THE INTELLECT HANDBOOK OF

Documentary

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Chapter 1
Handbook of Documentary

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What does it mean to study documentary in the current moment? On the one hand, there is a certain celebratory sense of a 'golden age' of documentary, reflecting both mainstream cinema successes and the proliferation of forms of documentary content across digital platforms and streaming services. In many respects, documentary media is more visible, and it is certainly more accessible than it has historically been. Of course, whether and how documentary is cutting through and finding an audience remains an open question. And yet, despite this apparent success we might wonder whether documentary *as an idea* is exhausted. What sense does it make to speak of an increasingly diverse body of work as 'documentary' today? In 2001, the journal *Studies in Documentary Film* was launched with only a slight hesitation over the inclusion of 'film' in its title. In the twenty-plus years of its existence to date, the journal has recorded a profound change in the technologies of non-fiction media production and a seismic shift in thinking about documentary as a media practice that engages realities in various ways. And yet, there is a sense that the questions at the heart of the discipline still matter. Indeed, as many of the contributions to this *Handbook* demonstrate, they matter more than ever. Not only that, but the field of documentary studies has much to offer those seeking to engage contemporary debates about shifting relations between reality, media practices and society.

This collection is testament to the richness of contemporary documentary studies, as well as to its growing interdisciplinarity and maturity. As a scholarly endeavour influenced by film studies, the study of documentary has been strongly shaped by a concern with matters of textuality, with form, aesthetics and rhetoric being key (Corner 2008). While this strand of enquiry remains vibrant, the current volume highlights the growing influence of sociologically and politically oriented scholarship as well as work grounded in empirical methods of inquiry. Contemporary documentary

studies are increasingly interdisciplinary, drawing on sociology, cultural and media studies, media history, political communication, production, audience and digital media studies, design, art practice and many other disciplines. We note, too, that the relationship between scholarly engagement and academically oriented documentary making remains vibrant, providing methodological depth. The questions with which scholars are engaged are revealing of several contemporary shifts, but there are also critical lines of continuity in documentary scholarship. We have sought to highlight both continuity and change and the value of engaging contemporary challenges with and through documentary practice and scholarship. In working with the contributors to this volume, we have sought to foster dialogue between scholars working on documentary in different contexts. This collaborative spirit is captured in the many references to chapters elsewhere in the collection.

The current moment, as many of the contributors to this volume note, is characterized by a sense of epistemic and democratic crisis. Informational excess coupled with declining trust in the 'discourses of sobriety' with which documentary has been historically aligned brings new questions to the fore, re-animating lines of enquiry: how do documentary makers and audiences navigate uncertain spaces between fact and fiction? How do forms of documentary media ontologically, aesthetically and affectively position audiences as witnesses to injustice? What impacts do documentaries seek to produce within different social and political contexts? It is perhaps unsurprising that in the current moment of epistemic uncertainty, documentary media is increasingly finding ways into the media mainstream. Of course, popularity has always been something of a double-edged sword. The extent to which contemporary offerings on streaming platforms can be located within what John Corner (2002) has described as a 'post-documentary' culture is taken up across a number of chapters in this collection. What we can say, however, is that audiences are keen to engage realities despite uncertainties about what is real and how we might begin to know and represent it.

As founding editor (Williams) and current co-editor (Nash, with Craig Hight) of the journal *Studies in Documentary Film*, we have had the privilege of charting the evolution of the field of documentary studies. The current volume reflects the key debates and transitions that we have seen emerging in the journal since its launch in 2001. We have sought to bring together the work of talented emerging scholars and established researchers in the field and to continue the very productive dialogue between practitioners and those with a more conceptual and/or theoretical orientation. We are conscious that documentary studies has been diminished by the relative lack of attention paid to documentary traditions beyond the global north. While we see evidence that documentary scholarship is increasingly geographically and culturally inclusive, we are very aware that much more work in this vein is needed. We have made attempts to capture the breadth of contemporary scholarship in collating this collection, although we remain conscious that we have done so only to a limited extent. *The Handbook of Documentary* engages a series of key themes and debates (which we will explore in more depth below), exploring documentary as relational, as practice, as performance

and as representation. It aims to highlight the diverse perspectives and methods that are being applied in the study of contemporary documentary and make connections with debates in adjacent fields.

The past couple of years has seen the loss of two key figures in documentary studies: Brian Winston and Patty Zimmermann. Brian's field-defining work on the Griersonian documentary (Winston 1995) and his passion for and commitment to ethical collaboration in the creation and use of documentary work across platforms (see e.g. Winston et al. 2017) have had a tremendous impact. We are pleased to be able to include here a work in progress titled 'Tilting at Windmills' that Brian was writing around the time of his death. It evidences both his critical orientation and his enthusiasm for documentary possibilities. We were incredibly saddened by the unexpected death of Patty Zimmermann during the production of this volume. Patty was a giant in the field of documentary studies, contributing to our understanding of participatory, feminist and environmental media, as well as alternative and independent media, digital art and the possibilities that digital technologies afford for collaborative, small-scale political interventions. Her contribution to this volume (with Dale Hudson and Claudia Costa Pederson) continues her exploration of emerging media technologies and the relationality of documentary praxis. We dedicate this collection to Brian and Patty, in celebration of their enthusiasm for documentary media in all its diversity and for their generosity in nurturing many generations of scholars.

Where and what is documentary (in an age of epistemic uncertainty)?

> *Documentary is massive (in grosses, scale of product, and length of work), very small (a meme, a tweet) and stripped to its core. Whatever is it for? Documentary studies is consolidated while ever-more scattered as we professionals try to make sense of reality-based representations while looking at a massive body of disparate work and forms, from investigative podcasts to live streams of Black death.* Alexandra Juhasz (this volume)

What is documentary today? As Alexandra Juhasz suggests in her contribution to this volume, documentary is at once everywhere and everything and, potentially, in need of new approaches if we are to address contemporary challenges. The singularity of the term 'documentary' seems to both embrace and elide the very many ways in which we record, share and make sense of audio-visual realities.

Across its long history, documentary has found a degree of identity in a series of claims about the relationship between the (realist) image and reality. Nichols' (1991: 32–42) conceptualization of documentary as an argument about the historical world best captures this reassuring idea that has served as a foundation for the discipline. Of course, such reassurance has always come at the cost of problematizing certain strands of work that, on the face of it, sit uneasily with this sober, realist project. As John Corner argues in his contribution to this volume, there was always something fascinatingly

awkward about the diverse ways in which different kinds of documentary output sought to connect (to varying degrees) with reality, truthfulness and public knowledge. In reflecting on five decades of documentary scholarship, he notes the important role played by those media forms that occupy the borderlands – drama-documentary and documentary-drama, popular reality formats that deploy often extensive staging in both pre- and post-production and forms of promotional work – for revealing the possibilities of various 'realisms' for the documentary project. He sees in the present moment a relative stability relating to documentary as a concept, reflecting a growing recognition of the complexities of the relationship between documentary media and reality.

The chapters that open this *Handbook* reconsider questions of 'definition' motivated less by a concern with matters of ideology and illusion, and more by reflection on contemporary epistemic uncertainties. As Michael Renov writes in his contribution to this collection, 'I would identify this as a moment of epistemic crisis' in which the critical question is 'what do we know and how do we know it?' Of course, he cautions, we must be wary of overstating the novelty of this epistemic condition. Indeed, there is no shortage of documentary practice that invites reflection on the constructed-ness of any realist media project. Renov takes this reflection as a starting point for revisiting questions of mediation. He takes up the notion of the *dispositif* as 'trial balloon' for thinking about documentary film as a 'special sort of discursive construct' in the context of epistemic crisis. Disposition, he argues, brings to the fore the social relations within which documentary discourses emerge. Focusing on, but going beyond, matters of textuality, the notion of a 'documentary disposition' asks us to consider the set of social relations in which documentary creation and consumption is embedded. There are relationships between a filmmaker and her subjects (historical subject matter and/or participants) and those between a filmmaker and her audiences. These interdependent relationships define documentary along the lines of ethics and attitude.

Documentary as praxis can also be taken up in response to the epistemic shifts that characterize our so-called 'post-truth' culture. This is the approach considered by Juhasz who asks provocatively 'what is the realist image today? Not a "documentary"'. The realist image may no longer compel by virtue of its indexicality, but it nevertheless remains 'the bounty, the *raison d'être* of the internet'. Amid a crisis of authenticity, Juhasz advocates a turn to other creative traditions with more productive relations to the concept of 'truth'. Developing the concept of fake news poetry workshops, she argues for a 'post-documentary' method that prioritizes 'imagination, affect, situatedness, inter-connectedness, knowledge, aesthetics', challenging expectations of documentary as narrative, and truth as the antithesis of fake. Juhasz seeks a way of 'living differently' with media, evoking documentary's association with the poetic as a form of realist praxis that responds to epistemic uncertainty by foregrounding subjectivity, emotion and relationships. Juhasz's chapter contributes to a renewed reflection on realisms in documentary practice that remains attuned to the political urgency of the current moment and the value of directness, immediacy and transparency, but which

also seeks to embrace the provisional, speculative, subjective and collective nature of knowledge. These are themes which are explored across several other chapters that address the roles of documentary media with respect to ecological crisis.

Documentary in the Anthropocene: Crisis, uncertainty, possibility

Contemporary documentary is responding not only to epistemological uncertainty but also to a growing sense of the proliferation of crises. From ecological breakdown to a renewed sense of geopolitical uncertainty and, not least, the ripple effects of a global pandemic, there is a profound sense that the future cannot be simply extrapolated from the past. Here a sense of documentary as a catalyst for political change (a point that will be developed in more detail below) is taken up as a process of *imagining* possible futures, beyond the logic of late-stage capitalism and its extractive human–non-human relations. Documentary futurism operates at the level of the speculative and possible, albeit as many of the contributors note, with the air of the inevitable. Several of the contributions gathered here explore what Selmin Kara describes as a 'more-than-human treatment of actuality', humorously recasting Grierson's now ubiquitous description of documentary practice. A desire to decentre human ways of seeing and understanding is evident in explorations of different perspectives, time scales, multisensory entanglements, co-creations and speculative futurisms. There is a growing sense that documentary media are providing spaces of possibility in which audiences and participants are invited to explore and respond to realities across a range of non-fiction forms.

Documentary in the Anthropocene is a recurring theme in this *Handbook*, reflecting its significance in practice and scholarship. What futures can be imagined in response to, and as a consequence of, ecological breakdown? While the chapters by Rose and Kara take up the productive possibilities that documentary affords to know and relate to non-human realities, Lebow considers the 'apocalypse documentary' in which 'the future is depicted via the filmic present, positing a proleptic future anterior that bears the implacable conviction of certitude.' Lebow casts a critical gaze on the relationship between apocalypse and privilege, noting that for some documentary makers it is easier to visualize the end of the world than one that has eschewed capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. Focusing on three high-profile, but independent, documentaries – Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), Geyrhalter's *Homo Sapiens* (2016) and Madsen's *Into Eternity: A Film for the Future* (2010) and tracing this tendency back to classic future-focused documentary like Watkin's *The War Game* (1965) – Lebow traces key tendencies. These include a tendency to de-contextualize and aestheticize devastation and to eschew the work of responding to crisis. 'The end is already here', these films proclaim and there is nothing to be done. Lebow's critique serves as an important reminder of the importance of interrogating documentary textualities and the ways in which they position us as agents (or not) with respect to contemporary issues.

In her chapter on documentary in the context of the Anthropocene, Kara considers the ways in which contemporary documentary practice seeks to facilitate 'more-than-human' perspectives. Taking up the concept of the Anthropocene as more than

an umbrella term for conceptualizing planetary crisis, Kara argues that it presents a challenge to realist modes of representation that are shaped by the regime of geo-power. Referencing Foucault's critique of biopower, Kara points to a dominant and dominating epistemology grounded in probabilities and norms, and forms of veri-similitude. The result, she argues, is that we have come to understand as real a world that is self-reproducing, predictable and sustainable. This is a world that is knowable and infinitely exploitable. If the Anthropocene calls for new ways of knowing reality, it also calls for new modes of representation that decentre human perspectives in their engagements with science. Kara describes a range of emerging realisms: from speculative realisms that challenge human temporalities; haptic realisms that seek to put us 'in touch' with nature in new ways; Indigenous realisms that focus attention on relationalities; and geologic realisms. Across these different responses to the realities of the Anthropocene, Kara traces a resurgence and rethinking of the significance of science for documentary practice, considering the many ways in which the agency of the natural world becomes visible.

Visibility and questions about what and how we see as well as how we might *experience realities* beyond the visible has been an emerging strand of work in documentary studies. Mandy Rose locates virtual reality documentary within an ongoing exploration of emerging technologies as revealing realities that might otherwise remain inaccessible. In particular, she considers the possibilities for a documentary practice that more fully extends beyond the visible to incorporate forms of 'tactile' knowing. Drawing on the work of Laura Marks, Rose considers work that positions the 'immersant' as an agent with respect to issues of injustice. Immersion and a sense of presence are interrogated for their ability to produce forms of emotional involvement, not simply as experience for its own sake but as a means by which to foster critical awareness and a felt sense of responsibility. Kiki Yu picks up several of these themes – particularly the sensory nature of cinema and the need to think differently with and through documentary – to propose a cinema of *qi*. Drawing on ancient Chinese thinking Yu considers *qi,* whose many meanings centre on ideas of breath and vital energy, as a way of conceptualizing documentary as relational, trans-sensory and more-than-human. To approach documentary from the perspective of *qi* is to challenge anthropomorphic (western) knowledges and to pay attention to the potential for alternative ways of knowing and being, focusing particularly on the circulation of *qi* through documentary making and images and in our experiences of watching documentary. *Qi* offers a framework for rethinking documentary as political communication, particularly its potential to foster ways of knowing and being with others (human and non-human) in and through the moving image.

Audio/visualities: Voice, ethics and representation

Documentary practitioners and scholars remain focused on the nature of audio-visual representation and its attendant formal, aesthetic and ontological questions. The five chapters that address questions of voice, ethics and representation consider a wide

range of documentary work, from the animated documentary *Flee* (Rasmussen 2021) to Shirley Clarke's (1961) experimental film *The Connection*, and a collection of films that evidence different forms of documentary 'voice' including *Yours in Sisterhood* (Lusztig 2018), *The Cancer Journals Revisited* (Lin 2018) and *Omelia Contadina* (Rohwacher and J. R. 2020). The diversity of the work considered opens a space to revisit and re-nuance questions of form, aesthetics and the nature of filmic representation. The concept of voice has been central to thinking about documentary representation and, particularly, questions of ethics. Nichols' (1983) foundational reflection on the voice of documentary draws attention to the role of the documentary maker as the source of meaning. In engaging the complexity of contemporary issues, recognizing both the value and incommensurability of visions of 'the real' and the ethical questions that inevitably attend practices of representation, filmmakers and scholars have sought to interrogate the nature of documentary voice and explore forms of polyvocal or polyphonic documentary practice.

In his contribution to this volume, Fernão Pessoa Ramos takes up questions of ontology. Considering documentary as an encounter between the mechanical apparatus and reality in all its complexity, he elaborates a view of documentary *mise-en-scène*, which he describes as 'performance staging within the theatricality of the world'. Documentary, he argues, is 'an audiovisual structure of enunciation', a collection of technologically mediated sensations that 'speak' in epistemological, propositional and/or aesthetic registers. Of course, how documentaries speak and the ethical questions raised remain paramount. With reference to Nichols' notion of voice, Ramos considers the 'mega-enunciator' function of documentary *mise-en-scène*, the nature of montage and narrative form as defining a 'metastable system'. However, the varied natures of documentary voice must be considered. There is, of course, the classic 'voice of knowledge' leading us through audio-visual discourse to inevitable conclusions, but there are also sensorial, aesthetic and poetic voices. While we have become accustomed to a critical analysis of voice as a mode of performance and a values-laden arrangement of elements, we must go beyond identification of a 'hidden subjectivity' to consider whether and how camera-images might lead us to new imaginaries and new ways of thinking through forms of theatricality that reflect the material realities of the documentary encounter.

In recent years, documentary scholars and practitioners have sought to resist the dominance of narrative (typically narrative of a fairly narrow kind) as wholly inadequate to the task of making sense of contemporary complexity and crisis. In their *Beyond Story Manifesto*, Juhasz and Lebow (2018) argue that story, while powerful, has become homogenous, offering audiences coherent worlds, readily understandable characters and familiar affective arcs that are popular, but which ultimately serve a commercial agenda by prioritizing 'individuals over collectives, people over their environments, human will over systematic forces, and in terms of spectatorship, feelings over analysis and passivity over action'. In the context of crisis where issues seem confusing and profoundly 'unstorified' and where new ways of perceiving problems

are urgently needed, documentary's ability to resist narrative becomes particularly valuable.

Digital modes of documentary have played an important role in developing non-narrative practice. Alisa Lebow's *Filming Revolution* (2018),[1] as just one example, engages the Egyptian Revolution (2011) in the form of an interactive database made up of multiple, overlapping 'constellations' of elements – interviews, documents and other audio-visual fragments. This speculative, unfinished, complex work resists the temptation to offer an explanation or account and leaves open the possibility that new perspectives or events might yet be included. Lebow's approach aligns with a desire within interactive documentary practice (Nash 2022; Aston and Odorico 2018) to use digital technologies to foster polyvocal work in which several independent voices can co-exist, giving voice to different perspectives and empowering audiences to make sense of complex realities on their own terms.

While digital modes of documentary have been most active in their desire to challenge narrative dominance (although see Winston et al. (2017) for an argument on the limits of non-narrative), it is possible to trace non-narrative desire across a range of documentary modes. In her chapter on polyvocal lyricism, Simona Schneider considers three projects that challenge narrative expectations to prioritize a lyric exploration of shared experiences of crises. Polyvocal lyricism describes documentary work characterized by both a pluralization of the subjective voice (documentary that sings or speaks of 'we') and a lyricism that prioritizes fragmentation, incompleteness and affect. She considers examples of documentary in which members of a community voice their experience which then come together to create an 'ephemeral community' without presupposing cohesiveness. Schneider makes the case for polyvocal lyricism as revealing realities through collective, collaborative documentary methods.

In considering the animated documentary *Flee* (Rasmussen 2021), Honess Roe focuses on the relationship between animation and representation and the potential of animated film to establish ethical relationships between the viewer and the documentary subject. Animation is often deployed as a way of rendering visual the inner world of subjective experience in ways that invite audiences to engage with distant others. On the face of it, *Flee* seems to offer insight into the experiences of a young, homosexual, Afghani refugee, promoting affective engagement and potentially an ethical orientation. While Honess Roe finds evidence that *Flee* struck an emotional chord with viewers, she asks in her chapter 'what and who it is viewers are getting emotional about?' *Flee* combines documentary audio (recorded interviews) and various visual registers including varying styles of animation and archival footage, positioning the viewer with respect to the unfolding narrative. Honess Roe interrogates the effects of varying animation styles, suggesting that at its most evocative, the images become more generic and provide less insight into the subject's inner experience. The result is to encourage the viewer to imagine how *they* might experience such an experience, collapsing the distance between the self and Other. In focusing on the different viewing relations established through animation, Honess Roe links a

concern with audio-visualities and the ethics and politics of documentary representation, a key theme in several other chapters in this *Handbook*.

Re-viewing the ethics and politics of representation

The ethics and politics of documentary representation have been central in documentary scholarship. To approach documentary as relational is to acknowledge that it establishes power relations between those with the resources and authority to create documentary media and those who are 'represented'. These power relations are complex and potentially unequal and consequently scholars have been concerned with who gets the chance to give voice to their vision of reality, how they represent others and to what political end. Historic analysis of the steady stream of 'victims' who stand silent and unable to represent themselves (Nichols 1991: 91) has inspired efforts towards a more collaborative practice. In her chapter, Jaimie Baron explores the 'fake documentary' *The Connection* (Clarke 1961) as a radical interrogation of 'both the evidentiary authority of the documentary form and the particular power dynamics that subtend and structure documentary filmmaking'. As a fake documentary, *The Connection* engages the viewer in a reflection on the relationship between fact and fiction and our ability to navigate the relationship between the two. It also presents a story about documentary making in which the power relationships inherent in the act of representation are constructed along multiple lines – race, sexuality, ethnicity and gender. While it reflects on these relationships of power (locating the viewer within these power relations as one who can *watch* the Other) it also considers the fragility of power in this relationship exploring the possibility that the 'cinematic gaze can be hijacked'. Revisiting *The Connection,* Baron's chapter serves as a reminder of the need to interrogate the relationships that surround image making and consumption.

Looking to the early history of the documentary movement, Mariano Mestman facilitates reflection on who has (and has had) the power to make documentary and who has been included in the 'global' documentary community. His chapter focuses on the early years of the Association Internationale des Documentaristes (AID), which was founded in 1964 and which held an international Congress in Algiers between 25 February and 2 March 1968. It is a history that speaks of a long-held desire (only ever partially realized) to support documentary makers from diverse geographies, and particularly the countries of the so-called 'Third World'. One consequence of hosting the Congress in Algiers was the increased inclusion of Algerian filmmakers and dialogue between the AID and the Algerian government. Of the topics for discussion at the Congress, the cinematographies of developing nations and the free movement of documentaries around the world are suggestive of a global outlook. Ivens' documentary *17th Parallel: Vietnam in War* (1968) opened the Congress, emphasizing its concern with radical and political identities, particularly in so-called 'developing' nations. However, as Mestman councils, any sense of globalism was rather more limited in practice. The AID remained primarily a European (and to a lesser extent Northern American) organization and that in spite of a desire to build relationships

with documentary makers from Africa and Asia, very few attended. The story of the AID reminds us that the ambition to 'decolonize' documentary practice is neither new, nor guaranteed.

Catherine Russell takes up questions of the politics of documentary practice as they relate to the archive through a study of the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada's *Souvenir* project. Made in the context of re-examining and redressing the colonial history of the NFB as an organization, *The Souvenir Project* invited four Indigenous filmmakers to work with sounds and images from the archive to reframe history and challenge stereotypes. Considering the violence inherent in the excavation of images, Russell considers the extent to which an institution like the NFB can interrogate its own colonial mandate through re-engagement with the archive. Can history be made to speak back to the present? In terms of Indigenous artists, she considers whether repurposing the images and sounds in the archive might enact forms of Indigenous visual sovereignty over the archive. In her analysis of *The Souvenir Project*, Russell highlights the many ways in which Indigenous artists succeed in speaking back to the archive: challenging the linearity of European modernity and regimes of power; unsettling the order of colonial society and its institutions; and confronting spectators with 'a demand for action, retribution, and indeed, reconciliation'. However, while Russell sees *The Souvenir Project* as an important gesture towards decolonizing the NFB, she notes that filmmakers were restricted in terms of the images and sounds they could use in their films and that, consequently, the project constitutes only a partial move towards relinquishing digital sovereignty.

The question of decolonization within a global south framework is explored by Deane Williams and Antonio Traverso. Drawing on notions of the 'south' as they have emerged as an intellectual field, Williams and Traverso re-examine important, but relatively unstudied, work by David Bradbury, Rodrigo Gonçalves and Dennis O'Rourke. These filmmakers, two Australian and one Chilean/Mozambican, tackle very different subjects – dictatorship, sexual exploitation and tourism – which are nevertheless reflections on the complexities of colonization. In comparing the work of these three filmmakers the chapter aims to develop a scholarship grounded in the film cultures of the global south, elaborating on their distinctive registers and considering how this might shape comparative film scholarship.

When it comes to the politics and ethics of representation, much attention has focused on representations of traumatic events. Attempts to 'document' the Holocaust loom large and have prompted much fruitful thinking about the power and limits of representation. However, the priority accorded to this event has overshadowed the experiences of those who have suffered under non-western authoritarian regimes and attempts to document trauma from non-western perspectives. In her contribution, Raya Morag considers the work of Chinese-French director Wang Bing and particularly his cycle of work on the Jiabiangou re-education-through-labour-[turned-death]-camp (2005–18). This hexaptych includes documentary and fictional work that constitutes a sustained reassessment of Maoism. Morag notes the fundamental

difference between notions of witness developed in the context of the Holocaust which focus on the enemy without and work in the Chinese context, including that of Bing, which focuses on the enemy within. Further, she considers his po/ethics characterized by slow rhythm, non-intervention, long takes and the 'quiet' interview, prioritizing listening and the ex-victim's reclamation of the self and identity. Bing's po/ethics establishes a distinctive epistemology and modes of spectatorship while also working to foster a sense of supportive community for ex-victims. Foregrounding the distinctiveness of the Chinese experience of collective trauma, Bing challenges western notions of testimony and what it means to bear witness. Morag's chapter highlights the need to think about the representation of trauma through multiple culturally and geographically located practices.

Documentary and politics

In reflecting on the significance of reality television for documentary studies, John Corner (2002) noted that the social functions of documentary have been as key to the tradition as matters of form, content or aesthetic. Taking a broad view of documentary that presupposed a national media culture within the context of mass communication, Corner argued that documentary had historically played an important role in promoting state-focused citizenship, investigation (think of documentary in its more journalistic modes), alternative political perspectives and as a space for aesthetic experience. Reality television, he argued, represented a significant point of departure in the emphasis it gave to entertainment as a documentary function. While it is possible to point to the persistence of documentary-as-diversion – a point made not least by those interrogating the significance of streaming platforms – this has not come at the expense of documentary's social orientation. Indeed, as many of the chapters contained here demonstrate, appeals to the social impact of documentary are, if anything, proliferating today. The chapters collected here highlight some of the ways in which documentary makers and scholars are interrogating this potentially expanded relationship to society and politics.

Helen Hughes' examination of the radioactive documentary links a concern with representation in the context of risk with the social and political goals of those who sponsor and make documentaries about nuclear issues. She is concerned with the fine line that many films walk between promoting debate and promoting nuclear industries while also acknowledging the complexities of nuclear technology. While documentary in the service of 'industry' has typically taken on a simplistic 'problem-solution' narrative (Winston 1995), this has become increasingly untenable and there has been a tendency to recognize complexity through inconclusive narrative forms. Hughes explores several radioactive documentaries, considering not just their ability to frame nuclear issues but also their potential to register the ambiguity of nuclear sites. Films such as Geyrhalter's *Pripyat* (1996) engage the zone of alienation through meditative forms of documentary observation that seem to reflect the pace of life in a place where 'people are consciously waiting for atoms to decay'. Made ten

years after the Chernobyl disaster when images of the zone of exclusion were still rare, the documentary seeks opportunities for empathetic understanding and reflection on the challenges of filming in toxic, post-industrial environments. In contrast, Peter Galison's and Rob Moss' *Containment* (2015, USA) seeks to open up a dialogue about how to respond to the issue of nuclear waste that has accumulated since the Second World War. The complexities of the nuclear legacy are engaged as the camera penetrates radioactive landscapes as a catalyst for creative thinking. Moss and Galison see their film as contributing to attempts to find a solution to the problem of nuclear waste rather than a filmic protest. There is something here to suggest the emergence of documentary made as a contribution to addressing complex social challenges.

A key point of debate has been the extent to which documentary can be used to produce forms of more or less tightly defined 'impact'. The emergence of a professional field of impact production has, in recent years, rekindled debate about documentary effects, albeit drawing attention to the complex relationships between documentary production and representation. Taking up the promise of impact in the context of nuclear representation, Helen Hughes considers the potential of nuclear documentary to open spaces for nuanced discourse about nuclear risk and the nuclear industry. Hughes highlights the ambiguity with which audiences approach the environmental risks posed by radioactivity. She notes the power of images of nuclear environments to render the risk to those who film, and those who inhabit the zone of exclusion, indexically and dramatically through 'damage' to the filmic apparatus. However, she argues that in responding to risk, many contemporary nuclear films seek to navigate the tension between fascination and fear to engage often polarized communities in constructive public debate. The films she considers have been made by a nuclear industry seeking to promote discussion amongst stakeholder communities, who are likely to hold many conflicting ideas about the safety of nuclear industries. The films seek to acknowledge the risks of nuclear energy while also looking for ways to anticipate and manage uncertainty.

Caty Borum considers the social impact of documentary in the context of networked and participatory media cultures. Charting the rise of a 'professional' approach to social impact (which is clearly aligned with some filmmakers' ambitions with respect to social change), Borum argues that what we are seeing is a more deliberate integration of human-centred, emotional narrative and the structures of civil society, community and activist movements. She positions impact-oriented documentary with reference to cultural and political change (the rise of participatory cultures and a shift to issues-focused and often more casual political engagements) as well as the increased significance of philanthropic funding for documentary filmmakers. But she also notes lines of continuity with earlier forms of committed and politically engaged filmmaking. She ultimately calls for more systematic studies of documentary impact, outlining an approach that considers questions of narrative and character identification, affect and a broader examination of the political and participatory impacts of audience activity.

Focusing on the media activist collective Equipe Media in Moroccan-occupied western Sahara, Ryan Watson considers several dimensions of activist documentary practice, and particularly the possibility that documentary might help to build and sustain militant civic cultures in a global documentary ecology. Building on Peter Dahlgren's (2009) notion of civic cultures, Watson considers the work of Equipe in terms of its ability to foster and sustain radical agency within and beyond Morocco. The production and distribution of films like *3 Stolen Cameras* challenges the power of the state to control public communication and allow citizens to see themselves as political agents with the potential to challenge the occupation. Further, the global circulation of images of Sahrawi resistance builds and nurtures relationships between activists, the Sahrawi diaspora and organizations working for an end to the occupation. The framework of radical civic cultures connects public and private spaces in outlining the different levels at which the work of Equipe Media supports cultures of resistance. As Watson's chapter shows, this includes creating a sense of shared identity and agency amongst the Sahrawi people within Morocco, spreading information and supporting human rights, and promoting monitorial forms of citizenship through a radical engagement with data. However, also significant is the role of film in creating spaces for supporters – both individuals and organizations – to work for social change.

The impact of streaming platforms on documentary culture has been a significant focus of attention for a number of scholars. Chapters by Goldson and Nash and Hight consider the ways in which the logics of Netflix as a platform may be shaping documentary's political project and social orientation. Goldson takes her own experience of Netflix as a starting point for interrogating the extent to which the platform could be considered to protect a documentary 'disposition' or 'entertainment with a purpose' (Aufderheide 2016). Both chapters note that much of 'documentary' content on Netflix tends to prioritize sensationalism over social engagement. In her algorithmically generated documentary 'feed', Goldson notes the presence of educational but edifying and entertaining content, but more noticeable is the dominance of content with a closer relationship to reality TV. While such programmes may appear to engage social issues, they typically privilege affect and sensationalism over any meaningful analysis. In Corner's (2002) terminology, we might locate much of this content in the realm of documentary-as-diversion.

In their analysis of one Netflix documentary *Seaspiracy*, Nash and Hight consider how documentary's social mission can be co-opted to generate value for Netflix. Building on the work of critical scholars of subscription video on demand (SVOD) platforms, they develop a concept of documentary-on-demand, highlighting the economic value of affect, sensation and the link between documentary texts and social media as a space of 'engagement'. However, also significant is documentary's link with the domain of politics. The ability of documentary to catalyse public debate, particularly through films/series that have the potential to be 'controversial', draws attention back to the platform itself. The value here lies less in the ability of documentary to achieve social impact and more in its ability to promote Netflix as a space of public

engagement. Political performance becomes bound up with the promotional strategies of the platform in ways that are difficult to disentangle. What both of these chapters demonstrate is the value of connecting analysis of documentary's social agenda with critical engagement with the shifting logics of production and distribution.

Gilberto Alexandre Sobrinho traces the emergence and development of 'testimony to the cinema of action' by the Indigenous peoples of Brazil, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. He focuses particularly on the Vídeo nas Aldeias ('Video in the villages', VNA) project which began in 1986 and continued until 2016 and which has been key in shaping social activism and developing an audio-visual language in support of Indigenous peoples. Beginning as a project focused on recording Indigenous communities' ways of life (often working with anthropologists and documentary makers), VNA has changed in response to the needs of different communities. Combining historical analysis (focusing on individuals at the heart of Indigenous cinema in Brazil) and examples of numerous VNA projects, Sobrinho highlights the different ways in which video has been used (and continues to be used) in the contexts of 'Indigenous struggle, territorialization/demarcation, recognition, survival, memory, and resistance'. Aesthetic and formal explorations by Indigenous filmmakers highlight the need for multiple militant image-based languages and practices to support the political projects of Brazil's Indigenous peoples. Sobrinho articulates not only a social agenda, but a striking 'affective dimension' based on the long tradition of Indigenous video but also striving for future-oriented defence strategies 'interacting and intervening in the universe of image'.

Production, distribution, audiences: Re-examining the 'documentary industry'

Given documentary studies' alignment with film studies, there has been, as noted above, an unevenness when it comes to scholarly reflection on the contexts in which documentary is made, distributed, encountered and (perhaps) consumed. This is shifting as the logic of streaming platforms is having its impact on documentary culture, as noted above. But more broadly, the focus on documentary as relational is highlighting the importance of contextualizing (economically, industrially and in terms of audience engagement) the documentary. In her chapter on utilitarian filmmaking, Grace C. Russell considers work that is generally not regarded as documentary, but which nevertheless shares various affinities with the documentary project, not least in relation to its social orientation. Russell develops a framework of the 'utilitarian *dispositif*' that highlights the national, social, organizational and discursive contexts in which utilitarian films are produced, circulated and viewed. Drawing on recent research into utilitarian filmmaking in Australia (1945–80) and through a detailed case study of workplace safety film, she highlights the importance of national identity, institutional voice and the paratextual informational environment. Throughout the chapter, Russell demonstrates the value of approaching filmic texts (whether documentary or related forms) from the perspective of the socio-technological contexts in which they appear.

Documentary funding has long been acknowledged as a significant factor in shaping what is produced, matters of style and form, and where documentary might be seen in the short and longer term. For all its significance, documentary funding regimes are rarely interrogated. In their chapter 'Documentary Funding in the Age of the Streamers', Inge Sørensen and Nick Higgins's chart recent shifts in documentary funding regimes in the United Kingdom and North America, highlighting the emergence of large-scale production companies that operate in a global media economy. Streaming platforms have ushered in profound shifts in funding, contributing to what Sørensen and Higgins describe as the 'polarization' of documentary funding. On the one hand, so-called 'no-budget' documentary might be created by those documentary makers with the means to invest in their own artistic and/or social projects. While this can result in significant work, as Sørensen and Higgins highlight, it perpetuates a lack of diversity in the documentary industry. At the other end of the scale, the funding offered by streaming platforms has led to the emergence of super-indies, global production companies that 'service this lucrative market'. The result has been the emergence of the 'super-doc' characterized by high production values, entertainment-oriented narratives often with 'thriller-like' features and created by well-known directors. The implications for documentary's social orientation are clear. Sørensen and Higgins' chapter chimes with those by Goldson and Nash and Hight in highlighting the ways in which the streamers are challenging established documentary cultures.

Annette Hill continues the focus on the significance of streaming platforms by considering what motivates audiences to engage with material labelled 'documentary' on streaming platforms and how they are navigating the generic chaos (Lagerway and Nygaard 2022) that characterizes much work on streaming services. Reporting on a study of Millennial and Gen Z Nordic audiences during 2019–20 (including during the Covid-19 pandemic), Hill considers the importance of industry and social contexts for documentary engagement. For all the focus on algorithmic cultures, Hill found that this was less significant than might be anticipated. In contrast, social factors were particularly significant in driving individuals to watch documentary content. Particularly during periods of social isolation, individuals turned to family and friends, reviews and a general 'buzz' to determine what to watch and watching became a vehicle for social engagement. A particular pleasure of viewing factual genres is the invitation to navigate truth claims, determining what feels 'authentic' and evaluating the accuracy of information. Hill proposes an 'authenticity index' as a way to understand what audiences are developing as they engage with factual content. Authenticity indexes are not fixed, but rather they are constantly being renegotiated and refined by programme makers, subjects, critics and audiences. In the viewers interviewed for Hill's study, generic expectations, physical markers of authenticity, emotions (viewer's emotions and those of people represented) and the social contexts in which factual media were consumed were all relevant. Documentary audiences are frequently invoked but rarely studied. Hill's research highlights (as her previous research with

reality TV audiences did) the need for empirical investigation of audiences in specific contexts.

Digital modes of documentary

Digital technologies and cultures have had a profound impact on documentary culture. The impacts are multifaceted: from the ubiquity of digital recording devices and the proliferation of documentary material across digital platforms, to the emergence of new documentary forms (captured at least in part under the umbrella of i-docs) or the increasingly significant relationships between documentary and other media forms, most notably social media to name just a few. Documentary practice has historically been shaped by technological developments (and their attendant cultures) and scholars have been focused on making sense of the ways in which documentary makers have engaged the digital. In her chapter, Chiara Grizzaffi considers practices of appropriation and reuse in the context of documentary and digital media cultures. Compilationism, she suggests, is an aesthetic strategy developed in response to the contradictions of the digital age and a sense of the complexities of contemporary issues. Compilationism is a response to the 'fullness' of the digital 'archive' and the increasingly complex relationships between archival and 'found' media. As the impulse to collect has become a 'mass phenomenon', the way we look at media (archival, found, factual, fictional) takes on particular significance. Documentary culture is increasingly responding to a desire to make sense of our contemporary informational excess, acknowledging that the screen of the computer is increasingly how we have come to experience and evaluate realities.

Taking up augmented reality documentary practice, Dale Hudson, Claudia Costa Pederson and Patty Zimmermann consider dimensions of relationality. Augmented reality documentaries layer information, establishing connections between individuals and place, human and machine and potentially between individuals; they are place-specific and often oriented towards convening. Connections are made with Zimmermann and de Michiels' (2018) concept of the open space documentary which approaches documentary media in terms of its ability to bring people together in ways that are not predetermined. There is a shift from representation (often tied to narrow conceptualizations and forms of narrative) to presentation, which calls attention to relationalities and the possibilities for action beyond the consumption of media content. Meaning and time are potentially fluid as individuals are positioned to think through and within place and connect to their environment and others. They consider a number of works that they describe as forms of micro-documentary practice, characterized by a focus on the small and local but which nevertheless opens into a consideration of larger issues. Hudson et al.'s consideration of augmented reality documentary can be located within a body of work that aims to not only chart but also theorize digital modes of documentary. As digital modes of engaging reality open up new questions, there is a clear need for theoretical development. There has been a recognition of the limitations of representation, with its focus on the nature of the

relationship between image and reality, as a critical framework for engaging with documentary practice. However, as we have seen across this collection, there is also a shift towards relational perspectives when it comes to audio-visual practice.

A chapter by Brian Winston concludes our exploration of digital documentary. Published posthumously, this important contribution focuses on the elusive relationships between documentary media, digital technologies and social change. Brian was both an ardent sceptic and an enthusiast when it came to digital technologies. The key question, as he saw it, was whether digital technologies might contribute to more participatory and collaborative forms of documentary practice, transforming the relationship between documentary maker, subject and audience. Digital documentary has all too often been accompanied by overblown claims of transformation and social impact. The ability of virtual reality to generate 'empathy' is one such example. For Brian, the question is less about what people feel in the moment of watching, but 'what they do when the lights come up'. Claims about the potential of digital technologies to move people to action is a form of technicism, he argues, that is nothing more or less than a rearticulation of a rhetorical position that can be traced back at least to the invention of photography. Documentary history is, in at least some tellings, a chronology of technological breakthroughs, each of which promises the naturalist illusion, that feeling of 'being there'. What Brian ultimately values most highly are those documentary projects (arguably the most marginal) that emerge from and seek to strengthen social movements, relationships and impact. Such projects circle back to concerns about the politics and ethics of image making and the willingness of documentary makers to explore digital technologies with a view to challenging the imbalance of power that has characterized most audio-visual documentary making.

What should we 'film' now?

In his 'Afterword' to *The Documentary Film Book* (2013: 383), Brian Winston wrote 'however documentary is defined, whatever hardware is deployed for making it in whatever "platforms" to whatever purpose, the "whole question" is surely unchanging: what must we film now?' Much has changed in the ten years since he wrote those words and, yet, in many respects this *Handbook* attests to the ongoing significance of this core question: what must we film now? While we may wish to broaden our concerns beyond notions of 'filming' as many of the contributors to this collection suggest, there is a shared sense of urgency facing scholars and documentary makers in the face of epistemological, environmental and democratic crises. In response, the contributors to this *Handbook* point in very different ways towards a response to this key question. In responding to this question, there is, as we noted at the outset, a sense of both continuity and change. The chapters in this *Handbook* reconsider core questions of documentary praxis, ethics, justice and social impact, but they also engage the challenge of thinking about what documentary must be in the context of environmental collapse and shifting regimes of 'truth'.

Questions of epistemology have long been central for scholars of documentary. However, there is a growing consensus that the classic tension between creativity and actuality is less significant than grappling with the ways in which documentary is shifting in response to a sense of epistemic crisis. As many of the contributors to this volume note, the ways in which documentaries today frame and problematize knowledge claims to capture complex, perhaps polyvocal, or speculative visions of reality require theoretical re-vision. The chapters collected here speak strongly of a relational shift in documentary theory and scholarship. While critical engagements with documentary texts remain a dominant and valuable methodology, there is a growing focus on notions of the *dispositif* and the ways in which contexts of production, distribution and viewing shape meaning making. While central, the question 'what must we film now?' also calls for a consideration of 'who must film now and to what ends?' and how might documentary praxis connect with spaces and networks that support political engagement and social impact.

Documentary voices are demanding reappraisal. We have seen in the chapters collected here the emergence of speculative, non-narrative, experiential praxis. We have seen too the desire to eschew (at least in some quarters) restrictive narrative treatments that elide uncertainty, incompleteness and ambiguity. There is a growing sense of documentary voice as 'braided' (FitzSimons 2009), reflective of a range of perspectives and interests. A recognition of the imbrications between production, distribution and possible spaces for action highlights the potential for new power relations to emerge. Collaboration has been a significant focus of recent scholarship, in and beyond the sub-field of interactive documentary. The recently co-created work *Collective Wisdom: Co-creating Media for Equity and Justice* (edited by Cizek and Uricchio 2022) offers rich reflections on collaborative mediamaking practices, many of which draw from, and connect to, documentary as an audio-visual tradition. Scholarship grounded in an understanding of practice (not to mention practice-as-scholarship), which integrates a study of representation with a recognition that documentary has always been more than representation, feels particularly urgent.

We might also ask 'what should we research now?' in the face of the challenges noted above. The chapters gathered here not only evidence the vitality of contemporary scholarship but also point to several emerging strands of inquiry. In the coming years, we are likely to begin to understand more clearly how SVOD and other 'on-demand' platforms are shaping documentary content and the expectations of audiences. There are unquestionably more opportunities to engage with a wealth of documentary content, but the questions raised here about ongoing 'generic' hybridity/chaos, the broadening (co-opting/foreclosing?) of documentary's social functions and the ways in which documentary media flow (in whole or part) across platforms will be increasingly significant. Audiences remain under-researched, and as several contributors to this *Handbook* have suggested, understanding where and how audiences engage with documentary will become increasingly urgent. Similarly, building on Hill's notion of an 'authenticity index', understanding how audiences are making sense of complex,

speculative, future-oriented, experiential modes of documentary will be key to the field.

Where and what is documentary today? As the contributors to this *Handbook* suggest, it is simultaneously global and rooted in place/relationships, micro and macro, story/not-story, collaborative, digital/analogue/relational, fluid and much more. In bringing this collection together, we have been keen to share the complexities of contemporary documentary media and culture, and to help foster new explorations and conversations that we hope will resonate in years to come.

Note

1. https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=29289. Accessed 12 December 2024.

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