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Towards a genealogy of radical documentary

The history of documentary film is both indebted to and stifled by the legacy of John Grierson. Grierson certainly helped to codify documentary into a coherent mode of film practice, yet his politics, while liberal, were not on the Left, and his influence has often occluded more radical voices. For instance, Bill Nichols (2001) argues that within documentary historiography, the pioneering and socially engaged documentaries that emerge from the interwar European modernist avant-garde are often suppressed (582). Further, Brian Winston (2008) has advocated for an ‘un-mooring’ of the documentary tradition tied to Grierson who, Winston asserts, viewed radical politics in documentary as ‘deviancy, a falling off from the “objectivity” that was supposedly documentary’s norm’ (274). A genealogy of radical documentary would be committed to revolutionary politics and thus independent of Grierson. ‘Commitment’ is Thomas Waugh’s (1984) term for the radical strain of documentary that develops in parallel with Grierson’s career. ‘By “commitment”’ Waugh argues, ‘I mean, firstly, a specific ideological undertaking, a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-political transformation. Secondly, I mean a specific political positioning: activism, or intervention in the process of change itself’ (xiv). Further, such films must not only be made ‘about people engaged in these struggles, but also with and by them as well’ (xiv).

The committed or radical documentary first emerges through the work of a diverse range of interconnected transnational filmmakers, theorists and groups including Jean Vigo, Dziga Vertov, Esfir Shub, Joris Ivens, and the US-based Film and Photo League. In inter-war France, Vigo’s (1930) manifesto ‘Towards a Social Cinema’ helped define the movement and vocation of artists associated with the modernist avant-garde in Europe, such as Ivens, who had shifted from a pre-occupation with form and aesthetics to a broader concern with the creation of a ‘social cinema’ that deals directly with the material problems of real people. In post-revolutionary Russia, Vertov’s concept of the kino-eye and his use of montage sparked new ways of viewing the world, while the compilation work of Shub perfected the practice of factography after Vertov’s approach fell out of favor. Factography was a film style and mode of praxis built on the careful compilation of documentary images that manufactured a coherent conception of the Soviet nation for citizens (Malitsky 2013, 188). In the US, The Worker’s Film and Photo League, founded in New York City in 1930, was sponsored by the Communist International and produced a variety of documentary-based film and media in support of labor and union rights. The
League helped to spread the energy and project of communism, socialism, class consciousness and revolution to the working classes. These films worked in the service of constructing revolutionary subjects and camera-wielding witnesses from everyday workers and the unemployed while disseminating images counter to capitalist conceptions of reality.

The period after World War II saw the emergence of the Third World as a global political force in addition to the rise of the New Left in Europe and North America in the late 1950s through the long 1960s. The New Left signaled a move away from orthodox communist movements based in militant class struggle and labor unionization toward broader global oppositional movements particularly in the Third World, as well as serious engagement with issues of race, gender, free speech and anti-war sentiment. Within these political shifts we see the development of a militant and revolutionary cinema in the work of Santiago Álvarez in Cuba, the broader Third Cinema movement, particularly in Argentina, Chris Marker and the Left Bank group in France, as well as the U.S. collective Newsreel, amongst many others, rooted in this broader sense of resistance. Third Cinema, as defined by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (1971), spoke directly to the concerns of a localized audience by providing information and an ideological perspective not available from the mainstream media in Argentina. At the same time, these politically engaged films were screened clandestinely and served as a locus for people to come together, share the experience of the film, discuss and debate the issues presented and take up the revolutionary cause. In Cuba, Alvarez’s short newsreel style films, made from available materials, constituted what Julio García Espinosa (1979) calls ‘imperfect cinema,’ an aesthetic and formal principle that made cinema both accessible to the people in service of ideologically building the post-revolutionary Cuban nation. In the US and France, Newsreel and members of the Left Bank group utilized cinema as a form of revolutionary counter information or potent ‘battle footage’ to engender radical fervor and move spectators into the streets, what Jane Gaines (1999) calls ‘political mimesis.’

The long 1960s was also defined by the emergence of cinéma-vérité and direct cinema styles spurred by advances in documentary technology. These developments, coupled with the rise of television, democratized access to the means of film production while broadening the availability of politically radical works. Since 1967, when the advent of the Sony Video Rover combined portability, synch sound, and consumer affordability, the personal video camera steadily became a common possession. The trend continued with Sony’s introduction of the first VHS camcorder in 1983, followed by similar products by RCA, Panasonic, and Hitachi. The ability to record and edit footage cheaply gave rise to activist collectives such as Paper Tiger Television, founded in 1981 in New York City by Dee Dee Halleck to subvert corporate media dominance and increase media literacy, as well as DIVA-TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television), a group aligned with the AIDS direct action collective ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). As Deidre Boyle noted in 1992, in the ‘years since the video Porta Pak launched an independent television movement in the United States, a new generation of video activists has taken up the video camcorder as a tool, a weapon, and a witness’ (1992, 67).

**Radical documentary today**

In some ways, not much has changed as we bring this genealogy into the twenty-first century. As Michael Chanan points out in his contribution to this special issue, exhibition
is still ruled by the prestige of mainstream festival and theatrical screenings, even if these are today only steppingstones on the way to being picked up by a major streaming platform. These aspects of the industry are still expensive to penetrate and corporate controlled, which means that counter-discourse remains relegated to marginalized spaces outside the mainstream. At the same time, radical documentary, to have social impact, still requires people to come together as some form of collective, so contemporary radical filmmakers, like their forebearers, find themselves struggling to reach audiences beyond their immediate networks in a system that consigns radical documentary to the margins.

In other ways, though, the landscape of contemporary radical documentary looks quite different. This is, in part at least, to be expected; as political, economic, social, and environmental conditions change, so does the nature of the documentaries that address these issues. As we move into a new era of global protest shaped by the ‘war on terror,’ a multitude of environmental catastrophes and constitutional crises, increasing economic precarity, rising right-wing nationalism, and a deepening hostility to immigrants, people of color, and LGBTQA groups, radical documentary must adapt to respond to the specific hostilities of the current moment.

There are, however, at least two significant and interlinked transformations that have fundamentally altered the production, distribution, and exhibition of radical documentary over the last twenty years: the consolidation of globalization as neoliberal capitalism and the digital turn. The rise of affordable and accessible recording and editing technologies, particularly via cellphones, has combined with the digitization and vast storage of information to simultaneously shrink the world and expand access to filmmaking and documentary media, resulting in an unprecedented era of connectivity and communication. From one perspective, at least, we have achieved the democratization of media that Third Cinema filmmakers imagined as the key to social transformation. Yet while access to both the means of cinematic production and alternative sources of information has radically improved, this has not inaugurated the revolutionary transformation of society that Third Cinema filmmakers and later techno-utopians imagined it would. Rather, it accompanied the opposite: the decline of the New Left and the expiration of the revolutionary energies of the long 1960s.

While the coincidence of the digital turn and the rise of neoliberal capitalism may not have resulted in revolution, it does demand a re-thinking of the dominant paradigms of political filmmaking. In the globalized age of new media, the study and practice of radical documentary necessitates a multi-faceted approach that is open to expanding definitional boundaries of what a documentary is, how and where it functions and circulates, and how its impact is measured. The limits of interactive communications technologies as tools for political empowerment have been well documented (Bridle 2019; Dean 2009; Keltie 2017; Sterne 2012). Rather than rehash these criticisms, as important as they are, ‘Radical Documentary Today’ focuses instead on the new understandings of radical documentary that emerge from our globalized, digitized present. As such, the essays collected here theorize contemporary documentary practices that complicate, disrupt, or expand existing paradigms to envision new pathways for radical documentary in the contemporary moment. Taken together, they rethink some of the key elements of the radical documentary tradition: how we define radical documentary; its formal and aesthetic strategies; the kinds of
collectivity it enables; and the modes of audience engagement it promotes. In doing so, this issue looks to recalibrate our understanding of the possibilities of radical documentary in light of the new challenges of the present and to help marshal the resources of film and media for a renewed and unrelenting fight against the manifold forms of injustice and oppression that structure late-capitalist living.

New definitions

One of the key elements of radical documentary practice that requires rethinking in light of the transformations of the last thirty years is the definition of radicalism itself. For most of the twentieth century, radicalism was dominated by the narratives of orthodox marxism, where class politics and labor organizing dictated the form and politics of oppositional documentary. However, beginning in the late 1970s, as capitalism consolidated its power through a neoliberal world-system that exploited the new markets opened up by the collapse of the Soviet Union and Third World nationalist liberations struggles, the militant political forces of the previous decade dissolved along with what Martin O’Shaughnessy (2007) describes as the organized left. The radical frameworks of the orthodox left lost critical force as the movements that sustained them weakened and as they struggled to accommodate multi-faceted and intersectional critiques based on gender, race, ethnicity, indigeneity, ability, sexuality, and environmentalism. Remaining wedded to a single-axis approach that centered the economic and privileged class relations in analyses of oppression, other forms of domination were at best relegated and at worst dismissed as epiphenomenal. Michael Chanan’s essay, ‘The Melancholy of a Political Documentarist,’ offers an autoethnographic account of the decline of these earlier frameworks as he reflects on the processes and ideals of radical documentary in the 1960s and catalogs the challenges facing the culture today in their light. While the 1960s marked a deepening commitment to a radical film practice rooted in anti-colonial, anti-imperial politics, as Chanan points out, new radical approaches need to better integrate anti-globalization, environmentalism, and identity-based politics into their approaches.

Gail Vanstone and Brian Winston’s essay offers one such attempt. ‘The Radicalism of Fourth Cinema from Tangata Whenua to Angry Inuk’ examines how indigenous film and media prompt a rethinking of the definition of radicalism in relation to indigenous politics and the continued dominations of settler colonialism. For Vanstone and Winston, radical documentary typically conforms to settler colonial notions of radicalism in as much as it documents injustices and claims reparations. While indigenous documentary practice may often do this too, at the same time it presents a new mode of radicalism based on documenting the voices and knowledge of elders and celebrating indigenous lives. In capturing indigenous being – a mode of living that is erased by mainstream culture and thus inherently oppositional – Fourth Cinema documentaries center indigenous knowledge and disturb mainstream settler colonial discourses that elide the dispossession and oppression of indigenous lives and culture. In doing so, Vanstone and Winston think through and beyond the limits of Third Cinema as a radical documentary practice bound to settler colonial understandings of politics and offer a needed expansion of the radical documentary tradition.

Dale Hudson and Patty Zimmermann make a similar point as they advocate for a demand anti-colonial approach to analyzing the radical possibilities of new and emerging
media. For Hudson and Zimmermann, the greater connectivity of digital technologies necessitates practices that ‘critique unacknowledged enlightenment assumptions from the start.’ We should thus endeavor to create a genealogy of radical new media that is decolonized from the outset rather than appending these critiques after the fact.

If the shifts in the constitution of the left prompt a rethinking of the nature of radicalism, the technological developments of the last twenty years motivate a similar reconsideration of what constitutes documentary. The radical impact new media has had on what we understand documentary to be is a key argument in Hudson and Zimmermann’s interview as they push to define documentary ‘beyond the festival film, the big project, the serial documentary, or the theatrical documentary.’ For Hudson and Zimmermann, the rubrics of documentary study for legacy media need to be rethought, which involves moving beyond the traditional idea of radical documentary as one that documents a movement with the goal of getting people to participate. Rather, new media opens the possibilities for new forms of documentary beyond the well-known activist narrative of ‘political struggle to representation to mobilization.’

In a similar spirit to Hudson and Zimmermann’s arguments, Anjali Nath’s contribution also revives the radical political potential of new media, focusing on images of India’s ruthless occupation of Kashmir. Nath’s ‘Camera as Weapon: Ways of Seeing in Kashmir,’ focuses on the circulation of amateur images that documented the brutality of India’s use of pellet guns for anti-protest crowd dispersal and considers the oppositional power of social media under conditions of occupation and total state control. For Nath, digital technology and social media carry a radical potential as they create opportunities to widely circulate images in defiance of a government-imposed communications blackout. Nath’s essay trenchantly undermines what has perhaps become a knee-jerk critique of new media for western scholars as they focus on the corporate structures of new media platforms. Echoing the radical potential of digital media in challenging state, as opposed to corporate, agitators, Hudson and Zimmermann join with Nath to offer a compelling counterpoint to Chanan’s experience as a western filmmaker for whom ‘the web is largely channeled through the portals of corporations dedicated to an all-embracing consumerist ideology.’ While Chanan explores an important critique of the consumer-driven logic of new media and its collusion with surveillance capitalism, these other contributions provide an alternative way of thinking what constitutes radical media in the current moment.

**New forms and aesthetics**

The new ways of thinking about radicalism that this special issue foregrounds bring with them new formal structures and aesthetic strategies. While Vanstone and Winston explore how the familiar style of direct cinema carries a radical potential when read through an indigenous framework, others contributors examine how contemporary political documentaries move away from the forms and styles that have previously dominated the radical tradition. In this vein, Sarah Hamblin’s essay, ‘Slow Cinema and Contemplative Politics,’ theorizes a move away from the militant urgency and kinetic energy of radical documentaries in the 1960s that positions slow cinema as the foundation for a desire for difference as revolutionary rupture. Reviving Japanese landscape theory (fûkeiron) as part of a new radical documentary form, her essay explores how the formal techniques
As Ryan Watson (2019) has recently argued, the concept of visible evidence is in need of an update. In their contributions, Nath, Hudson and Zimmermann, and Sharon Daniel all rethink the function of visible evidence in the age of new media. Nath’s essay considers how the documentary impulse might be distributed through different mediums in response to increasingly capillaried sites of visual power as she rethinks Third Cinema’s idea of the camera as weapon where the body, in bearing the physical trace of the violence of occupation, becomes a screen. In positioning digital media as central to the formation a newly formed Kashmiri digital public that uses ‘networked connectivity to reframe the visual landscape of resistance and claim their right to look,’ Nath reimagines the legacy of the concepts of visible evidence and witnessing that make documentary an inherently political mode.

Taking on what Chanan frames as ‘the first problem for left oppositional documentary’ – to stand out amid the ‘overwhelming flood of streaming video’ – Sharon Daniel outlines the aesthetic strategies she uses to respond to the loss of the power of the indexical image. Focusing on new documentary forms enabled by web-based exhibition, Daniel argues for the power of accumulation where the sheer volume of images and stories becomes impactful. For Daniel, accumulation also shifts documentary away from the single protagonist narrative, opening new ways of conceiving the relationship between narrative and testimony and allowing multiple voices to speak together to address and represent large structural inequalities. Hudson and Zimmermann similarly emphasize the new aesthetic forms facilitated by digital media and the shift from documentary grounded in visible evidence to one grounded in data structures. For Daniel and Hudson and Zimmermann, then, digital media moves us away from thinking about documentary as something that will give evidence of something that existed or happened. Rather, it creates spaces for emotional connection as ‘it moves toward trying to engage us in empathy for others whose perspectives we might not immediately understand.’

The new forms of radical documentary enabled by the digital turn are not purely aesthetic. These transformations reverberate in the production process as well. While our first thought might be to imagine the new collaborative and collective modes of production that digital media facilitates, as Chanan’s essay makes clear, the ease and accessibility of new technologies enables solo production. This individual approach to filmmaking helps to address some of the labor issues associated with freelance production, which, as Chanan argues via David MacDougall, ‘significantly challenges the power of the professional film-making establishment, with its customary financial backing, administrators, directors and specialist technicians’ (2001, 15).

New modes of collectivity

The impact of new media on radical documentary practice extends beyond production to forge new modes of distribution and exhibition. As a result, a plethora of sites and spaces for radical film culture have emerged, and multiple essays in this special issue take up the question of their political potential. Following Daniel’s claim that we shouldn’t be purists about exhibition context but explore a range of venues to engage a range of audiences, from activists to policy makers, Hamblin returns to the art gallery and museum as possible
sites of radical exhibition and rethinks the critiques of the 1960s regarding these spaces. Chanan takes a comparably broad approach to exhibition, arguing that the mobility of new technologies means that anywhere can potentially become an effective exhibition site, which, when combined with the speed with which new media can circulate, dramatically increases the potential for mobilization.

Moreover, the ubiquity of these new technologies produces the potential for forming new relationships, be it an increased intimacy between the filmmaker and subject (Chanan) or the affiliation of seemingly disconnected individuals in virtual and embodied communities that for Hudson and Zimmermann marks a shift in radical documentary’s aims from intervention to infiltration (creating an opening that brings together people, ideas, and technologies that wouldn’t otherwise align). Indeed, perhaps one of the most powerful aspects of digital culture is the newfound ease of connection across geographical divides. Historically, left radicalism has always been internationally oriented, but globalization as neoliberal capitalism – emergent in the 1960s but now a fully fledged world-system bound to the diminishing power of the nation-state – renders global and collective resistance all the more urgent. Indeed, for Chanan, the connection of global struggles with local issues is paramount for a twenty-first century radical film practice and where ‘left political documentary should now stake its claim.’ To this end, Daniel, Hamblin, and Nath all point to the potential for new media and digital technology to forge deeper transnational connections. For instance, Daniel’s use of the atlas forms as a design structure functions as a powerful example of the ways in which non-traditional digital documentaries can ‘link diverse sites and communities that seem to be facing very similar kinds of racial, environmental, and political injustices.’ Conversely, Vanstone and Winston’s essay thinks through this need from the point of view of scholarship, its transnational framework linking indigenous films from different continents through the ‘global community of First Peoples.’

**New understandings of audience engagement**

Finally, the new forms and aesthetics of radical documentary in the twenty-first century bring with them new understandings of audience engagement. Indeed, we must remember that aesthetic forms and the modes of spectatorship that they promote are historically grounded and that, given the economic, political, cultural, and technological shifts of the last few decades, the modes of engagement promoted by earlier forms of radical documentary cannot simply be carried wholesale into the present (Hamblin 2017, 2019). It is for this reason that Hudson and Zimmermann argue contemporary new media projects reject the didacticism common to earlier analog modes of radical documentary: new media documentaries ‘do not push you toward a deductive conclusion or tell you how to think because that’s ineffective in the current global political environment.’ For Hudson and Zimmermann, the interactivity of digital platforms presents a radical new mode of education; projects turn away from exposition and observation toward more active and collaborative modes of interaction, which, in turn, changes what we understand documentary to be. These experiments in new forms of engagement and mobilization are important, they point out, because of the weakened efficacy of material protest. How, they ask, do we occupy spaces when the barricades are digital rather than material?
Whereas Vanstone and Winston examine how the open-ended structure of traditional indigenous narratives prompts us to reconsider how we understand the politics of active spectatorship, Hamblin explores how contemporary radical documentary must move away from the idea of active spectatorship as it has been traditionally understood. For Hamblin, the rise of participatory culture has fundamentally undermined the ideas of active spectatorship that underscored the politics of radical documentary through the 1960s. Drawing on Darin Barney’s work (2008), she argues that while the idea of participatory culture may have historically carried radical potential, particularly in situations where individuals were denied easy access to information, in the current media landscape this is no longer the case, active participation having come to mark compliance with rather than resistance to corporate capitalism and state control. This leads Hamblin to retreat from an understanding of radical documentary tied to active spectatorship and instead explore the radical potential of slow, solitary acts of interpretation.

Thus far in the twenty-first century, billions of people have wide access to the internet and carry around cell phones with video and photo capability. Never before have the means of production and distribution of documentary images been in the hands of more people. And, the struggles faced across the globe – war, occupation, austerity, mass oppression, fake news, environmental precarity, and right-wing extremism – are increasingly shared across borders. These technological and political upheavals have ushered in a new era of global political protest and spawned a renaissance of politically committed documentary practices, and this new situation requires a fundamental rethinking of what documentary can ‘do.’ Cognizant of and indebted to a global, militant genealogy, we must re-consider the radical potential forces that documentary media can engender. The essays and interviews collected here offer a host of generative conceptions that foreground the political potential of radical documentary today.

Notes

1. The Workers Film and Photo League later split into other groups including NY Kino and Frontier Films.
2. The term ‘New Left’ derives from French editor Claude Bourdet, who, in the pages of the weekly newsmagazine France Observateur, proffered the tenets of what would become the Nouvelle Gauche movement, which, as Stuart Hall argues, opened a ‘third way in European politics’ in the post-war period ‘independent of the two dominant left positions of Stalinism and social democracy’ (2010, 178).

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