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Report Visible Evidence XVII Istanbul August 2010

Visible Evidence, the annual international peripatetic documentary conference, now in its 17th edition, was held this year for the first time in Istanbul, Turkey. It was organised by Alisa Lebow, (Brunel University), in collaboration with Bogaziçi University and DocIstanbul. DocIstanbul is a non-profit training, research, policy and networking centre, conceived in 2007 by a group of filmmakers and scholars with the aim of sustaining and advancing documentary scholarship, production and support in Turkey.

The conference brought together practitioners, scholars and filmmakers from around the world, to address contemporary debates in documentary studies in the beautiful setting of Bogaziçi University in the extreme heat of a Turkish August. Survivors of the unaccustomed heat were treated to a rich and diverse program of over 40 panels in just four days, daily screenings of Turkish and Kurdish documentaries, plenary panels focusing on Iranian and Kurdish documentaries, as well as an amazing boat trip down the Bosphorus river and fantastic food and hospitality. Turkish practitioners and scholars were well represented in the panels and many Turkish students attended the conference.

The Visible Evidence conference is now very large, and this edition covered a diverse range of themes relating to the documentary, and its importance for participants is as much about the opportunity for networking with people from across the globe, (even if this is still largely Anglophone), as it is in discovering new and exciting research. This year the conference organisers provided translation facilities for the Turkish and Kurdish speakers in the plenary panels, an excellent development as this has been a problem for international participants at previous conferences that have been held entirely in English.

The choice of Istanbul as the location encouraged a focus on documentary in Turkey and the Middle East, including discussions on Palestinian and Kurdish documentaries. Istanbul, a city connecting Europe and Asia, was in an excellent position to facilitate these debates. The conference included papers on Turkish Documentary filmmakers and communities outside Turkey, represented in the panel *To and From Turkey:*

Transnationalism in Documentary. Transnational cinema was also discussed in *Border/Lands: Artists' Documentaries* and a number of other panels in relation to migrant and diasporic communities. Another example was the panel chaired by Tim Schwab (Concordia University), *Palestinian Documentary Inside and Outside: Politics, Poetics and National Identity*. In the panel *Affective Landscapes and Archives*, Elizabeth Cowie (University of Kent) talked in her paper, *Testimony of the Landscape*, about “accented cinema” exploring the politics and aesthetics of the filmed landscape in relation to identity and nation states.

The conference did not feature keynote speakers, but instead focused on the issues of the region, emphasized in the two plenary sessions: *The Multiple Faces of Iranian Documentary Filmmaking* chaired by Hadi Gharabaghi (New York University), and included Mahvash Sheikholeslami (documentary film director and TV producer), Soudabeh Moradian (documentary film director and former Vice President of IRDFA) and Mehrdad Oskouei (documentary film director). *Speaking Out: Kurdish Documentary* was chaired by Ayça Çiftçi (Royal Holloway University) and featured three documentary filmmakers, Müjde Arslan, Kazim Öz and Çayan Demirel, who are based in Turkey and identify themselves as Kurdish.

In both plenary panels the filmmakers pointed to the difficulties in making documentaries independently of state censorship and control. In Iran there has been a resurgence in documentary cinema focusing primarily on social issues aimed at national consumption, but they are rarely shown on television and are therefore mainly funded by the private sector. The Iranian Documentary Film Association (IRDFA) for directors and cinematographers, now has 400 members and was very active around the ‘green’ revolution.

In the Kurdish plenary, the filmmakers emphasised their attempts to revitalize the film scene in Turkey by making films in their own language, to tackle issues around representing Kurdish identity in Turkey. A continuing and deeper discussion on the relationship of Kurdish and Turkish documentary filmmakers would be welcome, perhaps at the Visible Evidence conference in New York next year.

The conference program included film screenings of Kurdish and Turkish films and Turkish filmmakers presented papers in the panels, underlining the local character of this year's conference. It was unfortunate therefore, that the film screenings, which offered a chance to see rare Turkish and Kurdish documentaries, were held in parallel with the conference panels and were poorly attended, although DVDs of the films were available for sale.

The connection between local communities and a global audience can be linked in documentary studies to new distribution and online screening possibilities. Discussion around database documentaries and *WikiLeaks* appeared in a number of panels in, and beyond, *Virtual Witness: Spreadable Media; Social Media and the Viral; Spectacle; Documentary Aesthetics; New Media*, and *Techniques and Technics in Documentary Practice*. These panels illustrated the possibilities for contemporary innovative documentary practice. Alongside Augmented Reality applications, mobile devices present prospects for filmmakers to create new aesthetic forms and simultaneously offer opportunities for documentary filmmaking practice to open-up towards a user-based interpretation of technology.

Ethics was also a recurring theme in the conference, coming up in many different panels, particularly in relation to the Internet and the politics of representation. Video clips streamed on video-sharing websites, raise issues related to the ethics of viewing these types of films for the purposes of 'analysis'. Jason Middleton (University of Rochester)'s paper, viral "*Reaction Videos*" showed examples of clips revealing the terrified reactions of young children that appear to brutally expose them to horror films on TV, or horror images during computer games.

Alongside a number of papers that explored the notion of memory, a variety of papers framed the poetical documentary through examinations of *Animated Documentary, Still/Moving* and the Essay Film (*The Essay Film and Authorship*). In his paper *Temporality in the Documentary Film*, Michael Renov (University of Southern California) pointed to the significance of work produced in the 1920s. Engagement with subject matter through poetics can embrace the hearts and minds of the audience.

Through this focus on the Middle Eastern region the conference illustrated that documentary studies can provide a starting point for engagement with significant debates around documentary and consequently has the potential to lead towards cultural and social change.

Jill Daniels is a London-based, award winning filmmaker. She teaches media production at the University of East London where she is undertaking a PhD. Her film *Not Reconciled* (2009), is a poetic documentary on the continuing effects of the Spanish Civil War. She is currently in production on *The Border Crossing*, an autobiographical video set in the Basque Country that explores the poetics of documentary. Her website is www.jilldanielsfilms.com.

Max Schleser is a London-based mobile filmmaker, currently in the final stages of a PhD in the CREAM Research Centre at the University of Westminster. His documentary projects, have been screened at various film and new media festivals in the UK and internationally (including events in Berlin, Paris, New York, San Paulo and Tokyo). Max teaches media production at the Limkokwing University of Creative Technology in London and Kuala Lumpur. During the last few years he has spoken at a number of international conferences and lectured in London, Gaborone and Kuala Lumpur on the subject of mobile media. His recent publications include the Journal of Media Practice and VJ theory. Max organises the FILMOBILE network (www.filmobile.net), which showcases innovation in mobile creativity.