

Documentary Reframed

Documentary Reframed: Process, Politics, and Aesthetics

Screenings and viewings of Canadian and international documentaries

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The theme of the controlled body is omnipresent in Montreal filmmaker Caroline Martel's *The Phantom of the Operator* (2004), constructed with visual materials retrieved from national and internet databases relating to telecommunications history. Post-war women, grateful for respectable employment, discipline their bodies to service the maximum number of telephone customers in the shortest possible time. Everything from their tone of voice to their movie star smiles are learned behaviours conforming to Taylorist social engineering and the "voices with a smile" corporate slogan. Martel superimposes a disembodied female voice, a fictive narration, that leads the viewer through a dreamlike interpretation of these simulacra. These telephone operators seem to exist in a dematerialized, hyperreal space, one which intersects ominously with our own increasingly mediatized existence.

This sense of a media sphere is evident in Vancouver filmmaker Richard Martin's *Mixed Signals* (2005). The corruption of his images, recorded from a digitally scrambled broadcast, reflects the disintegration of American culture and the chaotic ideology of religious

fundamentalism allied with right wing politics. Martin eschews textual interjections and voice-over narratives, instead allowing the cacophonous voices of television evangelists and Bush-era politicians to speak for themselves. The mosaic of Martin's scrambled images is as appropriate to express the apocalyptic confusion of the late American empire as Martel's crisp black and white images are to depict the stability of the early- to mid-20th Century Fordist contract.

Psycho-spiritual realities

The filmmakers in *Documentary Reframed* who are concerned with psychological or spiritual conditions face the challenge of how to document non-corporeal realities. Is the camera's indexicality a barrier to expressions of inner states if used in a straightforward documentary manner? What happens when "actuality" lacks a material basis for the camera to record? In *Ryan* (Chris Landreth, 2004), *Dreams of Jagodina* (Nora Malone, 2005), *Happy Crying Nursing Home* (Niklas Sven Vollmer, 2004), and *I have no memory of my direction* (Midi Onodera, 2005), a variety of strategies are borrowed from other genres. Landreth uses recorded conversations

with his subject, pioneering National Film Board animator Ryan Larkin, but eschews the indexical image in favour of bizarre and brilliant three-dimensional, hand-animated characterizations both to honour the legacy of his biographical subject and to express his own sense of Larkin's mental world. Malone moves towards fiction with her dreamlike, *mis en scène* visuals and a lyrical narration scripted from interviews with a Serbian woman. The fictional recreations of scenes from the subject's childhood growing up with family violence combine with recreations of the girl's dreams, which played an important role in her survival and eventual escape.

Onodera and Vollmer both embrace the camera's indexicality while working experimentally. A Canadian-born, Toronto-based, experimental filmmaker of Japanese descent, Onodera constructed *I have no memory of my direction* partly with documentary footage she shot during three months spent in Japan, her first visit to the country of her father's birth. She then deploys toy cameras, television images, and video games to create a kind of travelogue that is also a personal essay on different types of memory: cultural, inherited, and collective. Playing

with notions of truth, her voice-over narrative is in the third person, a fiction that nevertheless bears close relation to the filmmaker's life. Like Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983), to which Onodera offers thanks in her film's credits, the images are real and the soundtrack is created. The documentary images are often explained, commented on, and contextualized by the narrator who is admittedly chasing ghosts, chasing memories. She says she wants "a camera obscura for dreams," but in the absence of that technology, she must rely on what is available. Onodera's narrative concludes with a disclaimer: "This is a dream; this is not a film; this is not true."

Onodera takes Minh-ha's challenge and becomes an eager observer collecting samples in order to reflect on media, among other things. This reflection involves a not-so-subtle sense of frustration at the limits of the camera and its visual image to effectively depict multiple layers of reality: material, ideological, and psychological. Instead of transcending those limits, *I have no memory of my direction* seems to throw them into high relief.

A similar sense of frustration pervades Vollmer's *Happy Crying Nursing Home*.

Vollmer's obsessive visual record of his baby's first few months of existence combine with audio and text to explore fatherhood and the contrast between dream-wish and reality. In Vollmer's hands, the comfortable and celebratory images of home video become a surrealist ride through conflicting feelings of happiness and despair. The video camera, though often engaged in extreme close-ups of the baby and rituals of feeding and diaper changing, paradoxically keeps the video maker at a distance from the experience. The work engages with experimental films like Stan Brakhage's *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), which was an attempt to transcribe the experience of childbirth from the point of view of someone who is essentially excluded from the process. At the time of Brakhage's short film, fathers generally were not allowed into delivery rooms. *Happy Crying Nursing Home* is a reflection not only on the limits of the camera's ability to penetrate inner states, but also on how the camera itself creates a barrier to the very experience being documented.

Encountering the Other

The reflexive approach intensifies with films and videos that attempt the documentation of other cultures, terrain fraught with theoretical as well as practical difficulties. Because of effective critiques mounted in the writings of postcolonial cultural critics such as Edward Said and the work of experimental filmmakers such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, those engaged in an ethnographic type of representation are working in a context of increased understanding of how systems of representation are framed by political forces. The visual histories of violence accompanying ethnographic representations pose a critical challenge to contemporary cultural producers who want to engage with cultures foreign to their own. Minh-ha's work is pivotal in this regard, and *Documentary Reframed* features her visual study of daily life in a Senegalese village, *Reassemblage* (1982). In classical editing, jump cuts are considered a flaw. In *Reassemblage*, jump cuts are employed to jar the viewer and, along with fragmented framing, suggest that the filmmaker is collecting samples that ultimately evade meaning because she cannot enter into the world of her subjects.