

Millennium Film Journal issue on Experimental Documentary

To the extent that I've always disliked (and tried to disavow) the term "experimental film," I feel the same way these days about the term "experimental documentary film", which is to say that I always thought the field of...what to call it? avant-garde?...cinema was ill-served by the term "experimental" and I think what everyone does these days that has a relationship to documentary is ill-served by this new moniker.

Of course I run into problems naming what I do when I do something that relates to documentary, so I (sometimes) use the term begrudgingly. I don't know whether anyone could ever coin a term that would be large enough to embrace the huge range of work made under this current name, but I still have to say I dislike and disavow it.

I never thought we were doing "experiments" when we were making non-narrative/non-documentary films, and I don't think we're doing "experiments" now if we use our cameras and language to record events in the real world--we're just making films that document something in a way that isn't proscribed by the tenets of conventional documentary practice. I suppose the equivalent in narrative is that things which might be (and sometimes are) called "experimental narrative" are usually misnamed as "independent cinema". All this naming is very crude and conceptually pretty useless, I think.

It would be far better if we called our work documentaries and let the traditionalists squirm in their seats (or coffins) at having something so "experimental" assert itself as, simply, a documentary. Why should they be the ones to dictate how one goes about documenting the world? Why are their works "documentaries" and ours "experimental documentaries"? That just serves to limit the field and to make people think in a limited or simplistic way about a huge body of films—as if some are "true" (proper, authentic, etc) and others are efforts to undermine (or correct) the traditional ones, when in fact there are so many complicated ways to group, categorize and analyze the field.

It also seems to undermine or ignore history—an analogy would be if Germany before WW2 would be called Germany and after the war would be called Experimental Germany because it no longer operates under the same rules as it once did. Or any country, for that matter. The history of a country, people, art practice, business, etc, is always subject to change, redefinition, refinement, progress (or regression), major and minor tweakings. It goes without saying that time (history) yields change, but in other areas we don't constantly rename the original entity because we accept that evolution occurs. So why can't we think this way about documentary? (Or narrative?...I leave experimental/avant-garde aside because it is its own separate genre from these, albeit with a lousy name.) Why do we need "experimental documentary" and "experimental/independent cinema" when what people are doing is simply revising,

enlivening, challenging, having a dialogue with, and *therefore carrying on or contributing to* the evolution of those genres?

I think one reason is because we (sorry to speak for others but I think I share some things with others....) don't want to be found doing the same things that are done by documentary filmmakers. We don't want to be mistaken for Ken Burns or those people who work for the History Channel or even the more admirable but still conventional makers. This is either out of pride (as in, we're more aesthetically sophisticated), politics (we speak more accurately for those whose voices we transmit) or the desire to be the newest thing, but for whatever reason, it seems important for many of us to assert that We aren't Them. I understand this impulse, I understand all the motivations for it because I feel them myself, but the more I reflect back on my experience at screenings, the more I think it would serve the field to have us all consider ourselves documentary filmmakers and then let the audience decide for themselves whether they like or agree with what we're doing or would prefer to be watching a Ken Burns film (and hopefully they would find value in both and not have to choose!).

One significant experience has been my attendance at the Flaherty Film Seminar, off and on, over the years. What I witnessed there was a fierce battle between the group that held to the traditions of documentary and those who wanted to open up the field. Sometimes it seemed like a tempest in a teapot, but what a tempest it was! And I found myself dragged into it, defending myself and my films against charges that I hadn't done things "the right way" (not to exaggerate: I was also warmly received by others.) It's important to note that I'm not talking about legitimate criticism applied to the problems inherent in the film (e.g. it's too slow, vague, badly shot, superficial—any film can and should be criticized if it falls short of its intentions, whether on technical or aesthetic grounds.) What I'm talking about is looking at a film as if it should have been made according to the rules of the genre and then deeming it a failure if it didn't follow those rules. This I do not accept.

Traditionally, a documentary would have been filmed over a sufficient amount of time to follow the subject thoroughly, would be shot in sharp focus with good sound, would be edited for maximum clarity and information-dispensing, and would in the broadest sense be seen as a truthful and comprehensive portrait of a people or place made from as neutral advantage point as possible. Obviously there have been massive attacks/revision made to these rules over the last 20-30 years (most notably the avoidance of the written and narrated voiceover in favor of the story being told by the subjects in on-camera scenes, even preferably without the interview format being used) and many great films have been made during this time, so in a sense we're already working in a much more liberated atmosphere than what prevailed before the 1970's. But the strictures are still in place if we still have to say that what we're doing is experimental. We still must feel that Those Guys make documentaries--albeit somewhat different than the most traditional ones--and consequently we don't see ourselves as part of the history, part of the

community, but instead as outsiders busy with our experiments rather than in a dialogue with our peers. (It certainly doesn't help that most of the documentary film festivals are still stuck in the past; they're still looking for those heart-warming social docs that will get nominated for an Oscar win the audience's heart and they still see this "experimental documentary" work as the bastard Other.)

It's much too late in the history of cinema to have these categories and/or divisions prevail. Viewers today are totally familiar with every "experimental" kind of shooting, sound editing, editing, etc. thanks to the internet, the 21st century, you name it. I think that continuing to call a work "experimental" that is in fact a documentary--something that records and analyzes events in the real world--is to consign us to the dustbin, the back room, the orphanage, and I don't think that's where we belong.

One of the lessons I learned many years ago as a young lesbian was that, if I spoke about myself as Other, I would be treated as such, whereas if I spoke of myself as just another human being, I would be treated that way. I think we should see ourselves as documentary filmmakers when we document the real world. Let others sweat if that makes them uncomfortable, but we shouldn't put ourselves outside of history--in this case, the history of documentary cinema--because we are as much a part of it as those guys who work for the History Channel.

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