

## **XXIX Visible Evidence: Documentary Ecologies**

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**Panel: A is for Authorship: questions of authoring within the documentary space** - Helen Littleboy, RHUL; Dr Stephen Connolly, UCA; Jessica Boyall, RHUL.

**Keywords:** Documentary, non-Fiction, Authorship, Peer Review

### **Paper Title: Authorship in contest; a report from the boundaries of Creative Documentary**

Stephen Connolly

See accompanying visual presentation PDF

#### **Abstract**

The content and boundaries of moving image authorship are more settled in the artist's cinema, re-enforced by its identification of an individual creator in 'artist'; the cultural siting of this cinema at the margins of the industry, and its artisanal and crafted modes of production. However, when artist's work crosses boundaries with non-fiction and invites framing as "creative documentary", the "thorny problem(s)" of authorship invoked by Bruzzi (2006) begin to manifest. Responses to works that straddle these boundaries offer material for questioning models of authorship in non-fiction cinema.

Evidence of failures of authorship in a work of a personal non-fiction film shown at VE 2002, *Archive, Album and other Images* (Connolly 2022), were found by a peer reviewer. These criticisms can be responded to by examining their modelling of authorship, and shown to be restricted to some registers of cinematic enunciation and not others. The articulation of authorship with respect to the haptic (Campt 2019), and embodiment in non-fiction as invoked by the work of MacDougall (2006), and the artists cinema, by Marks (2000) and

Chamarette (2012) will be noted. By discussing these exclusions, a modelling of authorship in non-fiction cinema will be explored in this presentation.

## **Presentation**

Hello and Welcome -

In this presentation I will reflect on authorship through the prism of the peer-review system which questioned authorship in a work.

I submitted the authored documentary piece *Family Album and Other Images* - shown at least year's VE - to a moving image practice journal. It was accepted with minor amendments to the text accompanied by widely contrasting peer reviews.

Of course – the hostile review got my attention – but it can be put to good use as an opening to a discussion of the dimensions of authorship that can be exhibited by a documentary film. Within the hostility were clear limits to the domain of authorship as understood by the reviewer. To move forward, rather than reverse engineer the review, I'm going to relook at a small section of the work to raise questions of what qualifies in the clip as evidence of authorship.

*Archive/Album and other Images* is a work assembled from documentary fragments long after the events indicated. I will substantiate claims for authorship by concentrating on the images in the moving image stream as a sequence of visual materials - as well as the textual elements that may be present.

As you watch the clip with two I'd like you to keep two perspectives in mind.

First - a quote by Bruzzi -

Documentary is predicated upon a dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential, that the text itself reveals the tensions between the documentary pursuit of the most authentic mode of factual representation and the impossibility of this aim.

Bruzzi, S. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 2006 pp6

I am asking you to conceive of authorship as operational within these parameters. [And in fact – authenticity could be a qualitative marker of authorship – understood in these terms]

Secondly – basic details about the topic of the work – it is about a family member – my father – who worked in the space industry also had mental health events that had major impacts on the family story. This clip is an imaginative reconstruction of the build-up to a crisis event – using documentary materials.

## SCREENING

The clip we have just seen has context has a position within the overall arc of this - very classically constructed – film as an 'interval' before a dramatic 'crisis' or 'fall'. Within the frame of narrative that is; a dramatic event is shown to be the product or outcome of a process or sequence. What needs to be shown is a build-up of stress, and work overload. This is achieved by montage - within this sequence. My father's work which we understand involves space exploration;

and time on the beach; are shown as in parallel; co-existent at the same time and location. This work/leisure cross-over is pictured as implying a mental state.

This is a decisive break in the cinematic language used by the film up to now – to get this point across. As a first question – does this montage qualify as an authorial intervention in the work or is it assigned to the domain of the editor – undertaking a creative task yet normatively under the supervision of the author. This is a complex area, in her talk just now, Helen has argued for the importance of executive producing and post-production roles significantly because they significantly shape the final documentary work – yet the importance of these actual practices is untheorized in the authorship literature.

Remaining at this overview level – let's consider the textual narration in the sequence. As the sequence progresses, we hear voiced a mis-match between the claims of the photographic evidence – the presence of my siblings on the beach - and the memory of the siblings – they cannot recall being there.

This episode of non-recall is followed by a spoken observation claiming the poetic and material properties of the world are remembered most when in space. The placement of this quote is to substantiate the material worlds in the slides; re-enforcing the powers of the representation; as well as offering a perspective from the “other” - a Russian or *Cosmonaut* - within the space theme.

These textual narrational enunciations both normatively qualify as *authorial* interventions in the work – particularly given the reflexive nature of their content. The reflexivity is on point with Bruzzi's assertion; a voiced scepticism as

to the claims for authenticity of the visual image from the family album – areas not usually given to contestation on these grounds.

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Let us look more closely at the montage in the film clip – both for method in illustration of overall signs of disturbance of a persona at this narrative moment and its means. The visual track juxtaposes a pass over the landscape of the moon with kodachrome snaps of a family on a beach; on the soundtrack, a layering of beach sounds; an ongoing radio conversation between ground control and astronauts; later the interjection of narration we have just considered.

These juxtapositions feature signs of proximity and distance; similarity and contrast -

- earth and moon are distinct celestial bodies – spatially distant;
- as material environments, the beach and the moon’s surface have similarities as particulate rock or sand (and places on the moon are identified as “mares” or seas)
- a compare/contrast in visual timbre of the images – between the fine detail and warmth of the kodachrome slides and the rough and ready 16mm footage of the moon’s surface;
- the sound has connective affiliation – the radio transmission is being broadcast and is a possible soundtrack to a beach – indeed the progress of the apollo was avidly listened to and supported by a substantial audience up to the achievement of Neil Armstrong’s walk on the moons surface;

- this has connections with my father's work – if we look to the biographical information that we know about the character on screen – this is of professional interest to the screen persona yet at this moment he is pictured on holiday:
- the juxtaposition in sound between the live US astronaut media (a document) and the post-hoc poetic reflections of a *cosmonaut* (a voiced text – re-enactment);
- from what we know of the persona –the space program is “work” and yet present to him within a context presented as “leisure”.

If interpretative rubrics beyond narration are applied, the sequence is revealed as complex and layered in its image and sound. It was designed as such. These rubrics – the materialities of image content as well as the image as object; the provenance of the images and sounds; the relationships between representations; these are affects in reception of the film. These aspects of the film texture reception matter as affects in the reception of work by audiences; in particular the haptic as discussed by film theorists like Marks and Chamarette and critical approaches to the reception of visual images by Camp.

In my experience, discussions of these affects as the intended product of “authorship” do find a home – but the participants are filmmakers in production rather than academics interested in documentary cinema. This is a general observation from experience of conversations in an edit suite and at screenings – and in general we are talking of affects.

I'm not sure these axes of interpretation are attributed as 'authorship' in film studies texts. I will note an exception in a moment – but I would like to make a speculative argument -

- at some point, authorship is transferred.
- What this means is the attribute of 'authorship' switches persona from filmmaker to film academic in the writing on film.
- it is transferred as part of the interpretative performance of the film analysis.
- This movement is facilitated by the alignment of film texts with the reception of film – to talk of affect is also to speak of reception.

The shared temporal and spatial co-ordinates of reception facilitates the movement of authorship from maker to academic text.

Capturing this spectrum of creative decision-making we can attribute to 'authorship' in film is rare in the academic literature. A rare example is the discussions between the theorist Kaja Silverman and the filmmaker Harun Farocki captured in the text - *Speaking about Godard* (NYU Press 1998). Constance Penley in her introduction labels the work undertaken by the discussants as 'inductive'; meaning that inferences are made from the images and sounds in the film without restriction as to the 'authored.' This is cited as mirroring the practice of the filmmaker in question, building given images and sounds into 'arguments' around the topics at play in the work.

Penley goes on to describe Silverman and Farocki's discursive text as -

showing interpretation to be not so much a matter of empirical correctness, but rhetoric, philosophy, and politics as well.

Penley in Silverman & Farocki, 1998

This is telling. For sure this must be the case, but I will suggest the habitual restriction of 'authorship' to the textual and narrative elements of a film in the literature may be related to ideas of parallelism between the film and the literary text. The remit of 'authorship' in the film unfolds in parallel with the 'authorship' of interpretative texts. Silverman and Farocki, by conducting their investigation of Godard's work through discussion, dispensed with this symmetry and freed themselves to consider a wider spectrum of creative axes and registers in the production and texture of the final film as evidence of 'authorship'.

That's it – I don't really have a conclusion except to say we need to take a closer look at the discursive limits to what is to be considered as 'authorship'. It is worthy of further study and new forms of reading and writing.

Thank you.

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