



## The Character of Documentary Culture

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Integrated Media Arts MFA Program Department of Film and Media Studies Hunter College, City University of New York

Codes and Modes brings together scholars, makers, graduate students, and curators to interrogate the social spaces and formal and thematic boundaries within which contemporary documentary culture is produced.

## THE REACH OF DOCUMENTARY

Click your web browser open to the remarkable usergenerated social media campaign #iftheygunnedmedown, which recently exploded in response to the events in Ferguson, MO, to realize at once that documentary is in a period of expansion. The particulars of this on-line campaign fervently highlight many of the dynamics that led to this conference. The extension of documentary practices into social media, and their adaptation by a creative class "formerly known as the audience," users who routinely go beyond consuming media to altering, forwarding, and repackaging media "products," produce a site where many of the approaches and formal strategies associated with documentary can be found taking root (even mutating) in a variety of new platforms.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, a proliferation of documentary culture in academic settings and in semi-formal and semi-public coops, collectives, screening spaces, and community centers means that a new kind of culture and discussion has emerged around the nature of documentary at a time when it is threatened in more traditional platforms such as television.

However you may want to characterize *#iftheygunnedmedown*, it surely helps us conceive of the documentary form in its most dynamic sense – not so much as an object but as a thing that is both a force and a focus of forces. Travelling to the margins of documentary practice takes us to a place where we might adapt what Ariella Azoulay calls "the contract of photography" to the set of social practices that make up the world of moving-image documentary.<sup>2</sup> Her contract invites us to see documentary as something not owned, but a shared space of revitalized spectatorship where meaning is contestable. Her nuanced notion of citizenship in a world where many are subjected to sovereignty outside of the Lockean compact, as immigrants, as refugees; as women, opens this shared imaginary to a civic practice of resistance and connection.

For Azoulay, our relationship with the subjects in our films goes beyond that ethical one of representation to say that the represented are also the governed. And in that political space representation may be weak or absent. For her, the social contract extends into a shared imaginary where citizenship and the burdens of catastrophe are connected in the frame of the photograph, a "civic gaze" that invites us to reexamine our world. For Eduardo Coutinho, whose film Jogo de Cena is featured in the conference, one could say that he translates Azoulay's imperative into the world of the moving image. Coutinho's key discovery is of a format of encounter between maker and subject that provokes inventive forms of self-revelation. It is a space where performance, often an uncomfortable companion in the world of documentary, and the interview, a staple of the form, meet at a crossroads, challenging our notions of the historical and our desire to see documentary as a social form with stable formal boundaries.

At this conference we hope to embrace the momentum of documentary media practices and frame our work in the most

expansive sense possible, looking out to a collectively created network of overlapping interests, institutions, and aesthetic approaches that shape a vibrant social sphere of non-fiction media production, reception, and contestation. While different threads of documentary practice often share overlapping goals, they do not demand or require subordination to an uniformly defined end. What they do demand is critical support. As we highlight the dynamics of the social sites and formal boundaries that influence and shape our field, it is important that we also train our focus on those structures that prevent a true diversity of work from taking shape in the first place. Put simply, we need to acknowledge the ways that many of the frameworks our work engage in obscure the larger social flows and range of voices that make the continued potential of documentary so promising.

Across the conference, our participants point to new and ongoing challenges to a vital and shared non-fiction media practice. For keynote speaker Brian Winston, the threats amount to a veritable tsunami, where the rise of digital media, with its erosion of image integrity, and the democratization of documentary production help expose faultlines that lie deep in the observational codes of documentary. Several participants note the role that many large, private foundations have come to play in a funding landscape once dominated by public arts and media entities. This funding shift has been accompanied by a stubbornly persistent desire to privilege the character-driven form of documentary, and more precisely, to fund projects presenting a psychologicalrealist approach that offers up the interiority of the (often foreign and/or oppressed) other. At the same time, metricdriven funding initiatives increasingly ask documentarians to compete with the logic of Facebook by articulating the habits and dispositions of its audiences. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon, but rather a further refinement of a process of audience prefiguration that Barry Dornfeld writes about in his ethnography of a public television documentary more than two decades ago.<sup>3</sup> However, when yoked under the documentary's capacity to affect social change in and through its audience, "change" often takes on a particularly market-driven logic, one that inscribes social and political habits onto class status, and one that encourages audiences to perform their activism through product support and boycott. Second, we observe the role that institutions as diverse as the academy, Netflix, MoMA, and Participant Media, to name just a few, have played in constructing the contemporary documentary canon. Not only do canons carry with them a suggestion about the way that history comes into form thereby threatening to suffocate broader sets of ideas, spaces, and genealogies, they also suggest that documentary still operates under a center/ periphery model, where key figures have an outsized role in what does and does not belong. This can reinforce the status of documentaries as objects to be engaged with by relatively passive audiences. Finally, questions of belonging lead us to consider boundaries of race and class (who feels comfortable participating in the spaces we create?) and boundaries of form (do we need to insist on viewing documentary as a finished product, rather than ongoing processes of research, engagement and reciprocal relations and articulations?).

Our panelists engage with these challenges along four lines of inquiry. First, participants question the role of funding in documentary culture. While accepting the role that foundations play in the field of documentary production, several participants critique the ways that neoliberal initiatives embedded within documentary funding apparatuses distort and displace the social spaces in front

of and behind the lens. Second, there is a sustained engagement with the strategies of the network age as a documentary framework, one that can accommodate documentary's role in breaking down boundaries between audience and text to frame and visualize our world for reflection and critique. How can a theory of documentary predicated upon our socially and virtually networked selves provide us with a tool to assert control over our own cultural signifiers and our own history while avoiding the extractive logic of big data? How can expanding our sense of "what we mean when we talk about documentary" help us think through the many forms of non-fiction media that make demands of us as viewers, as citizens, as plaintiffs? Third, a number of participants have found ways to challenge the celebrity image of documentary, whether that image adopts the privileged form of the polished market product or whether that image takes the form of Western humanist aesthetics that cast the filmmaker and their attendant social institutions as hero. Finally, there is a sustained line of questioning into how we produce and reproduce a sense of what counts as documentary - as teachers within the classroom, or as supporters of many of the formal, semi-formal and improvised documentary institutions that surround us.

The young makers of *#iftheygunnedmedown* put forward their own bodies in a powerful declaration of the very real stakes at play in their mass mediation. The risks they undertook encourages us to extend our notion of documentary to a set of shared propositions that create an imaginary around issues of justice. This project goes to the heart of truth claims, asking how those claims are both mediated and subjective. The makers acknowledge the ambiguity of the image, while accepting the unfinished nature, the incompleteness, and the fictions of any media making gesture. We conceptualize documentary as a social and technological method that both embodies larger social forces and offers them up for characterization, crystalization and debate. We also see the space of documentary as being precious in relation to the linked crises of global economies and institutions of representative democracy, not because it offers a place to stand outside those crises but exactly because of its openness to an embodied and potentially genuinely democratic discussion. We hope this discussion will help us bring together formal, curatorial, and scholarly threads to develop critical thinking and language around documentary that is as expansive as it is rigorous.

by Jason Fox and Martin Lucas

End Notes:

1 Rosen, Jay. "The People Formerly Known as the Audience," (Huffington Post, 5/25/11)

2 Azouley, Ariella. Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography. London: Verso, 2012.

3 Dornfeld, Barry. *Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.