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Fact / Artifact

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Cover
FRONT Jen Liu, *Pink Slime Caesar Shift: Gold Loop* (2020-21), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

BACK Amir Yatziv, *Another Planet* (2017), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

Front Page
Amir Yatziv, *Another Planet* (2017), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

Back Page
Fern Silva, *Rock Bottom Riser* (2021), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

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DOCUMENTARY (adj.)

KEYWORDS AND PROVOCATIONS

TOBY LEE, LALIV MELAMED,
POOJA RANGAN, PAIGE SARLIN,
and BENJAMÍN SCHULTZ-FIGUEROA

In 2002, media theorist John Corner argued that “the term documentary is always much safer when used as an adjective rather than a noun.” Corner’s intervention was a response to the codification of documentary studies and the proliferation of documentary audio-visual practices, as well as the growth of “discourses of facticity.” Today, nearly twenty years later, profound changes in media technologies, economies, and practices have further displaced documentary from its status as a noun, genre, and filmic object. These more conventional conceptions of documentary are now overshadowed by the use of documentary modes or forms in all aspects of social life—from medicine to civic and legal proceedings to advertising and social media—and the commodification of documentary content in entertainment media and the art market.

Under our current conditions, it would seem that Corner’s advocacy of the adjectival “documentary” has found new meaning, shifting our attention from the text to the material infrastructures,

circulatory contexts, political economies, and social practices that fuel and are fueled by documentary investments. Earlier this year, a group of filmmakers and researchers came together to ask what can be gained by deploying “documentary” as an adjective, rather than a noun, and to ponder how this idiomatic shift might move us beyond the admittedly ‘safe’ terrain of terminologies and definitions, and toward a renewed consideration of documentary’s political stakes. In this forum, they propose some critical examples—*documentary value*, *documentary audit*, *documentary operation*, *documentary speculation*, and *documentary divides*—which they hope will provoke further reflection on the limits and potentialities of documentary today.

DOCUMENTARY AUDIT

The documentary community often speaks of films as having a distinctive *voice* or social perspective. We need to have more conversations about how documentary forms filter the field of the audible, training audiences to assume listening postures and to practice listening habits whose implications and applications extend beyond individual films or genres. These are all registers of what I call *the documentary audit*.

Colloquially, an “audit” can refer to an inspection of financial accounts or to an informal mode of attendance in a college course. Both meanings imply audition and audience, with which “audit” shares its etymology. Their twinned implications of oversight and discipline resonate in John Mowitz’s suggestion that we think of “audit” as a sonic equivalent of the “gaze”: a term that roughly designates “that which exceeds and conditions hearing and organizes the field of the audible.” Understood as a conditioned hearing or mode of perception, audit has a primordial tie with aesthetics, and especially with aesthetic forms like documentary whose major innovations have been verbal and vocal. Conventions like expository narration, the filmed interview, or the observed conversation condition hearing; organize the field of the audible; inspect and arrange verbal and vocal “entries”; and invite informal modes of attendance. The repetition of these mutually reinforcing registers of the documentary audit over time shapes listening norms that become conditioned as universal or neutral even as they serve to ratify desired or sedimented systems of power.

Let me offer an example from a chapter that I just completed for my forthcoming book on the documentary audit. The chapter, titled “Listening with an Accent,” considers the imperial origins and afterlives of documentary conventions for auditing accented speech. During the 1930s, the General Post Office unit of the British Crown, Britain’s largest employer at the time, produced and distributed a number of educational films marketing its national telephone, telegraph, and postal services. The GPO’s early films, of which only a handful are well known, offered practical lessons in telecommunications protocols and etiquettes that also doubled as raciolinguistic lessons on how to speak and listen. Produced by mostly middle-class, white, male, Oxbridge-educated filmmakers (many of whom provided narration for each other’s films), these films were among the first to feature the recorded speech of ethnic minorities and working-class people. Alongside the modern industries of education, elocution, print, and radio, they were also instrumental in circulating and exporting a supralocal accent as a national-imperial norm and ideal.

Accent is an understudied lynchpin of these films. Many of them resolve the encounter of working-class people with modern media infrastructures by arranging a diverse range of colloquialisms as a hierarchical class-system that you will recognize as the unspoken *lingua franca* of mainstream documentary. Commentary sits atop this nascent documentary architecture. On-screen “accented” speakers serve concrete demonstrative or illustrative functions, while the usually unseen commentator, speaking in that refined, “placeless” nonaccent known as Received Pronunciation (RP) or “BBC English,” performs abstract narratorial functions such as analyzing, orienting, explaining, contextualizing, interpreting, and accentuating—which is to say, highlighting, stressing, or emphasizing the informational value of what is said by others.

The GPO’s early films were instructive in shaping the documentary audit. They modeled an imperious listening vantage that was nonetheless coded as “neutral” and “moderate,” inviting audiences to locate their own verbal styles and those of others on a geosocial grid mapped in audiovisual and narrative terms. These documentary habits of speaking and listening (or auditing and self-auditing) continue to resonate today in corporate and bureaucratic telecommunications that screen and sort non-standard and non-native accents for various forms of actual and metaphorical disposal. Accent training in call centers and the use of forensic accent tests by immigration authorities for determining the validity of asylum claims are two salient examples. Both sustain the fantasy of an objective, “neutral” listener who can detect, name, mark and classify accents (as in, “she has a foreign / Indian / fake / thick / posh accent”) without participating in their construction. In reality listening is never neutral; it is *relational*. What is identified, often pejoratively, as the accented voice of the other always emerges through relations of perception, and specifically, as the result of an *accented* listening that tars certain accents with the stigma of otherness. But attachments to neutrality and objectivity are hard to detect and harder yet to shake when it comes to listening—and documentary was and still is an insidious training ground for these attachments. This is precisely why documentarians are also well situated to expose the non-neutrality of listening, and to unlearn the techniques that serve to neutralize or camouflage the true locus of a film’s audit—that is, its mode of listening in conformity with unspoken norms.

POOJA RANGAN



DOCUMENTARY OPERATIONS

Over the past couple of years, I've been mulling over how we might think otherwise about the ways in which documentary film operates politically—how it acts, or exerts political force, in and on the world. This has been driven in part by a dissatisfaction with more conventional ways of understanding the political efficacy of documentary cinema, which tend to be limited to thinking on the level of representation, either putting too much faith in the power of social issue documentaries to drive change and have a measurable “impact” in today’s saturated media field, or reading a great deal of politics into a film’s formal and aesthetic choices, while neglecting to consider the worlds in which the film circulates and the ways in which it operates in those worlds.

In trying to re-think how documentary might operate politically, I've found it useful to borrow from the literature on operational images, which offers language and concepts to help understand the vast majority of images at work in our world today, most of them invisible to the human eye—images that, as Harun Farocki writes, are “made neither to entertain nor to inform...do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation”: for military purposes, in industry and manufacturing, surveillance and policing, consumer tracking, etc. Trevor Paglen writes that, with the exponential growth of operational media, the dominant function of images in our lives changes “from representation and mediation, to activations, operations, and enforcement.” Usually,

operational images are discussed in foreboding terms. But apart from the larger purposes that an operational image might serve, I find the basic idea of an image that acts, intervenes in, or exercises a force on the world, rather than representing it, to be an intriguing model for re-thinking how documentary film might operate.

There’s a long tradition of thinking about nonfiction films in relation to their use or instrumentality, particularly around non-theatrical, educational, propaganda, military, militant, and activist films. Even here though, there is often an emphasis on film as representation—as evidence, witnessing, educating, consciousness-raising through showing. To illustrate what I mean by documentary operating otherwise, I offer the example of *INAATE/SE/*, a 2016 feature documentary by Adam and Zack Khalil. The film takes aim at the settler-colonial history of the filmmakers’ hometown in northern Michigan and celebrates their Ojibway community, reclaiming its past, present, and future via a reimagining of the Seven Fires prophecy—sacred teachings, told and retold over thousands of years, that foretell major periods in the life of the Ojibway people.

As I've discussed at length elsewhere, *INAATE/SE/* is many things at once: Sometimes, it looks like a relatively straightforward documentary, utilizing a repertoire of recognizably documentary conventions, such as talking-head interviews, explanatory

voiceover narration, establishing shots and illustrative b-roll. But at other times, it looks more like a narrative film, with scripted and obviously performed scenes. And at yet other times, it resembles an experimental film, an appropriation film, a flicker film, even a noise punk music video, with a lot of what the filmmakers, in a conversation we had a few years ago, called “formal fuckery.” Speaking these different idioms, the film is understood and experienced differently in each of the worlds in which it moves—for some, especially in the worlds of documentary, education, or activism, it’s an expression of Indigenous histories and politics; for others, particularly in the film festivals, art institutions, and microcinemas where the film has circulated widely, it’s a radical experiment in form; and for some, it’s some mix of both. But there’s another world in which the film circulates, and another way in which it operates. In that same conversation from a few years ago, the Khalils described how the film has toured in Native communities, and how these screenings have been the most meaningful for them. And in other interviews, they have mentioned that they see *INAATE/SE/* not only as a film, but most importantly, as a new iteration of the Seven Fires prophecy itself. In other words, in addition to being a documentary film, an experimental film, an appropriation film, etc, it is also, and particularly for its Native viewers, a new form of this ancient prophecy.

As prophecy, *INAATE/SE/* constitutes what Christopher Bracken refers to as “savage philosophy”: practices, such as prophecy, magic, sorcery, or animism, that traditionally have been devalued by Western epistemology because they assert that language, signs, and symbols do not simply represent the world, but rather act directly in and on it. These discourses operate by exerting a physical force on what we take to be our lived reality, moving beyond the function of expression or representation to that of manipulation, and even fabrication.

If *INAATE/SE/* is an iteration or continuation of the Seven Fires Prophecy, then it stands as a provocative example of how documentary might operate otherwise — disturbing our usual assumptions about the power of representation and challenging us, with a bit of magical thinking, to re-imagine the political work of documentary.

TOBY LEE

DOCUMENTARY VALUE

(Between Use and Exchange)

In one of his earliest deployments of the term “documentary,” John Grierson proffered that *Moana* might have “some documentary value.” As many have remarked, the ambiguity of his use of documentary as an adjective has been fruitful and generative for documentary discourse and its attempts to define, expand, refine, and challenge the changing definitions of documentary. But what of that second term, *value*—a crucial concept in the Frankfurt School’s critique of the culture industry and Marx’s analysis of the dual character of the commodity form and the role of labor under Capitalism?

In fact, documentary discourse has been shaped by assertions about the “value of documentary,” in the sense of its social or political value—what Marx would call its *use value*. It’s the basis of the argument articulated in the hugely influential manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema” published in 1968. According to Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, documentary film is *the* political medium par excellence because images that “refute or deepen the truth of a situation” have the power to challenge the status quo, support decolonization efforts, raise consciousness, and contribute to revolutionary social movements. This emphasis on use value is one of documentary’s primary strengths as a discourse and practice — the basis of its draw for the left-leaning, politically minded and committed filmmakers who foreground the political stakes of media production explicitly.

These 60s-era assertions about the political uses of documentary rest on some assumptions that we can no longer

take for granted: namely that the political power and value of documentary film derives from the fact that it is produced and circulated outside what Solana and Getino called “the System,” referring to not only Hollywood and the Culture Industry but repressive structures more generally. The assumption that documentary practices can and do appear free from the profit motive of capitalist investment has, to a lesser or greater degree, been a fundamental, if unstated, point in discussions of the use value of documentary film. The corollary of this assumption is that unlike narrative film or even television, which are designed to sell tickets or to support advertisements, documentary film’s exchange value, or its potential value as a commodity, is basically minimal, incidental, and non-determining. And when documentary films do “acquire” an exchange value, it is to their political detriment—their use value is diminished or negated by their newfound commercial appeal.

But documentary’s “usefulness does not dangle in mid-air,” to quote Marx, The assumption that documentary film or media can or do exist in “relative autonomy” with respect to commercial and market forces faces new challenges as a result of the growing market for documentary film across streaming platforms and through the festival circuit. Although this reckoning with “the market” is old news to documentary producers, it has emerged more recently in the discussion of documentary form and politics in Alisa Lebow and Alexandra Juhasz’s “Beyond Story” manifesto, written in 2018 to challenge the correspondence between a “rise

in popularity” of documentary films and the dominance of stories and storytelling as paradigms for documentary production. The manifesto identified a formal connection between documentary as a medium for telling the stories of marginalized people, in ways that could impact and edify audiences, and calls from funders and distributors for three-act films based on individual characters.

Recent work by Josh Glick, Brett Story, and my own essay, all of which respond to the manifesto, are attempts to draw out the histories and implications of these new terrains and markets for documentary.

There’s further work to be done around capital investments in documentary media — specifically the ways that funding and distributing documentary film and media partake in the same neoliberal logics that dominate so-called “commercial” media production and distribution that we’ve assumed we are distant from. The fact is that addressing the dual character of documentary value — its mix of use and exchange value — actually means that documentary discourse and practices/media have a crucial role in making visible and audible the role that media plays in the production and reproduction of the logics of neoliberalism, surveillance, and racial capitalism.

I believe rethinking and reassessing the category of documentary value means that, as scholars and practitioners, we can contribute to the reassessment of value, understood in the Marxist/Financial Sense and more broadly in terms of media forms and platforms, that has been taking place in other fields and

contexts, namely in the art world (where documentary practices have flourished) and in the discussion of digital/social media. This critical and potentially revisionist work will require that we look more closely at the logics of private property that underwrite much of documentary discourse and the fetishization of labor as the category out of which the use-value of documentary practices derives. This will mean thinking more critically about the ways we celebrate documentary-making and the very act of documentation itself as a source or site of political value.

PAIGE SARLIN

DOCUMENTARY SPECULATIONS

In *Another Planet*, a 2017 documentary by Amir Yatziv, we move through different 3D animation models of the Auschwitz concentration camp: a museal model, a VR experience, two videogames, a forensic model built by the Munich police to interrogate alleged perpetrators who suffer from memory loss and a flight simulation.

Auschwitz, a place that was deemed a challenge to representation, whether aesthetic (Adorno's famous citation on writing poetry after Auschwitz as barbarism) or factual (Claude Lantzman, Shoshana Feldmann and others' contentions about the impossibility of testimony in Auschwitz) is now presented to us as a detailed virtual place. A place known for its contested pastness becomes a model, a form of abstraction, a plan. As the film makes manifest, whether a playful scene of vindictive fantasies, an instrument of implementing institutional discipline or a means of training, this is mostly not about historical injustice but rather pre-emptive transactions.

Because they are designed to facilitate functions and usability, models are oriented to the future, even if we use them to investigate past events. They create a space reduced to patterns and motions that can then be repeated and materialized. I stumbled upon the model when starting a new research project on operative images and media. The paradigm of the operative is introduced into film and media studies as a way to think about images as means of actions, rather than their representations. With the rise of machine learning and artificial intelligence the question of the image as operative gains a new urgency. To be clear, models are not operative. They do not *do* things in the world but sample, order, and speculate. They do not contain the very present (or past) and actuality of an action, but its probability. Although models are presumably not operative, everywhere I looked, searching for image operations, I found a model as well, from models meant to predict markets' behavior, or air turbulence, to models that simulate, plan and train. Models appeared as mediators of actions, accompanying image operations as a sort of predecessor, *a blueprint for an action to come*. The model encompasses the operative as a preemptive gesture.

While the operative is defined as distinct from the representative, models are certainly of the order and logic of representation: they are detailed, contain a complex indexical relation to their object, and also playful, embodied, and artistic. For the creators of the modeled Auschwitz, the model is a world-making tool that contains the past, making it operationable,

allowing us to use and abuse it. The camp becomes a site of wonder—experimenting with a novel technology, with its capacity for beauty and precision. Its monumental violence and industrial mass killing are a prism through which we approach something else.

Models are not evidence. They entail compression, abstraction, reduction, scaling and patterning of phenomena and motions. Here it is important to distinguish between what I term the mimetic model—a set of data organized into three dimensional, hyperrealistic space—and the diagrammatic model—the mathematical rendering of a set of data into a continuous pattern. These last ones, common in the fields of economy, ecology, and physics, are particularly interesting when the phenomena they seek to articulate are chaotic and defined by their very unpredictability. In such cases, models are means to tame and control what can possibly erupt.

While there is much more to say about the distinctions between the mimetic and the diagrammatic, what brings the two together is the idea of coherence and wholeness, the idea of incorporating a phenomenon, a motion, or a site in its entirety. In the context of corporate efficiency, historian Craig Robertson and media scholar Florian Hoof have termed this “knowledge at a glance.” For the moment, I am particularly interested in the mimetic model as a means that both simulates and predicts—a design set to determine future actions, while by its very preemptive logic already summons and actualizes that very future. Due to its mimetic nature, in this model the language of preemption is entangled with the performative and the phantasmatic. In other words—its patterning already entails social formations and imaginaries. In their simulation of a hyperrealistic environment, mimetic models entail an embodied experience, often referred to as immersive. A question to ask here is what is the future plan, future intelligence, and future actions that emanate from immersion? And also, how the limitations of our present social imaginaries already delimit these future courses of actions? Preemption means that we act within the realm of the known and imminent.

3D animation models are now everywhere: in operations related to cartography, engineering, construction, design, planning, in simulators meant to train and prepare and in forensic and counter forensic investigations meant to track a past event. One of the most prominent uses of 3D animation models is in the game industry, which by now caters to a growing field of



Amir Yatziv, *Another Planet* (2017), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

medical and body enhancement applications. The phantasmatic and performative aspects of the mimetic model are certainly important parts of the operations they mean to preempt, and so are their commodity language and their fetishistic language of technological novelty.

The model speaks the logic of a society obsessed with summoning and taming the future, with the management and prediction of risk, with its major social motors, like economy and security, driven by speculation. The model is meant to contain such future-oriented transactions within a safe space of action. It supports risk, while cushioning it with a discourse of what can be known.

What I lay out in this essay are some preliminary observations on the logic of the model as a form of public knowledge and of cultural imaginaries—therefore a documentary. What interests

me most is not just the model by itself but its connection to the operative and the way the model challenges and expands the optical operative field. I've become distracted by the prevalence of models because the model echoes the operative, thus attesting to the permeated nature and temporalities of operations and the way operative images are later brought to public discourse as a form of evidence or empirical knowledge. My question is what operates in the model, how does it operate, and when? In the context of documentary I want us to include modeling in its set of strategies, and to ask in what ways documentary, as a kind of public forum, summons certain futures and enables us to act upon them.

LALIV MELAMED



Ceda Turin, *Kedi* (2016), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

DOCUMENTARY DIVIDES

In December 2018, Jaimie Baron and Kirsten Fuhs asked me to write an essay on *Kedi* (2016)—Ceda Turin’s documentary about stray cats in Istanbul—for the *Docalogue* book series. *Kedi* is part of a growing movement of internationally acclaimed documentaries that focus on animals. Yet, up to this point my research and writing had mostly focused on the nontheatrical laboratory films made by comparative psychologists studying animal behavior. Yes, both deal with animals on screen, but *Kedi* is a work that falls squarely within popular conceptions of documentary as a genre and as an art-form, whereas the films I had been studying have historically been thought of as outside the purview of documentary studies. These two types of film look very different and were produced for very different purposes.

What could someone who had been immersed in the language and theories of nontheatrical and scientific film bring to the discussion of a work such as *Kedi*? Nonetheless, I agreed to do it. I started to compile the scholarship written about *Kedi*, as well as other, similar animal documentaries—*Sweetgrass* (2009), *Nénette* (2010), *Leviathan* (2012), and *Bestiaire* (2012), among others. As I conducted this research, I began to notice a particular recurring argument put forth by academics, critics, and the films’ creators themselves. A simplified version of this argument might go something like this: “X, Y, Z animal documentary fundamentally decenters human perspectives [either by attaching a camera to

an animal, by refusing to include voice-over narration, through the use of extensive long-takes, or by using camera movements that approximate a nonhuman POV]. Through this disruptive, non-narrative structure, the film combats the humanist elements in the standard anthropocentric DisneyNature model, where animals are simply stand-ins for human politics and perspectives. Ultimately, X, Y, Z animal documentary creates a posthuman perspective, beyond the confines of narrative or human language.” This is the argument I kept coming across, and perhaps it sounds familiar. It is commonly heard in both film studies and critical animal studies. But it was also familiar to me from a very different context.

Similar claims had been made by the mid-century behavioral psychologists, eugenicists, educators, and military personnel. Many of these nontheatrical and institutional filmmakers also sought to use film to circumvent anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, and yet they were doing so for very different reasons than the creators of *Kedi*. Figures like Robert Yerkes, the eugenicist founder of primatology in the United States, argued that film could provide a “feeling for the animal” that written and spoken language could not. Yerkes attempted to capture such feelings in order to construct a hierarchy of life based on definitions of race and species. Similarly, in his work for the military, B.F. Skinner used film to hack the sensoria of pigeons

in order to create more lethal weaponry outside the confines of human decision-making. His work is echoed in contemporary military research into weaponizing a broad variety of nonhuman animal species. Historically, the claim that a filmmaker is using moving image technology to decenter human perspectives is not limited to documentary filmmakers or scholars, but is also pervasive within governmental, scientific, and military institutions.

What should we take away from this similarity?

First, an assumption undergirding many of the scholarly arguments surrounding films like *Kedi* is that a better understanding of animals—not just in scientific terms, but in affective or sensory terms as well—is either an inherent good in and of itself, or will lead to a political position based on greater equity and justice. By bringing humans closer to animals, undermining the hierarchical differences between them, and leading human spectators into spaces outside their own sensorium, these films are described as having radical political ramifications that are fundamentally anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and ecologically oriented. I think that we might need to rethink this argument, as this position is at odds with the history of similar nontheatrical works. Films that facilitate empathy or embodied experiences with animals can be mobilized for a variety of purposes, including reactionary or rightwing ones; I am suggesting that we need better arguments

for why these films are worthwhile beyond simply the fact that they decenter the human.

This leads to a second question about documentary scholarship writ large: What happens when we include the vast diversity of nontheatrical nonfiction filmmaking under the umbrella term of “documentary”? I would argue that failing to do so inevitably leads to a certain insularity, in which the formats, audiences, and discourses surrounding theatrical documentary are assumed to be universal. To my eye, this is what has been happening with the arguments surrounding documentaries that “decenter the human”—arguments that are radically complicated when you include nontheatrical film history as part of the discussion. Ultimately, I think this leads us to ask: What happens when theatrical documentary is just one mode among many others for creating nonfiction film? How does such a reframing make us look anew not only at the works that have been left out of traditional documentary studies—such as laboratory films—but also make us reevaluate the theatrical documentary tradition within a broader context?

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