FALL 08
UCLA'S JOURNAL OF CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES
MEDIASCAPE

4. How have September 11 and the current political climate affected the reception and scholarship of documentary film? How will scholars characterize documentary film during this period?

Intro | Part 1 | Part 2 | Part 3 | **Part 4** | Part 5 | Part 6 | Part 7 | Part 8 | Part 9 | Part 10 | Part 11 | Part 12

Nichols: There is little grass roots filmmaking and organizing. Theatrical docs and some cable docs may be hard hitting but most play fiddle to a burning Rome. The net may change things but reception is monadic and has not yet led to any notable forms of organizing…. Hopefully it will.

Miller: This is a huge question, given the difficulty in defining "documentary film." Was the YouTube video exposing the bigotry of George Allen in the 2006 election a "documentary film," for example?

Most "documentary films" of long form that anybody sees are neither screened in theaters or shot on film,

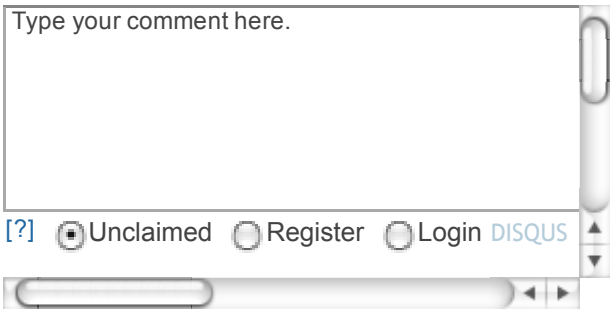
though those of Michael Moore have a major impact on public debate in part through such exposure. Certainly, the period since September 11, 2001 has coincided with tremendous developments in applied media technology that enable easier production and distribution of "films" by ordinary people, and a gigantic failure on the part of the bourgeois media. These developments have undoubtedly stimulated others to produce their own texts.

Tryon: Documentary films have certainly gained a new visibility in the aftermath of September 11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, most obviously measured by the success of documentary raconteur Michael Moore, whose controversial public persona now eclipses virtually anything he could say in the films themselves. However, despite this backlash, it is easy to forget that Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 helped to legitimize many of the criticisms of the war in Iraq, providing audiences with a felt sense of collectivity manifested in the sell-out crowds at movie theaters across the country. Similarly, Davis Guggenheim's An Inconvenient Truth can safely be regarded as moving the ball forward on climate change policy, a shift that has no doubt been exacerbated by rising energy costs. In addition to Moore and Guggenheim, a number of filmmakers across the political spectrum have used documentary to engage with public policy debates, including conservative commentator Ben Stein, whose Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed sought to promote the teaching of intelligent design in public schools. While all three documentaries were relatively successful at the box office, their more significant role was in securing media coverage through news reports, film reviews, and other forms of commentary.

In addition, documentary filmmakers have worked to create new distribution strategies, often in the name of reaching a wider viewing public. Perhaps the most prominent example of creating new distribution strategies has been Robert Greenwald, whose Brave New Films has released a number of progressive films to house parties across the United States. Like the political content of fiction films, extratextual materials—including the production and distribution strategies themselves—are an important part of how we receive the political content of documentaries.

Some of the more interesting scholarship on documentary has begun to focus on its place within a viewing public, or in some cases, its construction of a viewing public. Jonathan Kahana's Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary provides an authoritative account of the role of documentary in constructing a politicized public from the 1930s to the present. At the same time, Patricia Aufderheide suggests a significant line of inquiry for documentary scholars in her Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction in proposing that scholars focus on "the business of documentary distribution," an area of study that becomes increasingly pertinent in the age of internet distribution (134). Like Aufderheide, I would like to see more scholarship focusing on the institutions and organizations that have come to shape documentary culture.

Current Issue | Past Issues | Submissions | About Us Back to Top



blog comments powered by Disqus