

Editors' Introduction:

Public Rhetoric and Activist Documentary

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& Diane Shoos,**
Editors

Public writing is a constant battle to make one view seem inevitable in hopes that the audience will set aside the other possibilities.

—Phyllis Mentzell Ryder, *Rhetorics for Community Action: Public Writing and Writing Publics*

Attention is being directed toward reality-driven representations from an ever-wider array of sources: journalistic, literary, anthropological.

—Michael Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*

Watch the movie. Show it to others. Inform yourself. Get active on the issue.

—from the “*Dreams Deferred*” DVD sleeve

The idea of public rhetoric, the first term in this journal's new subtitle, might seem self-evident. The language of political campaigning and party platforms, the arguments that formulate (or justify) policies and institutional practices,

the calls for voter participation — all of this surely is what we might think of as public rhetoric writ large. It involves masses of people, national and international media, and well-known—or soon-to-be-forgotten—public figures. It is, as Phyllis Ryder so deftly puts it, a “battle to make one view seem inevitable.” Citizens all over the world encounter that level of public rhetoric almost daily. It claims a special importance — a right to dominate the press coverage — that, say, a small neighborhood organization or local women’s interest group could never hope to claim.

This issue of *Reflections* is dedicated to ways of thinking about public rhetoric beyond those powerful special interest groups, government policy wonks, or mainstream newsmakers because, of course, public rhetoric cannot be isolated in the words of the powerful. As theorists like Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (*Public Sphere and Experience*), Michael Warner (*Publics and Counterpublics*), and Nancy Fraser (“Rethinking the Public Sphere”) remind us, publics come together around large and small needs. They are constituted by those outside the power structure as well as within. Public rhetoric, then, is not limited to political addresses, op-ed columns, or the like. It emerges any time people push to have their voices (and their stories) heard — any time they seek to set the record straight, change minds, or move readers (or listeners, or viewers) to action.

What the articles in this issue of *Reflections* suggest is that documentary broadly defined — especially as that form seeks to disseminate marginalized voices or get out local, national, and international stories too often muffled by the din of the powerful — is a distinct and important kind of public rhetoric.

Michael Renov’s observation of almost 30 years ago on the expansion of and interest in “reality-driven representations” (*Theorizing Documentary*) continues today to be borne out by documentary’s increasingly widespread commercial availability, which has made films like *An Inconvenient Truth* and documentarians like Ken Burns familiar household names. Television outlets like PBS, HBO, and Showtime currently back documentary production and feature documentaries in primetime schedules. Popular streaming sources like Netflix and Amazon make documentaries that were once accessible only in

film studies libraries available to anyone with a subscription and a streaming device or a DVD player.

Renov's observations hold true, however, far beyond those mainstream venues. With the exponential growth of multi-, digital, and mobile media, documentary has assumed new, hybrid forms and sought out new avenues of distribution, expanding its potential to reach a wide variety of audiences in local, regional, national, and global communities. Student and amateur filmmakers might not have access to more traditional channels of production and distribution, but they can make (and are making) documentary films that reach audiences across the globe and in venues as varied as YouTube, Facebook, personal blogs, classrooms, and community meeting spaces. Even without the high production value studios offer, rapidly changing digital technologies and access to increasingly user-friendly, mid-cost, high quality camera and recording equipment have the potential to put documentary reporting into a community's hands—whether that is a local activist group, a town council, or an individual simply wanting to get a different side of the story out, one that has its source in voices too often left out of the conversation.

That is certainly the case with the documentaries featured in this issue of *Reflections*. They serve different purposes—activism, education, historical preservation, a retelling of political events—but they share a common concern. That is, they seek to bring the least-heard voices to the public. Moreover, they do that with seat-of-the-pants funding, volunteer efforts, and the knowledge that distribution and circulation will be a tough go.

The documentary projects that these contributors write of—whether film, video, audio, or (in Steve Parks' case) print—all grow out of a desire to claim the rhetorical moment. Some, like Katrina Powell's backstory of the consequences for poor families of the creation of the Shenandoah National Park, seek to recapture a hidden history. Others, like Tamera Marko's interviews with women from Medellín, Colombia, or Jennifer Hitchcock's interviews with Palestinian and Israeli peace workers, argue for political awareness and, ultimately,

action. Still others, like the archival project Dickie Selfe and his collaborative team present, seek to preserve stories threatening to disappear as small neighborhoods change or disappear entirely. In his discussion of the role community presses can (or, should) play in this larger project, Steve Parks tells his readers, “I have come to believe that long-standing community publication projects, like NCCP, need to directly join their resources to the rhetorical and material work of local and global activists, embedding democratic dialogue within a call for progressive structural change.” His is a hard challenge but one these contributors have taken up.

The documentary projects here are not products or artifacts in the sense of fixed entities frozen in time as much as they are ongoing, interactive forums for exchange (community screenings and question and answer sessions, online blogs, community publications, and the like). Moreover, of critical importance to many of the authors and the projects with which they are associated is the documentary process, which involves collaboration and dialogue among documentary subjects, creators, and audiences. In the history of documentary, this process has more typically been a one-way, linear path with little or no interaction between, especially, documentary subjects and the documentary audience, who are for the most part isolated points at either end of the line. By contrast, the documentary projects here trace complex circuits through subject, documentarian, and audience that cross — in some cases multiple times (Marko) — and where these figures also trade roles. In other words, there is a way in which these types of documentaries undermine the sense of an authoritative voice that controls the discourse of the documentary — what film critics have called “the voice of God,” that narrator familiar in much mainstream documentary who tells the audience what they are seeing, why, and how to see it. In these projects there is no naïve claim to “objectivity” but, rather, the open assertion that all documentaries have a source and a perspective and that what these projects contribute are perspectives that are often silenced or disregarded, with consequences that are both personal and political.

New documentary forms bring with them issues that are in some cases inherent in and in others intensified by the technologies that make them possible. Primary among these issues is the question of

access or circulation, both in the sense of availability of the means to tell and circulate stories, and in the sense of the opportunity to see, hear, and respond to those stories. As our contributors remind us, however, the very question of access is directly linked to questions of power, politics, and social justice. Referring to the physical displacement of the citizens of Medellín, Colombia, Tamera Marko writes,

In a competition of who gets to tell the past, present and future story of Medellín, *desplazadas* have the least access to circulating their perspectives in citywide, national and global arenas. So the *desplazadas* are displaced again, this time from their own stories of displacement. This I call *doble desplazamiento*, *double displacement*.

Haunted by this scarce circulation of *desplazadas*' perspectives, we began our archive project with a question: What happens when the "official" and "popular" stories about your neighborhood do not match what you archive in your family album?

Not only physical displacement but what Marko terms "double displacement," the separation of stories from their subjects and/or their creators, is equally relevant to many of the documentary projects here. The physical destruction of Palestinian homes and the consequent displacement of the Palestinian people in Jenny Hitchcock's film lead to dilemmas that, while not identical to those encountered by the displaced Colombians, are similar in their consequences — the loss of an identity and a voice.

We conclude this issue with reviews of two documentaries that comment on the role of street art as art or as activism. Jennifer Wingard's look at *Stick 'Em Up*, a documentary on what has come to be known as the wheatpaste street art movement, charges those filmmakers with ignoring issues of "commerce, politics, or the larger global street art movement" in favor of local aesthetics and single artists — divorcing the action of street art from its potential (and historical) revolutionary power. Wingard contrasts the insular vision of *Stick 'Em Up* with the much more self-conscious and politically smart vision of *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, the subject of Lauren

Goldstein's review. For both reviewers the question is less about the artists themselves or even the art they produce than it is about the documentarian's vision – the importance of moving outside the self; the understanding that activist documentary must be about more than the individual or the single action.

Guest co-editor Diane Shoos is an Associate Professor of Visual Studies and French in the Humanities Department at Michigan Technological University where she teaches and publishes on film and gender and visual representation. She recently completed a monograph on domestic violence in Hollywood cinema and is working on an anthology on adoption in the media. Her collaborative work with Diana George has been published in a number of book collections and journals, including *College English*, *JAC*, *PostScript*, and *Reader*. This issue of *Reflections* is, in fact, their second co-edited issue of a journal. More than thirty years ago, they began their work together as guest editors for a 1990 edition of the journal *Reader*.

Works Cited

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The People Who Make Our Work Possible

If you are a subscriber, your issue will come to you with a DVD of either *Dreams Deferred: The Struggle for Peace and Justice in Israel and Palestine* by Jennifer Hitchcock or *Medellín Mi Hogar* by Tamera Marko. We are privileged to make it possible for so many more people to see these fine films. Of course, the addition of the DVDs meant additional production and mailing costs, so we do have many people to thank for helping us make that possible.

Jenny Hitchcock and her partner and collaborator Vernon Hall provided the documentary and contributed directly to production and mailings. Their film and companion website, in fact, planted the first seeds of an idea for a special issue on activist and grassroots documentary.

Filmmaker, teacher, scholar, and activist Tamera Marko contributed a portion of her professional development funds from the Emerson College-Boston First-Year Writing Program in the Department of Writing, Literature, and Publishing to pay for producing copies of *Medellín mi Hogar*.

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As well, the journal could not continue without support from our subscribers and others who simply visit the website and purchase whole issues or individual articles. If you are not currently a subscriber, or if it's time to renew your subscription, visit www.reflectionsjournal.net or use the subscription form reproduced in the back of this issue to keep the journal coming to your door.

Finally, the editors of *Reflections* welcome the fine work and insight Diane Shoos of Michigan Technological University brought with her when she agreed to co-edit this issue.

Watching and Sharing the Productions in this Issue

We don't want to leave the rest of our audience behind. If you are reading this issue in a library or your copy doesn't include either of the DVDs, you can still watch them by going to the *Reflections* website where you will find links to *Dreams Deferred* <http://www.supportisrael.freepalestine.org>, to *Medellín mi Hogar* <http://medellinmihogar.blogspot.com/> as well as to *Community Future Casting* <http://go.osu.edu/cfc-reflections>, the community archive project Dickie Selfe and his co-authors describe.