INDUCTIVE THREAD

at Documentary Fortnight:
MoMA's International
Festival of Nonfiction Film
Feb 20th, 2010 at 8:00pm
JESSR

IN GERMAN

We all live together. In one building.
In Brooklyn, New York City. We have
called ourselves an artist collective.
We have also called ourselves a docu-
mentary collaborative. We are a group.
Outside of our building there is a
payphone.

JESSR

IN GERMAN

After every documentary film we screen
in our gallery, we record a discussion
with the people in attendance. The fol-
lowing voices are from our screenings.

MICHAEL

If I raise an aesthetic question, I
have to say, well that aesthetic ques-
tion is at the very least an expression
of a surplus. It’s an expression of a
surplus of resources and a surplus of
time. OK? If I’m running from a bul-
let and I have a very hungry stomach,
that question of aesthetics becomes
irrelevant. Bullets aren’t really inter-
ested, once they leave the barrel
of a gun, whether the arch they are
making is a beautiful parabolic curve.

YOUNG MAN

There’s this anger swelling in me
thinking that – as I’m looking at this
book of poetry – thinking this is actu-
ally not enough. It’s actually not
enough. I mean it’s cute, it’s sur-
realist, it’s playful and punned but
it’s not enough. Someone’s gonna read
it and then it’ll be gone. And it’s
not going to transform. I don’t think.
 Enough consciousness, it’s not going
to transform enough to stop the rising
Christian Fascist movement that’s tak-
ing over the country.

AYREEN

I don’t know. I mean, I’m more inter-
ted in a different kind of responsibility
to the image which is more artistic res-
ponsibility. Like how... how can we, um
be political... like make it work with
such images and realities in a way that
it is still challenging artistically.
Stolen payphone etched with location information 2006.
In my foolish opinion, the whole Flaherty experience is just terribly embarrassing. That aspect may be one of its strongest assets. It is embarrassing to be a filmmaker, it is embarrassing to get passionate as an audience member, it is embarrassing to hold a conviction or defend a position. More directly, it is embarrassing to be exposed, and in the environment of the seminar, in creating this coven with strangers, there is so much opportunity for exposure. Sometimes a person’s shoes, or the way a drink is held, or the tone in which one responds to a question tells you more about their intentions than the content of their work or comments. This may be an immature or ‘superficial’ perspective, but it’s impossible to ignore. The lack of control over what is speaking for you is, of course, a pervasive issue in social discourse, but having all these ‘close-readers’ living together makes being at the Flaherty particularly embarrassing.

In an event so committed to conversation, it’s also interesting to observe that dialog in the room stopped when, if only temporarily, the model of creator as sublime intellect or creator as unassailable genius, was presented. Hysterically, though, the phallus in the room cannot stand for long because the silenced group later erupts into a roar of private conversations and dissections. That’s the filmmaker’s embarrassment, and their submission to this painful level of exposure is really the most kind and selfless act performed by anyone at the seminar.

Which is not to say any of this should be avoided. There are too many places where one’s understanding of the order of things is reinforced, where one leaves feeling more comfortable and accomplished. There are too few places where things get ugly, and messy, and stupid, where one leaves with more confusion and humility. In one version, the Flaherty starts as a harmonious meeting of the minds and ends requiring, in Ed Halter’s reference, Montel Williams as mediator. The utopian retreat of artists and intelligentsia becomes a dysfunctional village of idiots.

I mean that in a good way. It is a grounded perspective from which you might do important work. You might start a real community. You might meet someone important to your future.
Dear....

On Sunday, August 29th, two very different, but intimately related scenes will unfold.

Inside Madison Square Garden, Republicans will be preparing for the most important show of the political season, the party’s convention. A display that leaves nothing to chance, the convention will show a united Republican party to the American people. Most of all, however, this convention will be about one man, President Bush, whose leadership after 9/11 and through the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq will be championed as the only sort that can steer the country out of its present uncertainty.

At the same time, on the streets of Manhattan in the August heat, hundreds of thousands of protesters will march unhearsed. Touting handwritten signs, chanting their own slogans, they will agree absolutely on only a single issue - that the current administration is a disaster for America, and that the party that gave rise to such a president is to blame.

We, the members of UnionDocs, have chosen the streets. But, mindful that Republicans are our fellow citizens and that no dialogue is likely to take place across police barricades, we’d like to call a truce, open up our home and invite ten convention-goers of our generation (20’s and 30’s) to dine with us the evening of August 28th. Instead of a show of numbers like the protest, the dinner will be an opportunity to engage individually. And unlike the players in an event scripted for television, the discussants will be able to express themselves spontaneously.

The evening will go as follows:

After welcoming our guests to our home in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, we will sit down together to a homemade meal. We hope that this dinner will prove an opportunity for introductions, friendly chat, and general discussion. To the extent that it is reasonable, we plan to follow the old rule that politics are not to be discussed at the dinner table. After eating, however, politics will no longer be ignored. A neutral moderator will be present to help conduct what will surely be a widely ranging discussion. Each attendee will be asked to explain what their plans for Sunday are and why - and then the dialogue will begin. The discussion will be civil, and we hope even friendly.

At the very least, our guests will leave with a gratified belly. But we desire far more than that: we want to satisfy curiosity, facilitate understanding and, in a very modest way, help restore dialogue to the American political process. The evening will be recorded, and portions of the discussion will be broadcast on the radio. In addition to that, a camera crew will be present to capture the interaction, and excerpts from the event will be presented to the MTV networks and Fuse for potential broadcast. We hope that what transpires, beyond serving as a learning experience for all involved, will provide an example of unconventional, real dialogue to others.

Won’t you dine with us?

A Republican At My Table Invitation
Paul Kiel and UnionDocs, 2004

We hung up a piñata that had Xeroxed copies of President George W. Bush’s face haphazardly taped on an otherwise generic store bought pumpkin design. Sarah had liberated the Halloween leftover from her office party just a few days before. The idea, however dangerously ill-fated in retrospect, was to introduce some stick-like, or bat-type weapon into a crowd of partygoers drunk on red-state/blue-state Jell-O shots and Budweiser (The Cindy McCain Special) just at the moment that the inevitable Obama victory was confirmed. It never came to that. Just as the band was beginning their set with “A Change Is Gonna Come” and the tiny TV with rabbit ears hooked up to the screening room projector struggled to maintain reception – we all noticed that the animated network graphics on the screen fluttered: “Obama Victory”. I was wearing a blue wig, standing in a crowd of mostly strangers, screaming and being doused in beer by someone spraying a can of bud, when above the sea of indistinguishable bodies I saw several fists emerge and they began beating down the piñata, swinging from the ceiling, with their bare hands.

Praxis! In Retrospect
Lindsay Napolitano, 2009
LESSIG: Well, what the vision thing here is, is a little bit uncertain. If by vision you mean sort of a single leader driving people to a particular end, that's right. Open source, or free software is designed in its nature to be forkable meaning anybody can take the project and take it in a different direction, which continually places on the project an extraordinary competitive check. If you get too far from the core then you'll see the splitting of the project. Now I'm not sure that's a bad thing to have that kind of competitive check, because it's ultimately a kind of democratic restriction on the way projects develop with a perpetual right for anybody who wants to have a different vision for how the project should develop. So it's hard to see any one leader articulating what that particular vision is. But if the vision is understood more collectively as a way to facilitate these sorts of collective works together, then that's a kind of vision that's very hard to develop in the traditional command and control type management environment.

I mean, if you have Ford Motor Company and you have the president of Ford articulating a vision and 10,000 employees reluctantly following it, that's a clearer vision than if you have the Apache web server project where you have 10,000 people working to facilitate a better version of Apache and no single person articulating a vision. I mean, I would think the Apache vision of vision is richer, thicker, than the Ford Motor Company.

Board members of UnionDocs were contacted recently by Leslie Kelen, executive director of the Center for Documentary Arts in Salt Lake City, who had a curious and somewhat disturbing matter to bring to our attention regarding the way we describe ourselves.

A non-profit organization in Texas is apparently near the end stages in the process of trademarking the name “documentary arts.” If this pending trademark is granted, Kelen’s organization and many others (such as UnionDocs) may no longer be able to use the same words to characterize their focus.

We were all pretty shocked and also a little intrigued — intellectual property has been one of the subjects we’ve been researching for an upcoming project. When we decided on our description, it was clear to us that “documentary arts” was an established term to describe a specific class of work, a genre, more or less. The Tate Britain Museum for instance has a collection titled 1930s Documentary Art.

Kelen agreed, explaining that in 2000 his organization had changed their name from The Oral History Institute to the Center for Documentary Arts to reflect an expanded range of activities and interests. They then needed to differentiate their approach from both academic and popular ideas of the word documentary. “We understood that some documentary work straddled a very interesting and unusual border between formal documentation and the arts.”

Alan Govener, founder of the Texas-based Documentary Arts, Inc., however, saw things differently. Kelen says that it was directly after the newly re-named Center for Documentary Arts reached out seeking support from an organization with similar interests that Govener’s organization began pursuing a trademark for its name.

Though both companies were registered non-profit, Govener apparently perceived a major threat to the identity of his organization in sharing this somewhat loosely defined space. In the application for the trademark, Govener claimed to have coined the phrase “documentary arts” and suggests that the pairing of the two words creates an oxymoron. In this view, documentary is a discipline striving for pure objective communication; whereas art is a discipline that thrives exclusively on subjective expression. Pairing the two is simply a contradiction.

Theoretical discussion and etymology aside, it seems that that protection may be granted to Govener. The trademark commission has dismissed an objection filed by members of The Center for Documentary Arts just a few weeks to make an appeal. The prohibitive cost and time required for lawyer fees may make putting up a fight difficult, but Kelen has been reaching out to others who use the term in an effort to find allies.
TIM ETCHELLS: I think there is an openness to chance in the... in the process that we... that we use. Because, in a way, I'm very suspicious of the thing that... I guess I'm not interested in what I know already, because I know it already. And I'm not interested in the thing that I could intend, like as an artist, because, um, again, it's already known. And I think what excites me and what excites us as a group of makers is to step into a territory - like when we're making a theater performance - to step into a territory and a process and absolutely to (cough) excuse me - not know where we're heading. Not know exactly what we're looking for.

UNIONDOCS: Mm-hm.

TIM ETCHELLS: Not know, um, what the end result of this thing is going to be. Um, and I think that... that informs the way that we try and make the work. And I think that's a way of, in a sense, surprising ourselves? Um, allowing ourselves to discover stuff that we wouldn't otherwise have found.

UNIONDOCS: Do you think that's iner-... differently different that way. I guess a more conventional playwright writing in a solitary room, by themselves and, you know...

TIM ETCHELLS: Yeah, no. I think in a certain sense you can draw... you can draw a parallel. I mean I think there's probably two differences. One is that, um, the chance that we're open to is also a kind of thing about the meeting of the intentions of all the people involved in the project.

UNIONDOCS: Right.

TIM ETCHELLS: So you can really be surprised by... I mean I can have a very clear idea of what I think we're doing. You know, some days. And then Robin or Terry or Richard or one of my colleagues will make some move in improvisation or bring in something else and the whole thing will be knocked sideways. So you're kind of dealing with like multiple intentions, which I think is a difference, compared to like the lone person sitting at their computer...? - writing away. And then...
Pretty much my favorite Utopian living experiment, the Oneida Perfectionists inhabited a compound of sorts in upstate NY for over three decades in the middle of the 19th century. As Perfectionists, they believed the kingdom of God was achievable on earth, and they developed two practices geared towards building it: Complex Marriage, the more lurid and consequently more well-known, involved a complicated system whereby all the men had sexual access to all the women (and, rather progressively, vice versa), provided they used the appropriate channels. No innuendo there—the system involved a bureaucracy of go-betweens in charge of granting permission.

The second, and way more wild, practice they called Mutual Criticism. Basically, at regular intervals a member of the community would volunteer to be observed by a rotating committee of peers. At the end of this period of scrutiny, the member would appear in front of the entire group (300+ in its heyday) and the committee would report on his or her faults, making recommendations for improvement. There’s a community handbook on Mutual Criticism—pretty much a guide to taking it like a man (paraphrasing but not much). Marshaling the natural impulse of people living together to get annoyed and talk about each other, Oneida Perfectionists thus attempted to form a totally harmonious environment, free of jealousy and irritation.

I think my favorite part of this story, though, is the way it defies narrative closure. Predictably, the living situation fell apart after the death of the community’s charismatic leader, John Humphrey Noyes. Rather than disbanding completely, though, the group formed a corporation and continue to this day, manufacturing silverware and plates. They’re incredibly successful.

The mansion that housed the community is still around, too. Still occupied, actually. In fact, since it was built, it’s never been unoccupied. I visited it last spring and it’s a bit strange to walk around the museum in the middle of the building and pass residents going about their business. They seem to be largely, but not exclusively, elderly, perhaps attracted to the inexpensive rent and the built-in company. Inside the mansion, there’s a sense of things going on as they have because there’s no reason for them not to. Kind of like a harmony achieved once, a long time ago, and remembered vaguely: like a distant tone that’s still ringing.

Perfect Oneida
Johanna Linsley, 2007

Finishing the 1500 wheat-pasted sheets of paper for the Facade installation
The videos collected in Chen Tamir’s Life Stories program are as much about biographers as the lives they depict. Though each of these four works are more-or-less straight interviews, none of the artists here are content to let us believe that their documentation provides us with a direct link to their subjects. Tamir in particular devises strategies to disrupt or amplify the flow of conversation in order to make obvious their machinations and ours. “The supposedly simple, neutral act of documenting people speaking about themselves” Tamir writes in the essay that complements the exhibition “becomes, in these works, a loaded exercise in power dynamics.” This is territory whose bounty has been well-reaped: anyone who has set foot in an art gallery or a college classroom in the last 30 years knows well the power differential that separates presenter from represented. It sometimes seems that it is impossible for anyone schooled in the theoretical tradition that extends from Foucault onwards to tell a story unselfconsciously. But without any way to actually cede control, the artist’s disavowal of her authority is a gesture without consequence, like prefacing some bit of hurtful criticism with “no offense.” In Life Stories, the pieces that really work are those that dramatize these power relations in real time, drawing the viewer into the dynamic rather than just pointing dutifully towards it.

To describe a person or event is to seize control over it, to transform the multiplicity of meanings innate to a real life event and filter it through a single, unitary consciousness. A director of non-fiction films or videos must take this responsibility very seriously, but they cannot be hamstrung by it. No matter how conscientious, the artist will forever dominate her subject. The videos in Chen Tamir’s Life Stories demonstrate that a kind of pragmatic irony goes much further than fearful ass-covering for any author looking to interrogate their own unceasing authority.

Collaboration is frustrating at this moment in history in particular because it is a term used so frequently, that it is emptied of specific meaning. The reference appropriates the spirit from a time of more radical thinking, but most often lacks a political agenda or purpose. For instance, I’ve heard people describe their process as collaborative but what that ultimately boils down to is that any member of the crew is free to offer them up an idea and the director then decides if it is worth pursuing. Now, I think that this is a regular (and acceptable) part of the individual creative process. It is also a way that employees move up in the ranks and earn respect by making their bosses look good, but it is probably not appropriate to call this collaboration. On the other hand, given our contemporary models of how ideas, language and meaning are fluidly created, one might conclude that everything in culture is actually the work of collaboration and there really is little to be attributed to the individual anymore. But this philosophical belief, of course is in stark contrast with how almost everything in popular culture works, where the individual ownership and celebrity are always at the kind of center of the machine.

So, collaboration is frustrating because the term is hard to define. For my purposes – and because you all have remained in this room, I know you will agree to my logic – collaboration is defined by shared authority. Within a collaboration individuals remain autonomous, they are responsible for their own decisions and initiative, but they agree to work in a group that actively shares influence and suggestion. Resources are not necessarily split equally, hierarchies may exist, and credit is attributed to individuals as it is earned and desired. I separate this from the idea of the collective – although there are a couple groups on this panel I’ve put together that use the that word – because to me, a collective makes consensus-based decisions, splits all resources, has no hierarchy, and shares all credit under one name.

Collaboration is frustrating. This is my opinion. It’s not just because I never learned to share. As consumers and processors of ideas, I think we are trained to respond most strongly to an individual vision, certainly when we are consumers of fiction, but also when we are viewing non-fiction. Largely, audiences respond to a strong argument, a boldly claimed truth. The food industry is bad. Capitalism is remorseless. Dolphins hunting is wrong. The box office is not alone in responding to stories that promote clarity in black and white. However, these attractive attributes, a strong vision or a singular argument or solid perspective on the truth can be very, very hard to create in a way that satisfies audiences through collaboration. When there are multiple cooks in the kitchen, when there isn’t a singular author or authority on the truth, the results are usually less than tidy. They may be contradictory or confusing, and, depending on the editing process, simply lacking in craft or clear value. So this particular tension between what audiences seem to want and what collaborative methods often produce is one reason I say collaboration is frustrating.

I am not, or perhaps I should say I am no longer, one of the eager optimists for this era of participatory media and the attention economy it has created. Actually, I would say that as much as the web allows us to be more connected and share more information with each other, it is actually most successful in supporting collaboration because it removes face to face contact. Because it clearly divides different aspects of the process of collaboration, and because it eliminates the subtle power negotiations that occur when people are in a room together that can often be the most challenging part of sharing authority.

Intro to Shared Authority: A panel on collaboration at the Chashama Film Festival
Christopher Allen, 2009

Dynamic Power: Chen Tamir’s Life Stories
Colin Beckett, 2009
JOANNA: In your book A Director Prepares you talk about the directing process as kind of creating conditions within which actors can work and I’ve always been kind of struck by that idea, and I just wanted to ask you how you go about creating that space for actors.

ANNE: You know, it’s very banal. It has to do with—believe it or not, having a clean space, where there’s not junk in it, but clean. Treating it well. Starting on time, ending on time. Listening. Ultimately creation is not making something happen, it’s actually listening to what’s already happening. Respect. Attention. And an agreement to disagree, if you understand what I mean. To me collaboration is not about agreeing. I think there’s a disease of agreement in this country. Whereas the notion of disagreeing is how creativity happens. But disagreement with respect and with listening. And those are the condition in which I think something can happen.

JOANNA: Within this highly collaborative structure, what is the role of the individual?

ANNE: Well, you know there’s a saying that a director, for example, needs—and it’s the same thing for an actor—you need—it’s for everybody in a collaborative process—you need a huge ego and no ego simultaneously. And that the paradox in which you live. If you come in just to be a collaborator and don’t bring your taste and brain and impulses and intuition into the act because you think it’s your ego getting in the way you’re in trouble. But at the same time, if you come in and that’s the only thing in the room, is your ego, then you’re in trouble. So actually it’s a negotiation between what you’re—you know. I think of a human being as an antenna and you receive information. And then you translate it. So your job is to keep the plaque off the antenna. That’s what training is. So you need all the things that make you an individual, but then you need to give over to the process at the same time.
UNIONDOCS: In your narration, you write: “If we can appreciate documentaries for their dramatic qualities, perhaps we can appreciate fiction films for their documentary revelations.” Can you further explain this idea? Where is the line between fiction and documentary? And I’m especially interested in your distinction between voluntary and involuntary attention.

THOM ANDERSEN: It’s a bit of a complicated question. That distinction comes from a phenomenon the late 19th century during the first world war, and wrote a book about the movies. It’s the first, I suppose, really theoretical treatise of movies. It’s called The Photoplay: A Psychologi kal Study. It’s one of whose themes still resonate. Although this psychology was based on the notion of faculties, mental faculties, which seems in a certain way obsolete today, but maybe not so much so. I think what’s really changed is the vocabulary rather than the underlying conception. His essential point about movies was that the technical means of motion pictures corresponded to the faculties of the mind. For example, the flashback or the “cutback,” as it was known in those days, corresponded to the faculty of memory.

But he was particularly concerned with the faculty of attention and he made a distinction between a faculty of involuntary attention and a faculty of voluntary attention. In our regular, everyday lives outside of the movies, we often use voluntary attention, right? We attend to things according to our desires. Which is an idea which is really close to the notion of attention in phenomenology, which is why I say his ideas aren’t as antique as they appear. His point about movies is that movies give us what seems to be a picture of the world, but it’s a picture of the world that has already been organized by a voluntary attention, which is the work that we assign to the director. The director has organized our perceptions for us, so that as we watch a movie, we watch with our faculty of involuntary attention insofar as a movie succeeds, it’s only so far as it fails when our voluntary attention comes to the fore. You know, the complaint of critics that “I was watching this movie and I started thinking about my laundry list.”

Münsterberg’s examples are when you start paying attention to the locations rather than the story, you’ve begun to exercise your voluntary attention and the story has failed. So what I’m proposing is... let’s conceive of a movie in a slightly different way. And I’m especially interested in distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary attention.

Conversation with Thom Andersen
Johanna Linsley, 2007

Obviously there’s a story aspect to documentary, and maybe a more useful way of distinguishing, of talking about these two poles of cinema is not to talk about fiction and documentary, but to talk about story and description. The pole of story is what we associate with fiction films and the pole of description is what we associate with documentary film. But story and description exist to a greater and lesser degree in all movies, and stories and descriptions are both useful, because they are ways in which we can begin to understand the world and our experience of the world and to deepen that understanding.

So I guess, in a way, my movie is a way of saying, beyond the story let’s also look at the description in these films. It may be better conceived as descriptions, but they still have value as descriptions and their value as descriptions may continue to exist when the stories themselves don’t have so much value anymore. One of my colleagues at CalArts was Alexander McKendrick and he always insisted on teaching what he called dramatic narrative and rules of dramatic narrative... you know, story-telling. Which he insisted was quite strict and rigorous, but at the time he was teaching, when he was in his 60s and 70s, he hardly ever attended dramatic films, he just watched documentaries on tv. I must say I find the same thing happening to myself. The older I get, the less interested in fiction I get and the more interested I am in this way something new is happening, the younger generation. I’ve never seen Molly Ringwald before in a movie, a different way of putting it is “I’ve never seen Molly Ringwald so beautiful.” Even though you don’t admire her acting, a much in that film as in others, you feel like this film has created a portrait of her which doesn’t exist in any of the other films she’s appeared in. And sort of with actors, so it is with places. Okay, so there’s also — I don’t know if I’d want to say there’s really a fictional aspect to documentary, but
UNIONDOCS: It also seems like, looking at the films you programmed here this weekend, landscape really is this nexus around which you can interestingly talk about avant-garde film, documentary, and commercial film as well – you write about Twister and Do the Right Thing in the book. Do you think that’s a product of your interests or is there something else there to make it a place to talk about all these different things?

SCOTT MACDONALD: Well, I do think film is very involved in place. I think it’s as much about place as it is about character. But then I’m obsessive in the sense that when I watch a movie I’m looking at the background as well as the foreground and trying to figure out where it was shot. I just saw The Road yesterday, and I felt pretty good because I recognized it was Mount Saint Helen, and Multnomah Falls, and I recognized another section was shot in Pennsylvania. I’m very place-oriented. We move through spaces all the time. If you show me films that create a pleasure in being in these places, I’m a happy dude. For me Gottheim’s Horizons has been one of the great avant-garde films because it helped me be happy to live in central New York. There’s never a day that I don’t think of Brakhage, that I don’t see something Brakhage alerted me to, that I wouldn’t have seen before Brakhage. Same thing with Gottheim. I like having my life invigorated by seeing more in the surroundings I’m in. I also like finding out about places I ought to go see. I love looking at maps, I like looking at pictures of places and films about places.
You wrote something recently for the Millennium Film Journal in response to a survey about what they call “experiments in documentary.” You say that you “dislike and disavow” the term “experimental” in regard to documentary, and in general, because you feel like it cordon off the rest of the world of documentary. I’m wondering if you think there’s any reason to distinguish what you do from what someone like, say, Ken Burns does.

S U F R I D R I C H:
Is there any reason to do it for my sake, and is there any reason to do it for the audience’s sake? It’s kind of two different things. Certainly, in my mind, when I’m working, I’m very aware that I’m not doing a Ken Burns film. So in some way, I recognize, without necessarily putting into words, that I’m working in a way other than the conventional mode of documentary filmmaking. I was going to say “in opposition to,” and then realized I don’t think I have that kind of militant feeling of wanting to overthrow the old guard — sometimes I do if I see a really bad film — but I am aware I’m doing something other than following the conventions. I suppose it’s necessary for me to understand that in order to proceed. Then with the audience, there’s a really hard question, because like the film I finished most recently, From the Ground Up, is about coffee and it’s pretty much visual and I don’t give any information about coffee production, and I use music in a sort of irritating way. I use a single song, in fragments, then I repeat the fragments, very deliberately to make it irritating and make you think about how monotonous work is and all that. But I realized after finishing it, when I started showing it people would come see the film with the expectation that they were going to learn something about coffee. So on the one hand I started worrying and thought I should let people know that they’re not seeing a conventional film, ergo I should call it an “experimental documentary.” But then I thought if I do that, then they won’t come see it. Then maybe I’d only get people who have more adventurous or developed tastes in film and I don’t want that to be the only audience I have, and if I can draw in people who have an interest in more conventional documentaries, maybe then some of them will come around. Sometimes I don’t want people to come watch it who are just going to be disappointed or annoyed by it. So I’m of two minds about it.

I don’t share Godmilow’s pessimism about the value of desire or feelings like concern and caring, but I think that she does capture something deeply unsatisfying about this mode of documentary: nothing is ever really at stake for the filmmakers or the audience (or at least the kinds of audiences I tend to see movies with). It’s not a question of motives — making a documentary is exhausting and difficult, and basically impossible without a genuine dedication to one’s subject. But good intentions are not enough. Tasteful reportage of apparent injustice leaves no room for the viewer to feel anything other than admiration for that injustice’s victims, and for themselves for having paid this token respect. It’s rare to learn anything from these movies that could not have been gleaned from a synopsis. There is none of the dramatic push-pull that subverts expectations and allows for the transformative potential we expect from art. And that’s the basic tension here: between those who want documentary to function as art and those who want it to function as journalism. Partisans of this genre will say that liberal documentaries give voice to people unrepresented elsewhere. They are not wrong, and this is a noble goal. But more often than not, these movies do not travel outside the closed circuit of festivals and art houses. And in the context of so many other somber accounts of tragedy, each individual story is subsumed under a kind of general assertion of the world’s misery and unfairness. Moreover, I’m not sure that a feature film is a particularly good form for conveying information. Both print and radio allow for a greater nuance in detail and analysis, and television reaches an exponentially larger audience much quicker. There is then a queasy relationship between form and content, an overconfidence in the power of the material that tempts directors to slack on the work involved in making it meaningful to their viewers. Throughout Pray the Devil Back to Hell, I wondered why its creators chose to tell this story on film. Is there any reason other than the fact that they happen to be filmmakers?


An Inadequate Form Colin Beckett, 2009
UNIONDOCS: And then another background question, you’ve just finished your first documentary, but you’ve been researching for over fifteen years, and so I was wondering what the advantage of working in film are, as opposed to writing?

SUDHIR VENKATESH: Now I didn’t have any pictures in my book because I distrust images. I distrusted images I should say. Very much so at that point. Because they over determine our perceptions of what poor people are like. I was trying to argue in my book that this is an American community, no different than Columbine, no different than the lily-white suburb where I grew up. Of course different in some profound ways but not different in the aspirations that people have to live a good life. And the problem is that when we see a picture of an African American person in poverty we get all sorts of images conjured up and they can over determine our ability to just say, what’s really taking place here and how are they similar? The presumption of race in this country is always, how are they different? Not how are they similar or how we related to one another. And so I wanted to get past that and so I didn’t have any pictures because I wanted people to have and image of whatever community they wanted.

Ok, so you go on while and you start distrusting images, and then you realize that maybe you’re missing something. And I think that’s what I did. I think there was an error in my judgment in some ways. And I met a filmmaker in New York and I decided to experiment with him. And bring him to Chicago and then look and see what happens when you try to play with narrative. Sociology, the point of sociology is to instruct and inform in the way of giving people an interpretation of what is going on in the world around them. Documentary film, in this country, has not been in that genre. It has been about storytelling, it has been about providing a historical record for what has been taking place, etc. Those things are in creative tension with one another. As a writer, I can tell you, here’s the information and here’s what you should think about it – here’s how you should think about it. Here’s what policy should be developed, etc. I can’t do that as a filmmaker. Or not so easily. My politics, my sense of how to lead you, have to be done in different ways. Through storytelling, through the relationship of image and orality, and so on. I can’t simply say, this is what this means, as I can in a conclusion of a chapter. So it’s a much different way of making a point, and to me it’s a much different way of being political. Expressing one’s political ideology. So you look at things, right? Obviously, people trained in documentary film know how to look for the juxtaposition of image, what is not there, the way of editing, and so on. So I had to learn how to demonstrate and give my political sense, or what I wanted people to take away in a different way than writing where you can just say, hey, this is what the data means.
Being a person means having thoughts and feelings and experiences and times that are not shared. That are lost. That are kept to yourself. That are secret. This is a privilege, I think, and it's sad. It's not something that should be mastered or contained or gotten over. Maybe it doesn't even have to be acknowledged. Maybe it goes without saying. The functional response to these gaps is to take what fragments we can find and make something new, something we can share.

But I want to try it. I want everyone to spend the next minute not saying anything and when the minute is over I'd like you to not ever tell anyone what you thought or felt or did for that minute. We're all going to share the same container and we're all going to keep the contents to ourselves.

Now make a promise to yourself to remember for as long as you can what you thought and felt and did in that minute. And make another promise not to ever tell anyone about it.
Excerpt from The Commons_Berlin
Excerpt from I Have So Much To Say; I Say Nothing
A Republican At My Table Invitation
Praxis! In Retrospect
WURST
Excerpt from Lawrence Lessig interview
art™ Christopher Allen
From the script The Commons Radio 6
Perfect Oneida
Dynamic Power: Chen Tamir’s Life Stories
Intro to Shared Authority: A panel on collaboration
Anne Bogart interview
Conversation with Thom Andersen
Interview with Scott MacDonald
An Inadequate Form
Interview with Sudhir Venkatesh
Not Documenting