

THE POWER AND POTENTIAL OF
PERFORMATIVE DOCUMENTARY FILM

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue the performative mode of documentary filmmaking is an emerging, intrinsically powerful and virtually unexplored weapon in the arsenal of science documentary.

Through selected theoretical and academic writings, I examine origins and pathways of documentary film that ultimately lead to the performative documentary. I contrast the performative mode against a common paradigm that documentary, and particularly science documentary, demands a filmic text that embraces traditional conventions of narrative, realism, empiricism, causality and evidentiary truth claims.

I then analyze the utility and application of common elements in performative documentary films including my performative science documentary, At the Risk of Being Smote. I show that viewers are uniquely able to assemble their own meaning from an adiachronistic structure of associated but fragmentary filmic events. Each person's mind weaves together patches of representation, *fictive* or not, into a tapestry of aesthetic response of knowledge and rhetorical truth.

After discussing the current state of performative filmmaking tools and techniques, I look into the future of performative science documentary. Based on evolving trends and technologies, it is possible that audiences will not just *view* films, but rather *participate* in a multi-sensory experience.

I conclude that performative science documentary is an immensely powerful, emerging tool that allows the viewer to perceive personal authorial control and voice that allows the boundary between discourse and intuition, between fiction and 'reality' to dissolve. Ultimately, this approach takes the filmmaker out of the role of interlocutor, giving the viewers a sense of invisible omniscience as they experience the filmic panopticon.

FORETHOUGHT

Thousands of stars randomly decorate the skies on a clear night. The stars represent nothing except that which they are – stars. One might recognize some constellations of animals or people, constellations that were shaped in the minds of an ancient people as they recognized the relatedness and connection of one star to another, then another. Finally, when all of the stars in part of the sky were connected in just the right way, they collectively represented some greater concept or meaning – an image of a god or important animal perhaps – but an image built from cultural memory and subjective interpretation.

Different constellation sets exist for different cultures around the world. These different constellation sets are the result of people, within different cultures, deducing *different* meaning from exactly the same set of stars. The meaning or representation they *derive* from the sky is intrinsic to their cultural influences.

THE ROOTS OF A DOCUMENTARY DEBATE

Less than thirty years after the invention of motion pictures, a handful of visionary filmmakers recognized the power of film - its utility as a medium for story telling and its intrinsic ability to influence the masses. These early documentary film pioneers, many armed with noble social or political causes, believed they could construct films using both fiction and non-fiction tools, as long as the “truth” of their cause was ultimately served. As the universe of documentary film matured, however, viewers and critics became increasingly analytical, even questioning the truth-claims or objectivity of documentary films that incorporated clearly subjective fictional elements. Three patriarchs of documentary film – John Grierson, Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov – mark the genesis of a burning debate that has smoldered for seventy years.

John Grierson

John Grierson entered the University of Glasgow, where he developed a sense that film and popular media were becoming more influential than church and school. These thoughts were to guide him for the rest of his life (Barnouw 85). In 1924, after graduating from the university with a diploma in moral philosophy, he received a Rockefeller Research Fellowship, which brought him to the United States to continue his studies. His research focus was the psychology of propaganda--the impact of the press, film, and other mass media on forming public opinion.

Grierson subscribed to the sociopolitical theories of writer and political philosopher Walter Lippman, who wrote Public Opinion in 1922. Lippman suggested the erosion of democracy was due in part to political and social complexities of contemporary society that made it difficult, if not impossible, for the public to comprehend and respond to issues vital to the maintenance of democratic society. Consequently, Grierson concluded that citizens might become actively involved in their government with engaging excitement, if generated by the popular press, which simplified and dramatized public affair. (Barnouw 85)

Grierson came to believe that documentary could play a central role in bringing the otherwise nescient, even apathetic, public into the political process. Grierson's emerging view of film was as a form of social and political persuasion, as a mechanism for social reform and education.

Robert Flaherty

The Lumière brothers produced some of the first motion picture films in 1895 including La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon (Exiting the Lumière Factory in Lyon.) a genre they labeled as *actualité* (actuality). While Edward S. Curtis used the term 'documentary works' as early as 1914 (Hall 29), Grierson, under his *nom de plume* "The Moviegoer," coined the word 'documentary' in his New York Sun review of the 1926 Robert Flaherty film Moana, defining documentary as "a creative treatment of actuality."
(13)

Robert Flaherty, a rugged man, studied in Northern Canada and became a prospector. Flaherty had a love of adventure, particularly the theme of man against the wild, the beauty and danger of the environment. In 1922, he produced and directed Nanook of the North, a highly staged and reenacted account of an Inuit native and his rugged life and survival in the frozen wilderness. Flaherty's film was a form of "salvage ethnography," a term coined by Robert H. Lowie. Between 1910 and 1916 Lowie studied American Indians with the intent to salvage a record of what they left of their culture before it disappeared.

Before filming Nanook, Flaherty discussed the filming of the walrus hunt with the Inuit community, explaining to the residents that they might have to give up their kill if it interfered with the film. The Inuit replied, "...yes, yes, the Aggie will come first, not a man will stir, not a harpoon will be thrown until you give the sign." (Barsam 17) Flaherty also insisted that the Inuit give up their rifles and use traditional harpoons in order to portray how Inuit life once was, but really no longer existed. In making this demand, Flaherty not only placed his Inuit subjects in harm's way, but he recreated a fictional memory of Inuit life for the sake of his film, which was ultimately *false memory*, because the Inuits did not create Nanook, nor did Flaherty create it for them.

Dziga Vertov

Dziga Vertov, born Denis Abramovich Kaufman, started his studies of medicine at the Psychoneurological Institute in St. Petersburg and experimented with sound collages in his free time. However, after the Bolshevik revolution in October of 1917,

Vertov volunteered to work for the Cinema Committee in Moscow and soon found himself, at the age of 22, as the editor of its weekly newsreel, Kino-Nedilia, which started delivering media to the public early in the summer of 1918.

Vertov formed a 'troika,' an ad hoc council of three people comprised of himself, his wife and his brother, and in 1922 the troika launched *Kino Pravda* (Film Truth), which produced monthly newsreels until 1925. Vertov's troika issued manifestos often assailing the 'poison' of fiction film and counter-revolutionary western influence.

Vertov doctrine polemically preached "...that proletarian cinema must be based on truth – 'fragments of actuality' – assembled for meaningful impact." (Barnouw 55) Vertov embraced 'actuality' as a truth caught on film with which there was no interaction or involvement between the subject and the filmmaker. Filmmakers following this doctrine never asked for permissions, abhorred staged actions, and used concealed camera positions to catch moments in marketplaces, factories, schools taverns and streets. (Barnouw 57)

In 1929, Vertov made the documentary film, Man With a Movie Camera, which ironically features infrequent but obvious use of staged scenes – a curious violation of his own doctrine.

DIVERGENCE OF FICTION AND NON-FICTION

Grierson's passion to bring political enlightenment, interpretation and participation to the public; Flaherty's desire to bring inaccessible ethnographic, man versus nature explorations to cinema; and Vertov's teleological, duty-driven, manifesto-defined effort to bring a Leninist film-truth to the Soviet proletariat were powerful forces that allowed these filmmakers to deliver an "objective" message by plainly subjective means.

Grierson, considered to be the father of British documentary film, faced criticism for his definition of documentary film, that 'the creative treatment of actuality' was somehow oxymoronic. Vertov rarely staged his films; however, critics assailed Man With a Movie Camera for both staging shots and its stark experimentation. The idea of asking a community to change its behavior for the sake of a documentary film, as in Flaherty's Nanook of the North, points to, what Deanne William calls, "...problematic methodology; [one] of representing the Inuit community as some kind of timeless, noble race that exists in isolation from outside influences." (*Senses of Cinema*)

During the early years of documentary filmmaking, there were few documentarists, nascent institutional practices, a limited body of works, and a viewership that wanted to be entertained and didn't fully comprehend the difference between fiction and non-fiction. While there were few definitions of documentary film beyond, "the creative treatment of actuality," documentarists and audiences began to question the objectivity and authenticity of a documentary that incorporated fictive elements; and,

therefore, they began to question its documentary value. For example, Brian Winston argues that “[to presume a] any ‘actuality’ is left after a ‘creative treatment’ [is] at best naïve and at worst a mark of duplicity” (11). Stella Bruzzi describes the ‘traditional’ concept of documentary as “striving to represent reality as faithfully as possible...” (154)

Progressively, both staging action and attempting to steer documentary action fell out of acceptance and came into question as legitimate tools in a non-fiction or documentary format. The universe of documentary film accreted and multiple forms of documentary film diverged from one another and assumed their respective orbits as distinct forms. As early as 1983 (Nichols, *Voice* 17-30) Bill Nichols introduced the idea of a taxonomy of documentary, which included the expository, observational, interactive and reflexive, and represented the canon of documentary modes through 1993.

(Representing Reality 23)

Most scholars of the genre persistently treat documentary as a representational mode of filmmaking, although at its core is “the notion of film as record.” (Bruzzi 11) Nichols describes it this way: “A typical scene establishes time and place and a logical tie to previous scenes; it represents the evidential nature of a larger argument; and it terminates with suggestions of how the search for a solution might lead to another scene, in another time or place.” (*Representing Reality* 19) Conventional documentary film is causal in its logic and temporally linear. Common documentary scheme is to pose a problem and then work to provide a solution. The progression from problem to solution is therefore diachronistic, in which cause precedes effect in a temporally linear fashion.

Plantinga explains that of the three structures of non-fiction film that he defines, (narrative, categorical and rhetorical), the narrative non-fiction structure is the most common: “A narrative non-fiction film is usually historical, representing historical events as they occurred in time.” (104) Typically, categorical and rhetorical structures, Plantinga argues, both unfold in time adhering to a causal logic.

The documentarist makes an argument about the historical world, which is the referent. The filmmaker places subjects in a film for the viewer to inspect and examine as examples and illustrations, as evidence of a condition, or an event that has occurred. The viewer is “separated from the act of representation and the subject of representation” (Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* 15) but *is* part of the filmmaker’s construction, because the viewer’s expectations of and response to a text play an important role in how the filmmaker crafts the work.

The conventional relationship between the filmmaker, the documentary and the viewer is critically important to consider. The documentary viewer employs procedures of “rhetorical engagement” rather than the “procedures of fictive engagement” that guide the viewing of classic narrative [documentary] film. (Nichols, *Representing Reality* 26) The viewer has become habituated to non-fiction texts, specifically documentary texts. Through an expectation of objectivity and a perceived relatedness of the text to the historical world, the viewer accepts truth-claims made by the filmmaker.

Documentary viewers have become accustomed to conventional narrative documentary in which their role is as observer. Additionally, documentary convention spawns an epistophilia (Nichols, *Representing Reality* 31) that compels viewers to

“...take the place of the subject-who-knows Knowledge.” (Nichols, *Representing Reality*)

31) Plantinga writes:

We must...take definitions seriously, because defining the documentary is often connected with issues of power and control. Definitions often promote preferred uses of non-fiction film, or foreground characteristics thought to be desirable or “proper.” What various groups think non-fiction films *are* determines in part which films are funded, find distribution and receive recognition. (8)

The Board of Governors of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, for example, defines documentary film, in part as,

... a non-fiction motion picture dealing creatively with cultural, artistic, historical, social, scientific, economic or other subjects. It may be photographed in actual occurrence, or may employ partial re-enactment, stock footage, stills, animation, stop-motion or other techniques, as long as the emphasis is on factual content and not on fiction.

(<http://www.oscars.org/>)

As a result, the Academy failed to recognize such important films as Roger and Me, because of its significant performance component; Paris is Burning, because the subjects of the film were essentially performing as embellished and manufactured caricatures of men in drag; and A Brief History of Time, which incorporated metaphorical representations including a live chicken placed against computer-generated pictures of the universe, the use of clips from the old Disney science-fiction movie The

Black Hole and semi-dramatized interviews with the friends and family of Stephen Hawking.

Traditional documentary film possesses an extrinsic momentum that has served to reinforce the idea that narrative, realism, empiricism, causality and evidentiary truth claims are necessary, even requisite, ingredients in documentary film.

FICTIONAL REPRESENTATION, PERFORMANCE AND THE
RECOGNITION OF A NEW DOCUMENTARY MODE

I argue that Vertov, Flaherty and Grierson are examples of ‘modality end-point’ filmmakers. They represent the earliest days of documentary filmmaking before a ‘divergence’ of fiction and non-fiction filmmaking. Today, at the other end point in the history of documentary filmmaking, Marker, Morris, Moore and other important contemporary documentary filmmakers embrace a multitude of representational techniques that break down the boundaries between documentary modes. These filmmakers also incorporate non-fictional as well as fictional, performative, evocative and expressive elements into their texts.

Chris Marker

Chris Marker, born Christian François Bouche-Villeneuve in 1921, is a French writer, photographer, film director, multimedia artist and documentary maker. He is best known for directing Letter from Siberia (1957), La Jetée (1962), Sans Soleil (1983) and AK (1985), a documentary about Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa. In 1982 Marker finished Sans Soleil, stretching the limits of what could be called a documentary. It is an essay and a montage, mixing pieces of documentary with fiction and philosophical comments, creating an atmosphere of dream and science fiction.

Marker casts the visual and aural material of Sans Soleil into a realm of the imaginary, and the film comes to comprise little more than a “tendentious collection of

memories and travel footage held loosely together by a voiceover whose origins and authenticity remain obscured to the end.” (Bruzzi 61) Marker continues to make films today; his most recent is Chats Perchés (2004).

Marker's first feature was Letter From Siberia and highlights what we now come to recognize as a foreshadowing of the style of the body of work he has produced through his career. Live action intermixes with animation to represent the depiction of a scientific expedition to uncover frozen mammoths in the Siberian tundra. The soundtrack transitions from the formal narrative voice to playful song.

In one example, a street scene shows a crowded red bus carrying passengers as a group of men labor to complete a dirt pathway. Mr. Marker replays this same scene three times, hilariously, to different kinds of commentary, from condemnation of the way that “the population is crammed into blood-colored buses” to upbeat propaganda admiring the way “happy Soviet workers apply themselves.”

Marker’s life of work embraced a variety of media types as he learned to use them or as they became available - from the still image to film, film to analog video, analog video to DV, and more recently from DV to interactive multimedia. His recent work includes Immemory (1998), a multi-layered, interactive, multimedia memoir on CD-Rom allowing a ‘viewer’ to investigate ‘zones’ of travel, war, cinema, and poetry, navigating through photographs, film clips, music, and text, as if physically exploring Marker's memory itself. The result is a 21st-century remembrance of things past, an exploration of the state of memory in our digital era. With it, Marker has both invented this media form and perfected it. Marker’s style embraces new technology to create documentary texts

that integrate multiple forms or modes with indistinct boundaries between fictive and non-fictive elements they contain.

Errol Morris

Errol Morris, born February 5, 1948, is an American Academy Award winning documentary film director. After unsuccessful attempts to complete a variety of advanced degree programs at prestigious universities including Princeton and Berkeley, Morris finally capitulated to his lack of passion for institutions where either, he had ‘absolutely no background’ for the chosen field of study, or where intellectual elitism thrived in the guise of ‘pedants.’ (Singer, *Profiles*) From that point he focused on the field of filmmaking.

In the early 1970s Morris discovered the Pacific Film Archive, a cinemateque/library /revival house near Berkeley, California. It was the only place in the San Francisco Bay Area with the film resources to devote several days to a retrospective of films of exceptionally uncommon themes. Singer quotes Tom Luddy, a film producer, who was then the director of the Archive:

There were a bunch of regulars and a bunch of eccentric regulars, and Errol was one of the eccentrics. I often had to defend him to my staff. What made him eccentric? Well, for one thing, he dressed strangely. Remember, this is Berkeley in the early seventies. And Errol was wearing dark suits with pants that were too short, white dress shirts, and heavy shoes. He looked like a New York person gone to seed. Then, I let him use

our library for research. I found myself defending [his odd behavior], which was often difficult, because he would attack me for the film programming. He was a film-noir nut. He claimed we weren't showing the real film noir. So I challenged him to write the program notes. (Singer, *Profiles*)

Morris' perspective on the world was and is as unique as the nature of his films, which include Gates of Heaven (1978), Vernon, Florida (1981), The Thin Blue Line (1988), The Dark Wind (1991), A Brief History of Time (1991), Fast, Cheap and Out of Control (1997), Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr. (1999) and his Academy award winning documentary, The Fog of War (2003).

Audiences recognize The Thin Blue Line as the tool that vindicated a falsely imprisoned man and identified a murderer who was ultimately convicted. Through long uninterrupted interviews on film or on audio tape, Morris has the ability to entice threads of truth and admissions from his subjects.

The murderer, David Harris, indirectly confessed to his crime during the production of the documentary on audio tape, leading the police to arrest, try and convict him for the crime. The dramatic, fictional performance of the film itself is a source of 'minor dissonance,' which raised questions of objectivity and historical authenticity for some critics upon the film's original release.

The ice cream that flies through the air in slow motion during the murder, the swinging timepiece during the hypnosis, or the rotating revolver combined with actor portrayals in elaborate, and highly constructed reenactments are all examples of

representational, evocative, performative elements that support Morris' rhetorical intent to imply more than he intends to directly argue.

As Nichols would say, "Things change," and since the 1990s filmmakers increasingly embrace and use reenactment as a legitimate way to address what is not available for representation in the here and now. (Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries* 5)

Michael Moore

Michael Francis Moore, born in 1954, is a film director, author, political-activist and political humorist. He is widely known for his outspoken, critical views on globalization, large corporations, gun violence, the Iraq War, and the George W. Bush Administration.

Moore's films include Roger & Me (1989), Pets or Meat: The Return to Flint (1992), Canadian Bacon (1995), The Big One (1997), And Justice for All (1998), Lucky Numbers (2000), Bowling for Columbine (2002) and Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004). Bowling for Columbine won the 2002 Academy Award for a documentary feature and Fahrenheit 9/11 won the Palme d'Or in 2004 at the Cannes Film Festival in France.

Moore's academic career was, like Errol Morris', unspectacular. After dropping out of the University of Michigan-Flint in 1976 at age 22, Moore created a small leftist newspaper the Flint Voice (later called the Michigan Voice), which he edited for ten years. This position gave him exposure and access to leftwing activists and the opportunity to do occasional commentaries for the National Public Radio (NPR) show All Things Considered.

In 1986, because of Moore's growing reputation as an adept, politically liberal journalist, the San Francisco-based socialist magazine Mother Jones hired him to serve as editor. Management eventually fired Moore from Mother Jones, one of America's farthest left magazines, because, among other reasons, he was too far left for it.

Formalizing what have become familiar tactics in his subsequent films, Moore responded by staging a media-grabbing public demonstration, by going on a local radio show to accuse his former boss at Mother Jones of being a traitor to the left and giving aid and comfort to [President Ronald] Reagan (MacFarquhar, *New Yorker*), and by suing Mother Jones for \$2 million. Moore eventually settled for \$58,000, which became seed money for his first documentary, Roger & Me.

Moore's films are laden with ironic citations of misconnection and confusion, piling up as [a] measure of heightened authenticity. (Renov 130) Moore integrates comedy, which serves to heighten evocative qualities of his work that help to draw viewers into, and even resonate, with his text. In a 1995 interview, Moore justified his penchant for juxtaposing humor with serious topics in his films:

First of all, I think humor is a very effective means of communicating a message to people. I think we've all seen that too many people are turned off by the sort of soapbox kind of preaching. That stuff's good when you're preaching to the converted, but when you're trying to convert, for whatever reason, wherever we're at now in 1995 in America, it doesn't work very well. So I decided to use my sense of humor as a means to

affect change, to get people thinking about the issues. (Sheldon, *People's Weekly World*)

Moore participates in his films as performer/director, contributing a significant performance element, which serves as an effective “alternative and less formally restrictive way to get to the essence of [his] subject.” (Bruzzi 163) In Roger and Me, Moore intercuts found footage from both feature films and commercial advertisements “with interviews and observational sequences while popular songs impose a flat irony...” (Paul Arthur and Renov 131)

Moore communicates his text to a viewership by methods that transgress boundaries imposed by conventional, traditional, ‘truth-finding.’ He “breaks the illusion of film, thereby interrupting the privileged relationship between the filmed subjects and the spectator.” (Bruzzi 163)

RECONVERGENCE

For much of the 20th century the use of fictional elements in documentary raised questions of indexicality, objectivity and, therefore, the truth claims put forth. However, in “early non-fiction filmmaking, extensive use of staged scenes, character and character goals became an important force in the narrative movement.” (Plantinga 133)

As Flaherty, Vertov and other important directors made use of fictional techniques in non-fiction filmmaking eighty years before, Marker, Morris, Moore and a robust cadre of modern filmmakers use similar methods today. Carl Plantinga writes, “One would be hard-pressed to fit Dziga Vertov, Robert Flaherty or Chris Marker into historical modes [as defined by Nichols] of non-fiction filmmaking.” (106)

Bruzzi writes, “...[T]he pact between documentary, reality and spectator is far more straightforward than...theorists make out: ...a documentary will never be reality nor will it erase or invalidate that reality by being representational...” (4) Nichols adds, “The four modes of documentary production that presented themselves as an exhaustive survey of the field no longer suffice.” (*Blurred Boundaries* 93) In 1993, Nichols added the performative (*Blurred Boundaries* 95) mode and, by 2001 he redefined the interactive mode as the participatory mode and added the poetic mode of documentary to his family tree of documentary modes. (*Introduction to Documentary* 138)

What emerges is an attempt on the part of the filmmaker to build new connections between the film and the viewer that exceed the viewers’ expectations of conventional documentary – a mode that audiences and critics alike increasingly perceive as banal,

pedantic, and lacking innovation. Viewers are the driving force that allows new modes of documentary to be accepted. As Nichols puts it, “[New forms of] documentary [are] particularly apt choice[s] in a time when master narratives, like master plans, are in disrepute.” (*Blurred Boundaries* 105)

Accordingly, there is an intrinsic flexibility and freedom to produce film in this ‘new,’ performative, mode. Where traditional documentary *usually* existed within the boundaries of its intended form (expository, observational, interactive or reflexive), the performative mode represents a continuum of means for establishing the film-viewer connection, which varies without prejudice across the boundaries of modes.

THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTITIONERS AND THE PERFORMATIVE MODE

There is no universally accepted definition for the performative mode of documentary in the community of practitioners. Carl Plantinga warns that Nichols' taxonomy of modes of documentary is teleologically guided, suggesting a hierarchy favoring the most recent mode and implying the earliest mode (expository) is least favored as being the most naïve. (101) Gary MacLennan calls Plantinga's criticism of Nichols' modes a "sideswipe." (*Critical Realist*) Stella Bruzzi criticizes Nichols' definition of 'performative' as being confusing, and she cites another theorist's prior work, Judith Butler's Gender Trouble (1990), as the basis by which Nichols *should* have used the term performative. (154) Jane Roscoe defends Nichols. She writes,

Here, [in Bruzzi's project] there is no real engagement with the ideas about documentary's relationship with the real, but a dismissing of some fairly substantial work [including that of Nichols, particularly his definitions of documentary modes]. This [Bruzzi's] introduction then sets a rather antagonistic tone, which does not serve her project which is an interesting one and a potentially useful addition to the field. (*Framework*)

While there are differences in the definition of performative documentary provided by Bruzzi and Nichols, there are important similarities as well. These observations on the surface might appear metatextual to my thesis; however, it is important to point out the unsettled, even disputed, nature of the definitions of documentary modes. There are many examples of the evolving state of documentary

definition, particularly the performative mode, which I shall briefly address later in this work.

Clearly, the community of documentary theorists is not completely in phase with itself on the definition of performative documentary. With this caveat in mind, however, academics consider Nichols' works to be 'seminal' and 'required reading' in many university filmmaking curricula around the world, and so I shall explore performative documentary in that context.

THE PERFORMATIVE MODE DEFINED

The formalization of distinct boundaries, or documentary modes, and their characteristics are not only concerned with the extrinsic features of the image, but also with an examination of the perceived visual text, and the viewers' interpretive strategies that allow the viewer to be induced to conclude or perceive the text's meaning.

Traditional narrative structures typically pose a problem and then provide a solution. They present a historical world (character, event, condition, etc.) that serves as the referent in the relationship between the filmmaker, the film and the viewer.

Traditional documentary is more about the message *transmitted to* the viewer, the message the film *induced* the viewer to perceive. 'Transmission to' and 'induce' are important words, because the difference between deduction/induction and transmission/reception are at the core of what differentiates performative documentary from traditional documentary.

Regardless of any message the film might inadvertently transmit, the real goal of a performative documentary is for the viewer to *derive* meaning and message from the film, for the viewer to be the *receiver*.

Filmmakers craft traditional documentaries to argue a point of view about the historical world, persuading the viewer using narrative, realism, empiricism, causality and evidentiary truth claims. However, performative documentary is not concerned with evidence, an order of events, referentiality to a historical world or indexicality. Bruzzi elaborates,

The traditional concept of the documentary as striving to represent reality as faithfully as possible is predicated on the realist assumption that the production process must be disguised... Conversely, the new performative documentaries herald a different notion of documentary 'truth' that acknowledges the construction and artificiality of even the non-fiction film. (154)

Performative documentary, however, offers its viewer neither the objective summation of events promised by the expository mode nor the lived immediacy and voyeuristic thrills of the observational form. (Bell, *Kinema*) There is a shift in epistemology from the 'whole' to its parts, from the historical to the moment.

Performative documentary underscores a paradox that is troubling for traditionalists - the marriage of performance to document. One draws attention to itself, the other to what it represents. One is predominantly poetic and evocative, while the other is primarily evidential and referential, designed to allow the viewer to assemble meaning of historical events through the collected evocations, icons, impressions, intimations and implications contained within the film.

Performative films represent an ontological shift from argument to suggestion, from the putatively objective to the subjective, from the world to places on the world. The difference between the viewer of a traditional documentary and of a performative documentary is well-served by this analogy: it is the difference between being a member of the jury who listens to complete and prepared argument from an attorney who explains what the evidence means and being the attorney who must investigate and

examine *each* piece of evidence by her or himself to glean or extract meaning from the body of evidence.

The performative documentary filmmaker draws on a broad and technologically evolving set of resources that includes, but is not limited to, found footage, re-enactment, staged recreation, interviews, computer generated imagery and animation, and possibly, interactive or heuristically interactive media, which I'll discuss later in this text.

Performative documentary exploits a range of creative strategies in order to evoke sentiment, emotion and meaning in the viewer. The filmmaker uses experimental collage, formal voice (to build confidence in the viewer that the narrator knows what we want to know) or open voice (a disarming technique that situates the viewer in a less resistive posture), vernacular voices, visual forms of telling, and even humor (cynical or ironic as in Moore's work) to communicate a much more partial, often emotionally charged and compelling account of an issue or event. As Nichols describes it, "[Performative films] address us, not with commands or imperatives necessarily, but with a sense of emphatic engagement that overshadows their reference to the historical world." (*Blurred Boundaries* 94)

Performative documentary may incorporate, in addition to the fiction elements discussed above, any or all of the expository, observational, interactive, poetic and reflexive modes of documentary. In *Blurred Boundaries*, Nichols writes that when a filmmaker integrates these elements in the performative mode,

... expository qualities may speak less about the historical world than serve to evoke...this world. Questions of authority may diminish in favor

of questions of tone, style and voice. Observational techniques...lend stress to qualities of duration, texture, and experience, often liberated from ... social actors giving virtual performances ... familiar to us from fiction. Interactive techniques ... now give greater emphasis to ... filmmaker's subjective position and emotional disposition. Reflexive techniques...do not so much estrange us from the text's own procedures as draw our attention to the subjectivities and intensities that surround and bathe the scene as represented. (95-96)

Performative films use multi-pronged, multi-mode, novel and fresh formats that take advantage of progressive strategies, which include the creative use of found footage (perhaps by adding new narration tracks or reframing), the inclusion of the filmmaker's presence and performance within the film, re-enactment, recreation, the development of visually dominant text, and a well crafted use of voice.

As a result, the performative documentary is a very robust means by which the filmmaker may deliver a hybridization of documentary modes in a clearly fabricated way that may retain referentiality. These modes work together to *suggest* and not *argue* a message by drawing a conclusion *from* the viewer – not *for* the viewer.

THE PERFORMATIVE MODE AND SCIENCE DOCUMENTARY

The corpus of performative documentary texts consists, for the most part, of socio-historical or ethnographic films. Performative documentary attempts to invoke feelings that raise questions about what we, the viewers, know. It prods us to examine the world beyond realism and evidentiary truth claims supported by facts, empirical observations and equations.

At first glance, performative documentary would appear to be at odds with the traditional methods of presenting science to the general public. Public understanding of science rests primarily on a foundation of principles taught through the education system. Between the ages of five and six, children typically enter into state-sponsored school systems where they receive twelve to sixteen years of formal education. The curriculum typically includes science classes that profess the formalism of the scientific method:

- 1) Observe and identify a problem,
- 2) Develop a testable hypothesis that is consistent with the observation,
- 3) Collect and analyze data,
- 4) Develop a conclusion that either confirms or fails to confirm predictions.

How, then, can filmmakers use the performative mode to produce a science documentary film, when the nature of science is itself based on evidence, observation and facts? Before answering that question, we have to understand the role of science documentary today and how, or if, a new mode might be used to enable new applications for science documentary.

There are no rules that restrict the intended purpose of a science documentary. Most current science documentaries, however, have one of two primary roles: as a strictly educational piece (e.g., for use in the classroom) or as a general interest entertainment piece (e.g., for broadcast on a television network). There is another important distinction between the two. The main goal of science education media is to teach, inform or raise awareness. In science entertainment, on the other hand, documentaries must intrigue enough viewers to be commercially viable.

Science education may be intrinsically scientific or extrinsically related to science. Intrinsic educational topics present a principle such as the conservation of energy, a fact such as the composition of Saturn's atmosphere, a process such as radioactive decay of uranium to lead, or a methodology such as the scientific method. Extrinsic topics deal more with the role of science in society and include topics such as history, stem cell research legislation and funding, and evolution versus intelligent design (or creationism).

Unlike commercial science television, the principal concern of educational science television is to provide visual aids that support or enhance an instructor's curriculum. Profitability, if it is a goal at all, is secondary to meeting the educational or informational targets. The visual medium is an increasingly ubiquitous teaching tool in the classroom. Once considered a passive process, "cognitive research shows that viewers [of video] observe, interpret and coordinate all of the information in [a] video to make their own personal sense of what is being communicated." (Bransford 112)

Science entertainment seeks to maximize its audience, which equates to higher revenues for producers and networks. In doing so, science entertainment typically embraces popular, yet conceptually unsophisticated science and engineering topics such as Discovery Science television's How it's Made, which explains how everyday objects are manufactured; Passport to Pluto, which reveals how a probe is sent to Pluto; or Building the Ultimate, which celebrates the 'superlative' such as the world's deepest diamond mine, biggest offshore oil platform or biggest dump truck. Science entertainment rarely presents unpopular or controversial topics; when a network broadcasts programs such as Discovery Channel's Global Warming: What You Need To Know, the controversial nature of the issue serves to increase viewership.

John Lynch, the deputy head of BBC Science, describes the role of science filmmakers in a commercial world as, "to be alert to the key issues in the world of science that matter to nonscientists, and to provide them with a framework within which they can make their own judgments. But along with that laudable goal comes a creative challenge: how to reveal science as enticing and as relevant as we passionately believe it is." However, his goal is not only to produce good science programming but to serve the corporate bottom line as well. He continues, "Working in science television, we are split between science as a wonderful world of discovery and knowledge, and the nature of television viewing, a world filled with people reaching for the remote control to change channels. Our lives are spent trying to stop them from doing so." (229)

Video media in an academic environment and the performative mode of documentary film share an important feature – they both rely, to some degree, on the viewers’ interpretive strategies and ability to assign meaning to a text.

The advantages of performative documentary enable science filmmakers to overcome traditional boundaries encountered in conventional non-fiction science films. Ten or twenty years ago, audiences might have expected actual footage of the Apollo 11 spacecraft as it departed Earth in July of 1969 as requisite if a filmmaker planned to tell the story of that mission. However, viewers’ adaptive film literacy allows them to suspend questions of representation or authenticity and understand that, for example, a computer animation of the spacecraft is representationally valid in the story of what actually happened.

Science is replete with history, processes, experiments, materials and places that are impractical, impossible or even dangerous to bring into a classroom environment. For this reason, performative documentary is an ideal format for bringing inaccessible science into the classroom or before an audience through a crafted *mélange* of recreation, reenactment, simulation and computer imagery and animations.

For example, as uranium decays to lead it sheds deadly radiation. As a filmmaker, I am barred from producing an indexical experience of this process for my viewers for obvious reasons. However, is the lesson mitigated by creating a simple animation that shows a sample of U^{238} with its deadly alpha particles, as one by one, each uranium atom decays into lead? For today’s sophisticated audiences, the answer is definitely “no.” Further, I can show the uranium sample from the viewer’s perspective,

with a shot that recedes away from the deadly material, revealing its microscopic size in the hand of a human – an actor. The actor takes the sample out of his hand, revealing a red burn on his skin where the uranium was. Performative documentary allows me to convey the *concept* that uranium is turning into another material through a process that ejects a particle, which in the hand of a human, seems to be dangerous. There is no indexicality, but there is computer recreation and a re-enactor. Thus, I represent a sophisticated science topic through performative film.

The Center for International Education at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, defines “learning objects” as a new approach using digital media in education and learning content. Traditionally, instructors deliver media content to students in large blocks of several hours (e.g. lectures, films). Learning objects are much smaller units of information, typically ranging from two minutes to fifteen minutes. These objects are self-contained – a student can take in each learning object independently. They are reusable – an instructor can use a single learning object in multiple contexts for multiple purposes. Educators can aggregate them, group them into larger collections of content, including traditional course structures; or they can tag learning objects with metadata – attach descriptive information allowing others to find them easily by a search. (www.uwm.edu)

Using a similar approach, filmmakers can integrate ‘learning object’ concepts into a complex performative text that incorporates an array of documentary modes, performance and non-indexical recreations to construct a science education tool designed to evoke a unique and personal learning experience in the viewer.

THE PERFORMATIVE MODE IN FILM

As I have suggested, performative documentary is ‘new’ in the sense that it is the latest mode in Nichols’ canon of modes, along with the poetic mode, to be defined; yet performative work in non-fiction has existed since the 1920s. Grierson’s Drifters (1929), Flaherty’s Nanook of the North (1922) and Moana (1926), Vertov’s Man With a Movie Camera (1929) and Iven’s Rain (1929) are examples of performative documentary films, or documentary films with performative elements. Accordingly there is a large body of performative documentary work to draw upon as examples of the paradigm. Notable films include: The Body Beautiful, Ngozi Onwurah (1991); Tongues Untied, Marlon Riggs (1989); Bontoc Eulogy, Marlon Fuentes (1995); Dockers, Jimmy McGovern (1999); The Thin Blue Line, Errol Morris (1988); Roger and Me, Michael Moore (1989); Fahrenheit 9/11, Michael Moore (2004); Paris is Burning, Jenny Livingston (1990); What the Bleep Do We Know, William Arntz (2004); The Elegant Universe, Julia Cort and Brian McMaster (2003); and, At the Risk of Being Smote, John Little (2007).

From this list of films, which certainly only represents a small fraction of documentaries that are at least in part performative, I examine more closely six disparate films, all of which may be called performative. The Thin Blue Line, Fahrenheit 9/11 and Tongues Untied are not science documentaries, but the film community recognizes these films as exemplary of their authors’ styles. Additionally these films each offer a unique insight into the application of performative elements in non-fiction film. The Elegant Universe and What the Bleep Do We Know are both science documentary films that

serve as comprehensive examples of completely performative documentary film. Instead of integrating performative elements within an otherwise traditional documentary text, these two films represent the archetypical performative science documentary film. Finally, At the Risk of Being Smote is an example of a performative science documentary that incorporates elements of all of these films. For example, Morris and Moore inspired the interactivity, reflexivity and performance components, and Arntz' style influenced the use of representational recreation and reenactment to evoke viewer response.

Tongues Untied

Marlon Riggs' Tongues Untied(1989) critiques the positioning of black gay culture as an ethnographic subject. It blends poetry, performance, popular culture, personal testimony and history into a text that allows the viewers to transport themselves into Riggs' world. Tongues integrates styles ranging from social documentary to experimental montage, personal narrative and lyric poetry. The music of Billie Holiday and Nina Simone occupies the sound track with poetry of Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam. Riggs creates Madonna-esque imagery that invokes the glossy black and white Vogue fashion world, with characters who use expressive and flamboyant gestures and embellished finger snapping. (The film is likely the source for FOX television's In Living Color (1990-1994) parody of Siskel & Ebert in a skit called "Men on Film," a skit which ironically supported Riggs' thesis. It featured Damon Wayans and David Alan Grier,

who play a pair of extremely effeminate gay men who review films completely based on their potential for homoerotic content.)

In Tongues Untied, we see a montage in which church leaders proclaim gay relationships as an ‘abomination’, black political activists who consider being black and being gay as a betrayal of one’s ‘blackness,’ and excerpts from the ‘fag humor’ industry perpetuated by celebrities such as Eddie Murphy and Spike Lee. Riggs links these expressions to acts of violence he experiences as a gay man *and* as a black man. He brings his world to the screen in his testimony of the abusive epithets: “fag, motherfuckin’ coon, punk.” He assaults the viewer with the violent rhythm of repeated insults with footage of the bashing of a black gay man. In so doing, he sculpts and molds an evocative world and invites the viewer to experience it, to step into Riggs’ shoes, and *derive* what life might be like for a gay, black man.

The Thin Blue Line

Errol Morris’ documentary film, The Thin Blue Line (1988), tells the story of the shooting death of a police officer in Dallas, Texas in 1976. It is not a sensationalized account of history, although the film itself was sensational on another level, because it revealed the true identity of the true killer and vindicated a wrongly convicted man. Morris slowly reveals a hidden universe by simply allowing everyone involved, criminals, judges, police officers, and witnesses, to talk on camera for as long as was necessary. Ultimately, the on camera personalities become so comfortable with the interview process that they let their guard down, and that’s when Morris gets his story.

Slowly, the film pulls the viewer into the surreal world of the accused, the accuser and the small town of Vidor, Texas and its 'justice' system.

The film The Thin Blue Line is an arbitration between characters who live on the fringe of society, either economically or psychologically, and who just happen to be caught up in a bizarre story. It presents multiple points of view simultaneously yet unevenly. These multiple views add credibility without leading to confusion. Morris' portrayal of the story is unambiguous because he introduces indexical evidence (still photos of the murder weapon, bodies, newspaper clippings) and found or archival footage that lead the viewer to accept Morris' claim of historical verisimilitude.

In addition to indexical, evidentiary representations, Morris invokes reenactments and recreations that serve to highlight the film through visual punctuation, iconic representation or historical representation. Images of Dr. Death's (Grigson's) psychoanalytical drawings and their pointlessness evoke a sense of failed justice. Cigarettes that grow in number in an ash tray reveal the passing of time. Juxtaposed images of Vega and Comet taillights raise a sense of doubt to testimony in the trial. In 1988, prior to the recognition and acceptance of performative documentary, the Thin Blue Line was controversial and denied documentary status because of such fictional story telling elements.

Morris doesn't parcel time on screen evenly for each character, and it's a strategic decision he made to allow viewers to convoke within themselves an emotional sensibility for each character. Adams, convicted of a murder he didn't commit, is articulate, intelligent and the more we see of him on camera, the less guilty he *seems*. Harris, is

inarticulate, slow witted and comfortable with a life of crime, which evokes an emotional sense that he is, in fact, the guilty murderer. This is part of Morris' story arc, which resolves itself in Harris' *de facto* admission of guilt in his final taped interview with Morris.

Morris' recreated representations are iconographic and rhythmic. His reenactments, while usually lacking in production quality, are representative of events in a historical world that have no indexical counterpart. His musical score is an emotional rollercoaster ride. All of these elements are braided into the story he tells, a story that indiscriminately crosses the boundary between fiction and nonfiction, in the performative documentary style.

Fahrenheit 9/11

Michael Moore's film portrays a post 9/11 America and, in particular, the record of the Bush administration and alleged links between the families of George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden through global oil conglomerates. To date, Fahrenheit 9/11 is the highest-grossing documentary of all time, taking in roughly \$200 million worldwide, including United States box office revenue of \$120 million.

Moore interweaves systematically or thematically connected, yet individually unrelated, vignettes of people or places with narrative stories to create a tapestry of ironic and humorous tragedy. The performative film reveals expository, interactive, reflexive and performative elements.

Moore interacts with his subjects by appearing on camera in ‘man on the street’ style interviews. For example, Moore interviews marine recruiters, forming questions designed to make them look like sociopathic and hyper-predatory liars. Moore never confronts the recruiters, but instead crafts his questions, feigning a ‘genuine’ curiosity and implied innocence. His act helps the viewer to look beyond Moore’s political agenda and accept the sequence’s suggestion that he seeks the ‘truth.’ He crafts his questions to evoke emotions in the viewer.

Additionally, Moore employs reflexive elements that serve to promote the idea he is simply a filmmaker enjoying his right to free speech. In the middle of an interview on a public street across from the Saudi Embassy, federal police interrupt Moore’s questions. At that moment the sequence becomes reflexive, and the focus is no longer about the interview but rather about Moore, the filmmaker who is suffering the scrutiny of police. Moore’s questions cleverly imply that the American police are protecting the Saudi embassy. In the context of prior text in the film, this interaction helps to build an idea in the mind of the viewer that the Bush administration, through Saudi oil influences, has unjustly provided security to the Saudis. Moore never shows this directly, but instead, leads the viewers to make that conclusion for themselves.

Moore talks an ice cream truck driver into driving in circles with Moore on board, loudspeaker in hand, on a street near the Capitol Mall. Moore’s film crew follows him around the circuit as Moore pointlessly reads the Patriot Act out loud on his megaphone - for the camera to film – not for Congress to hear. It’s an effective performance that, when contrasted with an interview with a congressman who said he didn’t have time to

read the Act before he voted in favor of it, allows Moore to claim that *no one* in Congress read the act before voting in the affirmative.

Moore has selected a sound track that heightens a sense of the ironic and even casts visual subjects in an awkward and unflattering light. Moore uses clichéd banjo music over news footage of George W. Bush to create an image of Bush as an incapable, backward, good-ole-boy hick. Later he plays musical selections by the B-52s, which appear over scenes of war. The happy, party pathos of the music makes the imagery more ironic and powerful. Moore uses short selections and iconography from popular television shows of the 1950s and 60s to represent and add cynical humor to current events in the Bush administration.

This film crosses the boundary between fiction and nonfiction while employing a variety of documentary modes and techniques that all come together to build an evocative and textured emotional state in the mind of the viewer. It allows the viewers to conclude ‘for themselves’ the message Moore so carefully crafts in the performative documentary.

The Elegant Universe

Julia Cort’s and Brian McMaster’s The Elegant Universe (2003) presents a world of advanced theoretical physics and ‘string theory,’ based on the book with the same title written by Brian Greene, who is a string theorist and physics professor at Columbia University. The story represents the very latest in theoretical physics, a field in which empiricism, realism, causality and evidentiary truth claims are critically important.

However, the filmmakers tell the story in the performative documentary mode without conflict or debate about the truth-claims it presents. String theory, which is built on a foundation of quantum mechanics, is unobservable and virtually incomprehensible to all but a handful of people in the world. There is no indexical evidence to represent the physicality of ‘strings’ and only a modest amount of historical media exists upon which to build the narrative foundations that lead to string theory in the film.

The filmmakers tell a story of physics using recreation, reenactment and non-indexical representations to communicate to the viewer the nature of a world no one has ever seen or experienced. In an early scene, Greene explains how strings, the objects upon which string theory is based, behave. Since no one has ever seen a string, the filmmakers present a visual metaphor, showing multiple copies of the same woman playing a bass cello to represent the unobservable behavior of strings. Viewers may understand the physics concept that, according to the theory, the strings vibrate in a way that is conceptually similar to cello strings.

Important historical events are reenacted such as Einstein in his Princeton home fifty years ago, near death, diligently making calculations in his notebook. This reenactment shows Einstein frantically writing down equations as if he is in a race to get his last thought on paper before death arrives. The scene is an exaggeration designed to set an emotional framework for the viewer to fathom the importance of Einstein’s work to string theory. In another reenactment, Greene appears in a 1920s era restaurant where actors portray Niels Bohr and Erwin Schroedinger, two of the fathers of quantum mechanics, who play dice. This represents the probabilistic nature of quantum

mechanics; it makes that complex concept accessible to viewers, because everyone has memory and understanding of the nature of dice.

In addition to Greene's many interviews with other physics experts, Greene performs as an actor who portrays 'the guy who experiences what the universe would be like if...' there were eleven dimensions, or the universe behaved quantum mechanically, or if we could travel at the speed of light. These portrayals highlight an important dimension of representation that Cort and McMasters bring to this film: computer generated images, animations and effects and their ability to represent in a realistically physical way the unphysical manifestations and consequences of advanced physics.

The film The Elegant Universe tells a story of extremely complex physics integrating a large performance component including reenactment, recreation, found footage and representations that are completely non-indexical. Fictional representation is not only present in this story, it is necessary for two reasons. One, the concepts are too complex for all but a handful of people to grasp without the aid of fictional, metaphorical and analogical representations that can connect the viewer and his world view and memory to a topic that lies well beyond such view; two, the body of evidentiary representation of this topic is virtually nonexistent.

What the Bleep Do We Know

William Arntz' What the Bleep Do We Know (2004) is replete with scientific concepts that are beyond almost every viewer's level of understanding. While the topics presented in the film include quantum mechanics, engineering, biology, the human mind and even mysticism, the fundamental science the filmmaker explores is the relationship between Erwin Schroedinger's quantum mechanical wave equation,

$$\left(i\hbar \frac{\partial \Psi}{\partial t} = -\frac{\hbar^2}{2m} \frac{\partial^2 \Psi}{\partial x^2} + V(x)\Psi(x, t) \equiv \tilde{H}\Psi(x, t), \right)$$

which describes the behavior of waves and particles in the realm of the very small, and the nature of the human mind. (I include the equation, which is cryptic and difficult to understand, only to underscore the complexity of the subject that the film so eloquently makes clear through performative techniques.)

The film is an exploration of a variety of science topics and their interrelatedness, all of which converge through a performance component in the film that serves as a liaison between advanced science and its relevance to the viewer. The filmmaker interviews experts in these fields and uses the character Amanda, performed by Marlee Matlin, to experience the results and manifestations of the otherwise inaccessible worlds the scientists describe.

Arntz uses computer-generated (CG) recreations and animations to vividly and clearly describe infinite parallel universes, two-dimensional planes of existence, micro-

cellular chemical reactions, human memory, infinite quantum probability states and many other advanced concepts. These CG tools connect the viewers' cultural and experiential memory to the visually and aurally well-crafted analogies and metaphors that allow them to understand the idea – the concept – in a more personally relevant way. For example, animations include the representation of human brain cells, their interconnectivity and their response to external stimuli. They include representations of two dimensional worlds that are then compared to our three dimensional world in order to build a basis by which the viewer might begin to understand universes with four, five or even an infinite number of dimensions.

There is no thesis to be argued in this film. There is no truth-claim asserted by the filmmaker. This performative documentary film employs expository, observational and occasionally the interactive modes in conjunction with a large performance element to compel the viewers to not only understand something more about topics that once seemed beyond conceptual reach, but to feel a sense of advanced science's relevance to their world, to their lives.

At the Risk of Being Smote...

The American Nobel physicist, Stephen Weinberg wrote, "With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil — that takes religion." (Goldberg, *New York Times*)

Weinberg's criticism seems, on the surface, to be of religion, or religious leaders. However, he is really talking about the inherent threat to science posed by social

constructivism - how individuals or groups interact to create a reality that conforms to their social beliefs, institutions and traditions – sometimes without regard to, or consideration of, what the facts might say.

Scientific research and discovery slowly peel away mysteries of the universe revealing nature in ways we can know, understand and apply to the world around us – often for the benefit of mankind. Science, by its very nature, embraces skepticism and rejects a-priori knowledge or forgone conclusion to educe and illuminate nature's most stubbornly guarded secrets. Sometimes scientific revelation signifies or represents objective realities that conflict with, and even threaten, certain socially constructed realities.

In the shadow of monster science, which might erode or even collapse certain constructivist belief systems, 'defenders of the faith' come to action in their declared battle to protect their traditions and institutions. Ultimately, such battles result in strategies that vilify science, that perpetuate half-truths or fabricate pseudo-scientific results that conform to an existing belief system. The consequence of such strategies is the diminution and derogation of science, casting science as controvertible and dangerous.

My film, At the Risk of Being Smote, explores the relationship between science and fundamental evangelical Christianity, the followers of this faith and their effort to recast science in the 'image of God.' Their strict and literal interpretation of the Bible forms the basis of their social constructivist belief system, creationism. The precepts of

creationism frequently contradict scientific principles and conclusions, which today are virtually axiomatic in the scientific community.

The book of Genesis in the Bible contains the foundation of creationism, and creationists interpret it to say that the Earth is 6,000 years old. This single exegesis is at the very heart of creationist's rejection of commonly accepted scientific theories in fields that include cosmology, geology, evolution, anthropology, paleontology, quantum physics, chemistry and relativity.

Creationists interpret the Bible as valid and relevant, representing the incontrovertible and *literal* authority of the word of God. Occasionally, science threatens their interpretation of the Bible and, therefore, the word of God. This brings us back to Stephen Weinberg's quote.

Fundamentalist evangelicals see science as a threat to God's word and anything they can do, by any method, to protect his word is 'good', even if science, or the advancement of science, might suffer or be damaged in the process.

As I've discussed earlier in this paper, nonfiction or documentary travels with a tacit pedigree of objectivity. However, as I have also discussed, from the days of Flaherty and Grierson, documentary film has always coveted the power of the Trojan Horse in its ability to deliver subjective political or social messages that raise awareness, influence, persuade or call people to action in the guise of the proverbial objective horse. My film is no exception in its Trojan purpose. I believe social constructivism, specifically Fundamental evangelicalism, is harmful to the advancement of science, and I intend to raise the viewers' awareness of the depth, complexity and effort to which

creationists go to rationalize and justify bad, or pseudoscience that conforms to their religious doctrine.

‘Evoke’ is an important word regarding the film, because my strategy is to avoid the conventional, diachronistic and causal, ‘Here’s the problem and here is the solution,’ format. Instead, I employ a performative format to raise viewers’ awareness of the growing debate between science and religion, to evoke in the viewers an emotional sensibility to the futility of complex realities constructed in response to social doctrine, and to guide the viewers to derive that fundamentalist creationism and science are often mutually intransigent, that they are two different pursuits.

The style of my film reveals my moral outlook and ethical position on the relationship between social constructivism (creationism in this case) and science. Through the questions my character poses to the creationist, his occasionally incredulous responses and my resulting humorous, ironic and poignant flights of imagination, it becomes clear on which side of the debate I reside.

The rhetorics of my film, the means by which I convey my moral and ethical position to the viewer, rely on a performative strategy that integrates interactive, observational, expository and reflexive modes incorporating significant performance components in addition to the use of found footage, elements of contemporary broadcast media and my own computer generated animations with composites. I rely heavily on the conventions of the interview, leveraging the creationist’s belief that this interview is an opportunity to preach his doctrine. I draw attention to the implausibility of the points he tries to make and to the curious logic he uses to rationalize elements of his doctrine.

While film historians loosely define performative documentary as a *mélange* of visual mode and style, I also experiment with the use of varied and dissimilar music pieces and sound effects in both diegetic as well as nondiegetic applications. Specifically, I use diegetic music to underscore or support the story as it unfolds, such as piano being played in the bar background or music that ties up the NPR broadcast. I use nondiegetic musical inflection and accents to highlight particularly entertaining statements. This broad variety of style in sound helps avoid a ‘habituatedness’ on the part of the viewer and subsequent lessened emotional response to the aural component of the film. This might be called performative sound.

The film is the story of a filmmaker who is frustrated with the surge of influence that religious fundamentalists seem to have over science education and ultimately science advancement. My character decides to make a short film about the subject by interviewing a creationist to expose (through the use of humor) the oceans of difference between the creation and science points of view.

From early in the film I play a character prone to dreams or imaginings that reflect his cynical view of what is ultimately portrayed as unrealistic, poorly considered and silly – the creationist point of view. Ultimately, I want my viewer to be entertained and amused by the intersection of science and fundamentalist religion and how these two pursuits are at odds with each other.

I experiment with the emotional boundaries of a performative documentary film, by incorporating humor as a tool to amplify or underscore important events. Throughout

the film, humor forces a divergence of perception in the viewers' minds, causing the creationist to seem simpleminded, uneducated, annoying and even macabre.

The format of the film is pseudo-journalistic, presenting the creationist in an interactive interview in which I play the interviewer. Typically, the creationist sits relatively low in the screen with his head centered in the frame, in a rather subordinated spot, so that viewers almost feel that they are looking down at him, a technique similar to Errol Morris' portraiture style used in A Brief History of Time and The Thin Blue Line. The lighting is flat and uninteresting, almost offensive to a film literate viewer, in order to subliminally suggest that the subject, like his environment, is unspectacular, dull and incapable of adding color to the viewers' lives. Further, I carefully placed the subject against a wall with a light switch and a door frame behind him, rendering him an odd guy in an odd setting. I was careful to keep any affectations of the creationist's life or profession out of frame to prevent the viewers from seeing him as empathetic character (and possibly developing an empathetic affinity for him). I wanted the creationist to project an ethos of dispassion, a man only capable of dogma and doctrine.

I also experimented with an interesting idea to use a camera operator who had never operated a camera before for the creationist interview. My goal was to get shaky, sometimes out of focus, and generally poorly framed images. I envisioned an interviewee who would seem to squirm and appear somewhat frenetic, courtesy of the shaky-cam of inexperience. My only instruction to the operator was, "keep him in the middle of the frame." The middle of the frame is not aesthetically pleasing and paints the subject more as a suspect in an interrogation than a respected expert. My operator often

got it 'right' and the effect works – the focus is occasionally as blurry and as shaky as the creationist's logic.

By producing this film, I wanted to experiment with some theoretical concepts attributed to Andre Bazin and Jean Baudrillard. Bazin contends that every image represents some intrinsic truth. He was interested in films that had a quality of *objective reality*, films that depended less on their constructedness by the hand of the director, and more on their ability to provide the viewer visual information that is less manipulated – shifting the responsibility of interpreting the signified from the director to the viewer.

Performative documentary is highly constructed, and Bazin would likely view it as unacceptably artificial, lacking any of what he naively called objective reality. Performative documentary and objective reality, as Bazin defines it, share one important feature - the shift of responsibility from director to viewer to construct meaning from a film, which is a fundamental goal for my film.

Baudrillard, on the other hand, sees the world of signifier, signified and referent through the glasses of structural semiotics. A precession takes representation through an evolutionary process from the original to the counterfeit to the mechanically reproduced to, what Baudrillard calls 'third order simulacra,' the simulated copy that has come to replace the original (e.g., the map has come to precede the territory.) (Baudrillard 166-184)

My film explores elements of both perspectives by shifting the responsibility to interpret meaning to the viewer and to do so with a wide variety of constructedness and simulacra. Shifting or at least sharing the responsibility of interpretation is, on a level,

duplicitous as the filmmaker wants to either persuade or, in the case of my film, make the viewer aware of an issue in an entertaining way. The best way to do that is to let the viewer assemble meaning from the film, influenced by his own fears, world view and experience – to let him feel that his conclusion was *his own*. This might also be viewed as the difference between pushing a point of view and pulling a point of view. In either case, the point of view is the same – mine. The viewers’ resistance to or rejection of my point of view is mitigated if I present the ethos of my preaching as less obvious and I construct an environment in which the viewer may observe dialogues between characters and my character’s flights of imagination that serve as my inner commentary on the lack of logic I see in the creationists’ occasionally incredible assertions.

If the creationist says dinosaurs were on Noah’s ark, one way to suggest that this idea is illogical is to portray my character imagining a dinosaur eating a passenger on the ark. The underlying message to the viewer is, “if there were dinosaurs on the ark, how did anyone survive?” The ease by which CG animations may be built enables filmmakers like myself to fabricate nonindexical representations that, in this film particularly, serve to underscore the absurdity and humor of my subject’s claims. Throughout my film there are elements of artificiality through recreation, animation, creative editing, montage and compositing. Some of these effects in this performative film are obvious and some are not; however, they all serve to achieve my goal that the viewer comes away from my film with a sense that science is endangered by certain religious fundamentalists.

Ultimately, I don't intend for the film to make converts to my way of thinking or to sway the undecided to the ways of secular society. My goal for this film's effect on the viewer is twofold. First, I intend to entertain with this film. Second, I crafted it to raise awareness in viewers of how very serious creationists are about a point of view that is scientifically indefensible. The film uses the performative documentary mode and humor to celebrate the boundary between science and religion and to show that rationalizing either science or religion to be consistent with the other leads to irreconcilable and entertaining contradictions.

The film explores a fascinating behavior in social groups that assigns primacy to doctrine over observation – to build a world view on an a priori world-view that forces observation to conform to it, regardless of inconsistency or irreconcilability between empirical data and doctrine based conclusion. This paper is not an examination of social behavior and science, however I suspect that every social group in the world suffers, to some degree, from scientific prejudices and resistance to scientific advancement that have their roots in constructivism. Evangelical fundamentalists, however, represent an extreme world view which is unfamiliar to many and therefore, fascinating and entertaining to observe. As Bill Nichols would explain, “[The film] *speaks* about them to us and we gain a sense of pleasure, satisfaction and knowledge as a result.”

(Introduction to Documentary, 41)

THE FUTURE OF PERFORMATIVE DOCUMENTARY

The future of performative documentary would – by itself - make an excellent thesis paper and a discussion in any detail is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is an important issue to briefly treat in the context of viewers and their expectations that media, specifically documentary, will adapt and evolve in the future.

Viewers' subjectivities guide the performative documentary, because viewers subjectively interpret or derive meaning from such films. Viewers' fluency in advancing technologies and their desire for originality in film make them critically relevant to the evolution of the mode.

Film styles and genres become stale and uninteresting as viewers become saturated and unsurprised by a format with which they are completely literate and have come to know overly well. Roger and Me exploded onto the scene of documentary film representing a novel, cynical and ironic treatment of socially important issues – with a certain amount of stylistic shock value. Fahrenheit 9/11, along with the canon of Michael Moore films, tell different stories but in a very similar way. The shock value is gone and the viewer has become acclimated to the style, expecting a Michael Moore film to be a 'Michael Moore' film. Perhaps Michael Moore is a step in the evolutionary path of performative documentary, upon which others might build.

Chris Marker made bold advances in documentary film by embracing new technologies and producing his 'interactive' 1998 documentary Immemory. Since 1998, technologies have advanced significantly, providing incredibly powerful interactive

gaming technologies and computer generated media technologies that increasingly allow a non-expert user to produce striking computer representations of still and animated worlds of both the real and the imagined.

Performative documentary allows different viewers to subjectively receive the documentary message in a way that is unique to each viewer, which represents a transfer of ‘authority’ from the filmmaker to the viewer. However, the world of documentary film remains unidirectional, in the sense that the final cut the viewer sees is the final cut the filmmaker produced. The only participation on the part of the viewer is his or her unique interpretation of the filmmaker’s product. There is no interactivity providing the viewer a real-time input to science documentary film that might guide the ‘film’ to yield varying, viewer directed pathways for the film’s story.

With new technologies that include ‘learning object’ based filmmaking assemblies and interactive computer algorithms, a viewer may one day *participate* in a performative documentary with a spectrum of topical documentary pathways that might be cleverly stimulated by the uniqueness of the viewers’ inputs.

The computer-documentary may heuristically consider the viewers’ series of interactions and calculate the most effective ‘next’ representation from a pool of pre-crafted media or real-time computer-generated media that would be both subjectively tailored to the viewer and would contribute to a unique rendering or version of the documentary. Participatory performative documentary will be technologically possible and its creation viewer driven.

CONCLUSION

John Ellis points out, “Documentary is a slippery genre to define; classifications can be out of date before the printer's ink has dried.” (342) However, it seems that new definitions of documentary modes are retrospective, serving only to label that which has been, since perhaps, the very beginning of documentary film itself.

Grierson recognized the power of film as being more powerful than education, more powerful than even the church as a means to influence the masses. Influenced by Lippman’s political theories, Grierson saw his role as political patriarch, able to use the power of documentary film to simplify increasingly complex political topics for viewers and entice the nescient public back into a political process it had abandoned.

Flaherty saw documentary film as a tool to bring the cultural anthropology of ‘aboriginal’ peoples to curious audiences in the form of ethnographic documentary. However, western influences on Flaherty’s subjects spoiled the image of how he truly believed native societies once were, might have been or *should* have been. Flaherty used documentary to fabricate false memory that conformed to his preconception and not to reality.

Vertov professed that proletarian cinema must be based on ‘truth.’ Vertov’s ‘truth’, by his own admission, consisted of fragments of actuality *assembled* for meaningful impact to serve revolutionary doctrine. Vertov saw his work as objective and truthful even though it contained fabrications that served the proletariat.

The documentary works of Grierson, Flaherty, Vertov and others of that early period subsequently fell out of favor as some viewers and critics questioned the objectivity, historical accuracy and truth claims of work built on recreation, reenactment and non-indexical representations – elements typically associated with fiction film.

For the sixty years following Grierson, Flaherty and Vertov, the community of practitioners guided definitions of what was and what wasn't documentary. These filmmakers relegated elements that might be adduced as remotely fictive to the inventory of unacceptable tools in the world of conventional, putatively objective documentary film.

Under this restrictive approach, a documentary film served a narrative or rhetorical purpose within the subjective shackles of traditional and orthodox documentary modes, forms and structures. As a result, viewers now employ procedures of rhetorical engagement in documentary film, because they are habituated to these formats and prone to accept a film's truth claims. Similar to Pavlovian conditioning, this film tradition trained audiences to expect relatedness to the historical world and objectivity in documentary film.

However viewers were tired of the same, stale format, they retained an expectation of objectivity in works labeled as documentary. Filmmakers were also interested in exploring new frontiers, to experiment beyond tradition and see what might lie beyond the margins of orthodoxy.

Filmmakers like Errol Morris, Michael Moore and Chris Marker, among others, were the architects of documentary films that would embrace performance, reenactment,

recreations, fabrications, animations and computer generated imagery as representational threads woven into the fabric of their films. Filmmakers' principal goals included raising awareness, calling people to action, investigation, education and entertainment.

However, these films would not be held captive, imprisoned within the boundaries of any prescribed documentary mode.

Slowly, theorists and filmmakers alike started to embrace the idea that a documentary would never be reality nor would it erase or invalidate that reality by being representational. By 1993 the performative mode of documentary was born, or at least defined. No longer would documentarists be bound to causal story structure that relied exclusively on narrative, realism, empiricism, causality and evidentiary truth claims.

Performative documentary is poetic and evocative, more about *suggestion* than argument, allowing the viewer to assemble meaning of events through the collected evocations, icons, impressions, intimations and implications contained within the film.

Performative film allows a filmmaker to transfer or share the responsibility of interpreting the referent from himself to the viewer. The structure and strategy are no longer about posing the problem and walking the viewer through to the solution. Where a conventional documentary is designed to *send* meaning to the viewer, a performative documentary is designed for the viewer to *receive* meaning. It is no longer the filmmaker's responsibility to induce meaning in the viewer, but rather to allow the viewer to derive meaning from the film.

Performative documentary film genres have been, in large part, social, cultural or ethnographic, with only a handful being science related. The world of performative

science documentary is itself a virtually unexplored frontier, inviting new filmmakers and viewers to experience almost unrestricted modes of representation. Performative science film is poised to become an important mode, because viewers are increasingly film literate and willing to accept the *representation of a truth*, understanding that the *truth of a representation* is no longer a prerequisite for a document's truth claims.

Performative science film enhances the audiovisual learning or entertainment experience not formerly found in conventional science documentary, because the experience invites the viewers to understand the film in the context of their personal memories and experiences. Performative science documentary is no longer concerned with reaching everyone – it is concerned with reaching *each* one.

Technology is enabling new ways to represent not only the physical universe around us, but also universes that once only existed in the imagination of brilliant minds or advanced science books. Certainly when indexicality fails, because the subjects are too small, too large, too fast, too slow or too abstract to see by conventional methods, animation is a powerful and obvious tool for representation. The sophistication of new computer animation software and the speed of new processors together will soon be able to generate images and animations so 'physical' in their behavior and appearance, that they will converge with the behavior and appearance of indexical still and motion images. The recreation and representation elements of performative science film, particularly those that are computer generated, represent the natural world in ways that are increasingly indistinguishable from the indexical.

The future might find indexicality irrelevant, because actual participants of historical events, social actors that portray them and the computer generated representations of them will be not only indistinguishable, but potentially more economic and less troublesome to work with than actors, props and sets.

Performative documentary will wield significant influence and power to evoke memory, emotions and a sense of ownership in the viewer by artificially portraying any physical process, historical event or person - convincingly and authoritatively.

The future of documentary film may hold interactive performative science 'experiences' that integrate found footage, reenactment, interactivity and, of course, computer recreation. In these science documentaries, a viewer, *now participant*, may step out of the Eagle on to the moon with Neil Armstrong in 1969, or join Lewis and Clark on their expedition seeing the world through the eyes of any, or all, of the members of the Corps of Discovery. As a result viewers may derive from the interactive performative medium what it might have been like to experience first hand such an adventure in natural science.

The evolution of technologies enables new ways to bring a performative science documentary *experience to participants* in ways that are only limited by the imagination. It allows the viewer to perceive personal authorial control and voice that allows the boundary between discourse and intuition, between fiction and 'reality,' to dissolve. Ultimately, this approach takes the filmmaker out of the role of interlocutor, giving the viewers a sense of invisible omniscience as they experience the filmic panopticon.

Performative science documentary is intrinsically compelling for its novel approach to subjective representation and use of non-causal narrative. It evokes meaning in a viewer on a personal level, strengthened by the viewers' own memories and emotions, allowing them to uniquely derive meaning from the film text that may entertain, raise awareness, persuade people to a point of view, call people to action, or simply celebrate the difference between them and us in a film about them for us. The mode is emerging and stands poised to become a dominant tool for nonfiction science filmmakers because the constituency of viewers and the community of practitioners have accepted the legitimacy of subjective elements within a nonfiction text.

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