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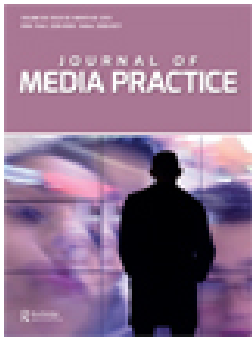


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‘Visible Evidence XIV’ Conference: Bochum, December 2007

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The 14th international ‘Visible Evidence’ peripatetic documentary conference was held in the snowy landscape of Bochum (Germany) in December 2007. It drew together participants from around the globe, providing a dynamic forum for discussion and critical debates on contemporary issues within documentary modes of inquiry. There was an energy and excitement at the conference, which spilt over into the discussions outside the panels of both theory and practice. The programme comprised panels, keynote speeches, screenings and a book presentation of *Building Bridges: The Cinema of Jean Rouch*¹ with Joram ten Brink, Brian Winston and Michael Renov. The conference was diverse in its different approaches to the field of documentary study, including a talk by the Serbian performance artist Marina Abramovic, and a keynote speech by Sylvie Lindeperg (Paris III) ‘Nuit et Brouillard: A Film in History’. This generality, however, further offered scope for several important themes to emerge, such as digital documentary and technologies, and the performance, re-enactment and affect of Reality TV on television documentary productions.

A focus on digital documentaries and documentary technologies included recent trends within documentary practice incorporating new media, web 2.0, locative and mobile media technologies. Tim Schwab (Concordia University, Montreal) chaired the panel ‘Dilemmas in Digital Documentary: Aesthetics, Participation and Authorship’ and Bjørn Sørensen (Norwegian University of Science and Technology) chaired the session titled ‘Documentary Technologies’. Through the incorporation of digital and mobile technologies new possibilities for participation and shared authorship surface, while simultaneously new aesthetics strive to enter the mediascape, positioning themselves alongside an increasing number of non-linear documentary projects. Looking back to the past century in the field of art and media practice, documentary remains a pioneering field of inquiry for the exploratory use of technologies, evidenced in the promotion of innovative documentary formats by practice-led researchers, filmmakers and educators; the hybridisation of non-fictional filmmaking ranges across various domains (archives, education, galleries,

1 ten Brink, J. (2007), *Building Bridges: The Cinema of Jean Rouch*, ed., London: Wallflower Press.

Reality TV formats, science) in which the creative treatment of documentary filmmaking is given full expression.

In the panel on 'Reality TV', chaired by Brian Winston (Lincoln University), Richard Kilborn (Stirling University) pointed out that Reality TV, arguably a passing trend, is the antithesis of the traditional documentary, since half of it is faked or made up. Brian Winston commented in the session that programme producers are aware that there is the possibility of negative consequences for the participants as a result of appearing in these shows, and that since these cannot be foreseen, the participants' informed consent was thus diminished. The tone of the discussion of the ethics of Reality TV towards its participants, together with its impact on TV documentary was fairly despondent and focused mainly on whether or not more regulation would be of benefit.

In a fascinating panel on re-enactment and science chaired by Jonathan Kahana (New York University), Deirdre Boyle (the New School) referred to the film *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) by Rithy Panh, in her discussion of re-enactment in the disassociation of memories in trauma. In a repetitive and ritualistic series of motions in a clip from *S21* a prison guard re-enacts his behaviour towards the prisoners, demonstrating how he abused them verbally and physically. For Boyle narrative memory in ordinary life is a social act, but in traumatic memory there is no social component, and very often traumatic memory cannot be consciously remembered, although the memories can control ongoing behaviour, including nightmares and flashbacks. Repeating the action is thereby a way of remembering, since the past has to be re-enacted in order to be assimilated. This further raises the ethical question of whether documentary has a legitimate place as a form of therapy or catharsis for its participants.

In a panel on documentary photography, chaired by Matthias Christen (Berlin), Jie Li (Harvard University) discussed *Though I am Gone* (2006), an important documentary on the Chinese Cultural Revolution by Hui Ji. In 1966 Bian Zhongyun, a teacher, was beaten to death by her Red Guard students and her husband Wang Jinyao extensively photographed his wife's body. He has been waiting to transfer the photographs to the Cultural Revolution Museum, yet to date this has not materialised. The use of the camera, Jie Li asserted, replaced the gaze of the human, recording what the human cannot bear to look at. The camera mediates but does not mitigate the sight of horror. The film has been banned in China and is only available on the internet through You Tube.

Gerda Johanna Cammaer (Ryerson University, Toronto) discussed Jennifer Baichwal's film *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006) on the work of photographer Edward Burtynsky. Baichwal's film shows Burtynski formally composing identically dressed factory workers outside factory buildings in China before taking his shot. The completed photograph in a gallery is then filmed, zooming out from the photos to show how the people have become in the photograph no more than depersonalised dots. Cammaer demonstrated that this concern for beauty clashes harshly with the larger (ugly) picture: the gigantic damage done to nature by worldwide industrialisation and the devastating social and ecological consequences of globalisation.

The conference closed with an inspiring keynote address by Michael Renov, who highlighted the need to assert teaching documentary as a passion, rather than, as is the case all too often, viewing such teaching as a supplement and inferior mode of scholarship to conducting research. The teaching of non-fiction sets it apart from other areas of pedagogy; the increase in documentary studies courses, coupled with the availability of low-cost cameras, the internet, film festivals and new documentary modes, has increased the number of students eager for additional courses. Yet, despite this demand and expansion, as noted by Renov, the financial rewards for institutions are skewed increasingly towards research rather than teaching. In the past, the United Kingdom, for example, was always good at prioritising teaching, but this has been gradually reversed through the state rankings of Universities and the RAE, fuelling the tendency to prioritise writing about teaching rather than teaching itself.

In his address Renov commented that one of the key aims of the 'modest proposal of nine pedagogical goals' is to provide local knowledge. The Ruhr area, where the conference was held, is the former industrial heartland of Germany and is currently coping with the difficult change from a production to a consumption culture. The conference screening of *Losers and Winners* (Michael Loeken 2006) characterised these shifting values. The documentary portrays a steel factory being dismantled in its entirety and shipped from the Ruhr area to China; might China be one destination that the 'Visible Evidence' conference transfers to in the future? The conference organisation by the Ruhr Universität was excellent and the registration fee generously low. However, the language of the conference was English with no translation – certainly a problem which needs to be addressed if 'Visible Evidence' is to be seen as a truly international conference. The next conference will be held at Lincoln University on 4-8 August 2008.

Contributor details

Jill Daniels is a London-based filmmaker and teaches media production at the University of East London. Her film *Small Town Girl* (2007) is a longitudinal study, filmed over five years, of three girls growing into adolescence in two small English post-industrial towns. It was screened at the Swansea Life Film Festival in May 2008 and the International Film Festival England, Tamworth, June 2008. She is currently in production on a film, *Traces: 1, Not Reconciled*, on the continuing affects of the Spanish Civil War.

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Max Schleser is a London-based filmmaker undertaking a PhD in the Cream Research Centre, University of Westminster. He teaches media production at the University of East London and Limkokwing University of Creative Technology. He organised the international Filmobile conference and exhibition (www.filmobile.net) held in London in April 2008.

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