in making something

meaningful remains central, while the post-human contribution of the computer injects a dimension which is truly new for documentary. Models like these suggest ways in which everyday life as well as excessive experiences can be represented through polyvocal hypertexts.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has tried to map what seem to us to be the significant new opportunities emerging from documentary's integration into the Web 2.0 online environment. These developments raise a number of significant critical debates for 21st century documentary studies which researchers will develop in the future.

The field has had a stubborn attachment to questions of the real and its representation. As documentary practice becomes absorbed in the fields of media virtuality our critical understandings will change. Clearly the evidence above suggests we will have to spend a lot more time thinking about what constitutes an open text as documentary develops through the affordances of web 2.0 which facilitate linking, association, user generated content and mash up. Secondly, that documentary studies will be forced into a shift toward the post human. From the point at which the chemistry of film became the electronic signal of video we have been moving toward the point where all media becomes data. All our data experiences are now subject to the agency of the human machine assemblage, or as Elsaesser has it 'strange organisms, pulsing, moving

and mutating, depending on the tags one enters or encounters'. (15), and as

Jonathan Harris acknowledges determined in part by 'the computer, a constant

thankless helper in my work.' (43) Not only does this context shift documentary

epistemology, the new conditions of networked media also reconfigure our

understandings of documentary's public and political purpose.

Against this general critical background there are at least two sets of new and

specific ideas that emerge from our thinking in this chapter. The first is that in

beginning to define a poetics of the database that works for documentary we will

need to consider the polarities that we have identified between the highly specific

and everyday utterance of the vernacular on one hand and the totalising map on

the other. We have observed the profusion of autobiographic and everyday

particularity in the rise of vernacular video. One of the things that appears to

occur when documentary makers enter this domain is the revival of global

humanism in the idea that somehow it is possible to represent *everyone and*

everything through the infinite network architecture of the web. This is an

understandable response to the potential of the network in affording distributed

authorship. However, in terms of documentary traditions we would argue that this

is a redundant move. Attempts to say everything about everyone finish up saying

nothing about anything. Borges map ends up tattered and useless in the desert.

The key for us is in the idea of 'staging a conversation'; the documentary

producer working online with Web 2.0 is called upon to 'stage a conversation',

with a user community, with research subjects, with with participants, co producers and audiences. The question for the documentary producer is how do we stage that conversation ? How do we design the stage ? Do our co producers even know the stage is there in the massively long tail of online media abundance ? Do they understand its terms of entry ? What are the pre existing discursive formations that determine a public's attitude to the stage in the first place ? What are the constraints on our action once on this stage ? What kinds of utterance and linkage does the stage afford ? These are all questions of structure and rhetoric. Questions that return responsibility to the authorship team and in turn re confer the possibility of intervention and argument.

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