

Tay, S. L. (2008), 'Undisclosed Recipients: documentary in an era of digital convergence', *Studies in Documentary Film* 2: 1, pp. 79–98

http://www.atypon-link.com/INT/doi/abs/10.1386/sdf.2.1.79_1

Studies in Documentary Film Volume 2 Number 1 © 2008 Intellect Ltd
Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/sdf.2.1.79/1

excerpt

Undisclosed Recipients: documentary in an era of digital convergence

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Abstract

As part of 'two essays in dialogue' with a piece written by Dale Hudson, this article advances critical discussions of the documentary film given the context of, and challenges posed by, digitality. Specifically, it analyses 'the digital' in Michael Takeo Magruder's {transcription} and [FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004] and Christina McPhee's La Conchita mon amour as a means to advance discussion of documentary beyond claims to realism and documentary truth towards what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls 'boundary events'. Tay argues that digital video, editing and compositing expose the limitations of visual evidence to represent trauma.

Keywords

Internet
globalization
database
documentary
environmentalism
Festival

Preamble

Curated by Dale Hudson and Sharon Lin Tay for the 2007 Finger Lakes Environmental Film Festival (FLEFF), the online exhibit 'Undisclosed Recipients' situates documentary praxes in relation to the festival's potent re-imagination of environmentalism. The festival challenges assumptions that environmentalism concerns itself primarily with ecology and preservation, arguing instead that environmentalism demands to be recognized within a broader framework, a 'complicated nexus of the social, political, aesthetic, technological, economic, physical, and natural'. Sustainability becomes the nodal point at the intersections of nature and culture. 'An ecological way of thinking, then, demands tracing these complex intersections in order to understand them – and then act on them', explain FLEFF co-directors Thomas Shevory and Patricia R. Zimmermann; 'Ecology means understanding how things, people, and ideas are interconnected' (2007: n.p.). Comparably, the online exhibit complicates assumptions about documentary's primary concern with 'truth' and 'evidence', particularly in relation to the theme of sustainability and the environment within a large global conversation that extends across issues of labour, war, health, disease, intellectual property, archives, HIV/AIDS, women's rights and human rights. 'Undisclosed Recipients' brings together artistically innovative, socially engaged and politically urgent work to a larger audience of 'undisclosed recipients', exploring the Internet's potential both as a medium of production and a mode of distribution. The exhibit foregrounds ways that digital video and the Internet can re-imagine and reclaim the documentary praxes that recognize meaning as process, rather than as product. Documentary is reinvigorated as collaborative, interactive and polyvocal –

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as open to the complexities of debate, rather than closed to the simplicities of certainty. Adopting these strategies, the following two essays explore related arguments about digital images and digital structures in selected works from the 'Undisclosed Recipients' exhibit. The essays aim to propose ways of rethinking documentary's ostensibly contradictory impulses of a desire for immediacy and the necessity for mediation. Tay focuses on the challenge of 'the digital' to images as documentary evidence in terms of fidelity of representation and mediation. She analyses Michael Takeo Magruder's *{transcription}* and *[FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004]* and Christina McPhee's *La Conchita mon amour* as a means to advance discussion of documentary beyond claims to realism and documentary truth towards what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls 'boundary events'. She argues that digital video, editing and compositing expose the limitations of visual evidence to represent trauma, 'natural' disasters and war. ...

Undisclosed Recipients: documentary in an era of digital convergence

Sharon Lin Tay

Speaking about her digital documentary, *The Fourth Dimension* (2001), Trinh T. Minh-ha observes that she produces films that she considers to be 'first and foremost "boundary events"' through which 'one can view them as different ways of working with the freedom in experiencing the self and the world' rather than endorsing categories 'by which the film world largely abides' (Trinh 2005: 28). According to Trinh (2005: 28), *The Fourth Dimension* has less to do with the nonstaged nature of the material shot than with the process of documenting its unfolding: it documents its own time, its creation in megahertz, the different paths and layers of time-light that are involved in the production of images and meanings. Discursively, the documentary film has had a rich and complex historical trajectory that effectively gave rise to its particular rhetoric and theoretical orientation. The post-war rise of Italian neo-realism that strives towards truth in the uncontrolled event, the technological innovations of the 1950s that provided film-makers with the portable equipment with which to make documentaries that appear to further eliminate artifice, the rise of various film movements such as Direct Cinema in the United States and Canada, Free Cinema in Britain, and *cinéma-vérité* in France all contribute to the alignment of the documentary film with ideas of realism and truth. The emergence of new media, with the consequent loosening of the indexical relationship between signifier and signified, resulting in doubts about the fidelity of representation to its referent that digital media casts, has significant implications for documentary practice in the digital age. Using Trinh's point about freedom from the constraints of conventional documentary practice, I would like to explore in this essay the extent to which digital and Internet technologies can enable the move beyond certain limitations that continue to affect conventional documentary practices. As the companion piece to Dale Hudson's discussion about database aesthetics and the processes of online documentaries, this essay will open up some ideas about the image and representation in documentary film within the context of digital convergence.

The documentary tradition's discursive currency has traded upon several fundamental theoretical premises, of which access to unmediated reality is often simultaneously contentious and prized. The discrepancy between the necessity of mediation and a desire for immediacy is that which pervades much of documentary studies; in another conversation, it is also a central concern in thinking about mediation and the convergence to digital. This seeming conundrum in documentary, however, may be theoretically resolved by seeking recourse to various strategies that circumvent the rhetoric of, and discursive construction around, the documentary film. Laura Mulvey, for instance, explains the intricacies of weaving together the fictional and the documentary in the last shots of Roberto Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* (1953). As the fictional couple reconcile and kiss on the crowded street, the camera pans away to follow the spectacle of the street procession. For Mulvey, the [fictional] film simply fades away as the local brass band plays and people drift past. Life goes on. One ending halts, the other flows. One is a concentration

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focused on the stars' role in producing the fiction and its coherence, and the other is a distraction, the film's tendency to wander off in search of another kind of cinema.

(Mulvey 2006: 121–22)

Mulvey also uses examples from Abbas Kiarostami's films to think through this theoretical conundrum about mediation and access to reality. Kiarostami's tendency to construct the fictional narrative and documentary aspects of his films much in the model of a Möbius strip expresses, for Mulvey (2006: 131), 'the gap in time, the delay, that separates an event and its representation, its process of translation in thought and creativity'. These examples are myriad in Kiarostami's films, for instance, in the last shots of *A Taste of Cherry* (1994) where the fictional story wraps and the character that has apparently committed suicide (or rather, the actor playing the character) is seen smoking and talking with the film crew. The complex construction of *Close-Up* (1989) calls into question, at each narrative turn, the documentary and/or fictional status of what the viewer sees. These ways of advancing critical discussions of the documentary film beyond claims to realism and documentary truth are useful gestures to the need to critically reassess certain assumptions of documentary studies towards more constructive premises, especially given the context of, and challenges posed by, digitality.

Digital transcriptions: remediation and the news media

In *The Powers of Nightmare* (2004), the three-part documentary series made for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Adam Curtis illustrates the argument about the regime of fear instituted by political leaders that then lends legitimacy to their rule. The end of the Cold War and the absence of a definitive enemy left a political vacuum. As Curtis reiterates in the prologue of each episode, 'In an age when all the grand ideas have lost credibility, fear of a phantom enemy is all the politicians have left to maintain their power.' Post-9/11 panic about al-Qaida, terror cells and terrorist attacks establishes psychic and social boundaries between those experiencing panic and paranoia and those generating these feelings. The exploitation of panic serves profit and power, and the role that the media plays in the exploitation of panic and irrational fears for the benefit of the powerful needs consideration. Michael Takeo Magruder, a US-born artist based in the United Kingdom, explores these ethical issues of mediation in his online digital works. Straddling the aesthetics of digital art and the expository impetus of the documentary, Magruder's works raise questions about the relationship between news reportage and live events. Both examine questionable media coverage of events that confuse real and imagined situations. As its title suggests, *{transcription}* is a digital project that attempts the creative transcription of 24-hour news coverage, in the process raising questions about the mediation and remediation of real events in our consumption of current affairs. Processed in real time, *{transcription}* samples live BBC news coverage, effectively severing the relationship between news broadcast and the events that are being reported. Familiar images taken from BBC news footage slowly and arbitrarily appear on screen, layered on by a digital skin that obscures the clarity of the image. These images are accompanied initially by the sound of scratching, and then one gradually hears the news being read. Scratching and voices are then layered on with more voices of different newsreaders, which are then continuously repeated and layered. The disjuncture between image, voice and sound that *{transcription}* effects produces an uncanny experience for the user, oscillating between familiarity and strangeness; an effect achieved by the use of an algorithm to disrupt the linearity and veracity of news broadcasts. Rendering the meanings generated by the news broadcast confused and multiple, *{transcription}* becomes a stream-of-consciousness experience, although not an unfamiliar one. In fact, this stream-of-consciousness effect replicates the all too familiar experience of consuming round-the-clock news broadcasts, where the supposed acquisition of information and knowledge through news broadcast instead becomes a form of simulation, alerting us to the often-unquestioning way in which we consume the news. In *{transcription}*, constant 'artefacts' (scratching sounds added to behave like 'video noise', like images added to replicate film grain) and the imposition of a 'digital skin' (another visual layer on top of the remediated news footage) accentuate the mediation of the news. Causing a radical disjuncture between sound and image, the processes of remediation that these scratching electronic noises and digital skins emphasize alert us to the constant deluge of round-

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the-clock news coverage, and the perpetual sense of panic and paranoia that the news ultimately engenders.

The political implications of such mediation that *{transcription}* engenders are brought home in *[FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004]*. The latter piece ponders on the relationship between ethical filtering and manipulative remixing of the news, the significance of which increases with technological advances that enable the generation of history in 'real time'. Similar to *{transcription}*, *[FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004]* involves the use of digital skins and the disconnection between voice and image to highlight the prevalence and signification of mediation. Made up of two versions, each consisting of several manipulated moving images, *[FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004]* accentuates the extent, and effects, of mediation. In one version, familiar images of the casualties of war such as billowing black smoke, fire, deserted roads, bombed-out cars, and the inevitable clusters of shocked, outraged and/or injured passers-by are at times composited with other similar images. In other instances, large images of the aftermath of an attack, complete with raging fires spewing clouds of black smoke, would be gradually layered on with texts from news reportage, usually filling (and completely obscuring) the image with thick newsprint within a matter of seconds. The need to evaluate the ethical premises of the digital documentary is especially urgent; such urgency becomes obvious when one considers, for example, the political reasons that may lie behind particular news coverage leading to the massacre in Fallujah, Iraq. That the attack on Fallujah and the US presidential election both took place in the early days of November 2004 is no coincidence for many. As Magruder explains in the notes that accompany the piece, *[FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004]* is set within the context of the news report that Iraqi insurgents in Fallujah killed four US civilians. The bodies were then dragged, paraded and mutilated by the town's people, footage of which was broadcast around the world. On the basis of these reports, US forces then attacked the city. However, Magruder notes his reservations to the message conveyed by international news coverage: one, the US citizens were not civilians as reported, but mercenaries employed by a private US security firm; two, the entire scene of desecration was filmed by one Associated Press camera crew; three, there was no US or coalition forces intervention in neither the attack nor the subsequent mutilation; and four, coverage was highly censored by international media networks. These reservations question the veracity of the news coverage by raising questions about context. In other words, the media processes involved in representing the events leading up to the US attack on Fallujah, that *[FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004]* interrogates provided no real comprehension of the event that took place. The notion of documentary truth, premised upon the indexical relationship between the event and its representation, is thus destabilized via the algorithmic processes through which *[FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004]* operates. The meanings that one may take away from the news about Fallujah are at best contingent and equivocal. Considered together, *{transcription}* and *[FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004]* note the perils of mediation without context, the disassociation of the signified from its signifier, a situation made infinitely more possible by digitization. On a more innocuous level, *{transcription}* considers the ethical questions implicit in the consumption of network news: whether knowledge or currency is that which has priority, and what does one do with this surfeit of (mostly bad) news from the television set, and increasingly, from the computer? How may ethical spectatorial positions for the consumption of network news be constructed? Much in the way that Edward Navas's *Goobalization* explores the issue of surveillance in digital media, whether for commercial exploitation or political control, as Hudson discusses below, *[FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004]* reminds us of the political agendas to which such a discrepancy between mediation and actual events may avail itself.

The idea of embedding journalists with soldiers in warfare adds a new implication to reportage, suggesting the ethical issues around representation, perspective and the eventual media decontextualization of events that take place at a distance. The ethics of recording, documenting and reporting are raised in terms of the value of different types of images: if images gleaned from the event are more valuable than archival footage, that would raise the question of whether knowledge or currency has priority in our consumption of current affairs. Does the mediation involved in the reporting of violence and unrest render these events mere electronic white noise that emanates from the television sets that

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ultimately depoliticizes current events into byte-sized news packages? Collectively, these works reveal that conventional news media have not only averted their gaze from documentary's historical preoccupation with truth, but also often collaborated in camouflaging truth for political exigencies. The contingency of meaning is thus heightened within the context of digital convergence, given the non-linear, non-representational, evocative and interactive characteristics of digital media, as the discussion below of Christina McPhee's *La Conchita mon amour* furthers.

Documenting unspeakable trauma

Ethical questions around documentation and reportage that {*transcription*} and [*FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004*] raise are also pertinent to the works of the California-based digital artist, Christina McPhee. In particular, her project *La Conchita mon amour* taps into the states of panic and paranoia that characterize political events post-9/11, albeit in a different way. *La Conchita mon amour* references in its title the trauma of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima that could not be fully articulated in Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1960). Studying the struggles of life in the beach community of La Conchita in California that was inundated by debris flow after a devastating mudslide, the panic that *La Conchita mon amour* highlights refers to the heightened awareness and fear that living with the aftermath of the mudslide, and continuing fears of its recurrence, brings. Caused by increased winter rain that comes as an effect of global warming, this digital video project documents the interface between human response and geological data, when governmental assistance for victims of cyclical recursion of disaster is not forthcoming. As McPhee notes in the statement accompanying the project, the aftermath of this environmental disaster is one from which La Conchita residents cannot escape and are forced to live through, both literally and financially, given that their properties are rendered worthless by the mudslide; it therefore becomes impossible for the residents to re-mortgage their damaged homes and/or move away from the area. As a performative act of witnessing, *La Conchita* updates the cinematic manifestations of political modernism, as articulated through the documentaries of film-makers such as Resnais, Marguerite Duras, Agnès Varda and Chris Marker; thereby bringing a formal discourse of the expository documentary into the Internet age at the same time that it transcends the expository mode in specific ways. In her search for meaning after the destruction of the landscape, McPhee records the rituals that the community performs to grieve for those who died in the mudslide as well as to survive as a community abandoned by the state. As a digital project, *La Conchita* imbues documentary realism with subjective evocation to such an extent that the project effectively displaces the importance of the documentary image's indexicality. Instead of contemplating the impossibility of representing trauma in, for instance *Night and Fog* (Resnais, 1955) or *Hiroshima mon amour*, *La Conchita* attempts the evocation of trauma via the algorithmic processes of selection and combination. The viewer's experience of *La Conchita* is contingent and interactive, and not unlike the notion of mining for geological information. Still photographs, composited images and video clips of the landscape, environment and vernacular shrines allow the viewer to piece together the relationship between geological instability and psychological trauma. In this case, the evidentiary is not dependent on the indexical relationship between signifier and signified. Instead, the viewer arrives at 'evidence' of the trauma suffered by the *La Conchita* residents by looking at the mudslide in terms of its geological impact on the psychological subject. As McPhee notes in the essay accompanying the project,

La Conchita stores landscapes of information beyond what the obvious visible evidence discloses. The site is marked by the invisible mathematics of largescale disturbances from seismicity patterns (there is a major fault, called Red Mountain Fault, running through the sea cliff upon which the village rests), to tidal patterns now altered by rising marine temperatures since the seventies. (McPhee 2006: n.p.)

In this sense, the work interrogates the relationship between the visible and the evidentiary, and shows the limits of representation in instances of panic and trauma. The instability and contingency of meaning that *La Conchita* conveys differs from the notions of unspeakable trauma or the sublime in which many

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modernist expository documentaries are often invested. Instead, McPhee gestures towards a non-representational strategy, given the limits of representation, via the database aesthetics of her performative documentary that pivots on the algorithmic processes that Hudson observes as being key in the production of the plurality of meanings. Images and field recordings of vernacular shrines, graffiti, chain-mail fencing and barricades in the aftermath of the mudslide, alongside images of the physical landscape make up the *La Conchita* project. Geological data and human responses to the disaster quantify the impact of the environmental disaster, in the process broadening an understanding of what the environment means and encompasses. By amplifying the leaps and elisions between observed facts culled from geological readings and the community's trauma as a subjective response to the disaster, evidence is therefore rendered materialist; effectively harnessing the digital and virtual to the material and the political...

Whenever visible evidence fails to articulate the situation involved, ethical questions surrounding the act of representation come into play. *La Conchita mon amour* seeks recourse in the poetic rendering of the trauma that environmental destruction brings. McPhee's use of field recordings and a particular operatic soundtrack featuring a mournful female voice adds to the subjective evocation of the natural disaster. Her documentation of the landscape and instances of human response to the loss of lives, the aftermath of the mudslide and its continuing threat refuses the creation of spectacle. As McPhee claims in her project essay, 'disaster images become pornography almost by default'; she also asks 'how to generate narrative about a place of continuing catastrophe in a way that occludes spectacle? Is there a way to escape the anaesthetic of the daily news, and its remains online?' (McPhee 2006: n.p.).

Conclusions

Conceding that the documentary film often exceeds, and is more intricate and complex, than much of the theoretical enterprise that surrounds its practice thus requires some more enabling and constructive bases from which to speak and think about it. Vivian Sobchack, writing about the representation of death in documentary and non-fiction films, delineates an ethical space from which to discuss the limits to, and impossibility of, representing death. She writes,

the textual vision inscribed in and as documentary space is never seen as a space alternative or transcendental to the viewer's lifeworld and its values.

That is, this textual vision and its activity reflexively point to a lived body occupying concrete space and shaping it with others in concrete social relations that describe a moral structure.

(Sobchack 2004: 248)

The ethical space that Sobchack demarcates derives from cultural norms about death; which, for instance, gives rise to the peculiar situation where death is more often portrayed as being violent and unnatural than ordinary and acceptable, because of our culture's increasing unfamiliarity with such a state of being. The ethics around various representations of death in the non-fiction film is thus intimately related to the social and the cultural. Short of death, I would argue that this ethical space that Sobchack distinguishes for the documentary is also political and part of the complex media and cultural ecology in which we inhabit. The works that I discuss above thus explore, interrogate and expand on the different and complex ways in which they articulate their relation to the material beyond the issues of representation. While Magruder employs the creative transcription of television news in the process to seek understanding despite media obfuscation, McPhee's strategy involves delineating the limitations of visible evidence in rendering truth.

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Appendix: Undisclosed Recipients by festival content stream

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http://www.atypon-link.com/INT/doi/abs/10.1386/sdf.2.1.79_1

Brief descriptions and links to all works can be found online at http://www.ithaca.edu/fleff07/selected_works.html

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Suggested citation

Tay, S. L. (2008), 'Undisclosed Recipients: documentary in an era of digital convergence', *Studies in Documentary Film* 2: 1, pp. 79–98, doi: 10.1386/sdf.2.1.79/1.

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**Tay, S. L. (2008), 'Undisclosed Recipients: documentary in an era of digital convergence',
Studies in Documentary Film 2: 1, pp. 79–98**

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by a commitment to feminist politics, and revolves around film theory and film-making practices. She has published articles in the journal *Women: A Cultural Review*, chapters in the anthologies *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers* (Routledge, 2002), *Femme Fatalities: Representations of Strong Women in the Media* (Nordicom, 2004) and *Northern Constellations: New Readings in Nordic Cinema* (Norvik Press, 2006). She is preparing a book about feminist ethics and women's film-making practices. Contact: Sharon Lin Tay, Middlesex University, School of Arts, Cat Hill, London, EN4 8HT England.
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