

***Documentary Media: History, Theory, Practice***

*Second edition*

by Broderick Fox

Routledge 2018

Published in **Documentary Magazine** April 2018

An impressive 151 film and media project titles are used by Broderick Fox as source material referenced throughout this textbook for modern documentary media makers. Since the book targets the educational market, this extensive listing also supplies the distribution sources for each title, a crucial piece of information necessary for educators that many media textbook authors overlook. This thoughtful addition broadens the usefulness of the text beyond media makers to those simply interested in exploring the genre.

To elaborate on the subtitle of the book; ***Historically*** - Fox's examples cover the entire history of moving images from the Lumières 1896 *Arrival at the Station/L'arrivée d'un train en gare* to the 2017 release *I Am Not Your Negro* by Raoul Peck. ***Theoretically*** - Fox runs the gamut, pushing the envelope on the definition of "documentary" with his inclusion of *Mothlight*, the experimental 1963 short film by Stan Brakhage in addition to referencing *The Quipu Project* 2013-2017, a trans-media work by Maria Court and Rosemarie Lerner that utilizes a radio campaign, phone-line archive, interactive documentary, online documentary short, and social media accounts. Then, to insure that potential documentary makers reading this guide are able to transfer thought into action, Fox closes each chapter with an ***Into Practice*** section, a hands on exercise intended to propel the truly serious practitioner into creating a project prospectus, promotional trailer and web presence for their documentary.

The first page of the first chapter ends with an exhilarating challenge and admirable statement of purpose; "This chapter is designed to be critically and conceptually freeing, opening up possibilities for pleasure, experimentation, and audacity rarely associated with documentary media production. Clear your mind of presumptions, and let us expand documentary's social, political, and representational possibilities." The author suggests that he will be our partner in this journey. His real world experience as a filmmaker certainly informs this book, as it must also undeniably influence his role as professor in the Media Arts and Culture Department at Occidental College in Los Angeles. In exploring Fox's creative endeavors it becomes apparent that he practices what he preaches. The terms audacious and experimental seem particularly apt in describing this Harvard and University of Southern California educated filmmaker's own work. His impressive filmography includes *Zen & the Art of Dying* (2015), *The Skin I'm In* (2012), *Home* (2009) and *Things Girls Do* (2001). Besides being a decidedly cool looking dude, he has well-earned street creds having hit the skids in 2005 when he was hauled off the Berlin subway tracks with a cracked skull and a lethal blood alcohol level of 0.47. I

would add this event seemed to instigate a courageous belief in the value of individual, personal, intimate expression to effect positive cultural change that is now the connective thread running through both the book and Fox's films.

Rather than following a chronological structure the book provides historical context for contemporary theory and weaves real life, up-to-the minute happenings throughout each chapter. It all feels relevant. Fox's analysis and tracing of the origins of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, part of the first chapter "Reimagining Documentary", is a perfect example. He never lets us forget the double-edged sword of digital media, that "the same tools that have afforded this newfound public sphere have also equipped the sphere of public authority with unprecedented means for real-time surveillance and intelligence gathering."

The third chapter, "Content, Rhetoric, Structure" tackles one of the most obvious questions all filmmakers must ask themselves: "What's it really about?" The answer is often elusive. Fox points out sometimes we think we are making a film about one thing, but our paths are convoluted, our subjects may lead us to a dead-end, or to an unexpected conclusion. Setbacks may be inevitable and unforeseen opportunities may be lost. Before diving into any project, Fox rightly tells us we must dive deeply into our motives. He asks his readers, "What is your subject matter and why have you chosen it? What is the driving question you are seeking to explore?" and ultimately, "What do you want audiences to come away thinking, feeling, or doing?" Being able to succinctly answer these three questions will position a filmmaker well in any grant application they might seek and will help to keep the project on course.

Divided into two main sections—visual design and sound design—chapter four addresses the aesthetic possibilities utilized in a range of documentary projects that Fox describes as "startling, beautiful, intimate, and unflinching." The path to achieving those descriptions are further elaborated on in more practical terms under the subheadings of "Shooting Format", "Aspect Ratio", "Color versus Black and White", "Framing", "Shot Size", "Camera Placement", "Movement", "Lighting", "Visual Metaphors and Structural Motifs", "Challenging Expectations", "Sound Design", "Tracks", "Smart Design", "Sound Alternatives: Beyond Voice-Over and Talking Heads". Black and white illustrations help to clarify each of these section subheadings. My only complaint here is that the print quality of the images throughout the book is poor. This I'm sure is part of the publisher's efforts to reduce the cost of a textbook that they hope will be widely adopted. I would add that I found the formatting of the text visually dense, difficult to read in part due to the fact that it was printed in a sans serif grey, rather than black, font.

Fox's approach in discussing "Ethics: Focusing Your Professional Gaze" is most engaging and timely. He states, "There will always be those seeking to capitalize upon human pain and tragedy. Ratings and profit margins feed commercial media practices that celebrate the sensational—from paparazzi to storm chasers, to local news teams. The willingness to put oneself in danger for a shot is in itself of questionable ethics. In most situations, this decision may in fact be highly irresponsible, placing not only you but also your crew, your subjects, your equipment, and other individuals affected by your actions

into harm's way." I don't think I've read this perspective on ethics articulated in quite this way before. We tend to think of the risk taking documentarian as a bit of a daredevil, singlehandedly charging into territory, literally and figuratively, where no one has dared to go. Fox gives us pause and challenges us to rethink these assumptions.

The dicey aspects of copyright out of necessity must be addressed in any chapter that discusses ethics since appropriation, ripping and remixing existing media, whether from archives or easily accessible digital sources, have become ubiquitous. Fox covers all options including clarification of existing copyright law, fair use, Creative Commons, and ultimately how and why producing a rights and clearances log may be a useful exercise for any documentary maker.

The final chapter "From Media to Movement: Distribution, Outreach, and Engagement" loops back to the first chapter with an emphasis on the need to have "a clear plan for identifying, reaching, and impacting your intended audience..." There are a few ironic examples in this chapter that include a discussion of Lee Hirsch's *Bully* (2011) that was a recipient of a Fledgling Fund Grant and a 2013 Doc Impact Award nominee. A controversy ensued over a ratings fight, R-vs.-PG-13, giving the project extensive free publicity. The documentary premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and was acquired for distribution by the Weinstein Company, which at considerable cost put together an education and outreach team and launched The Bully Project. This anti-bullying effort impacted 705 schools, trained 7,500 teachers and reached 250,000 students. It is unfortunate that their founder and president, Harvey Weinstein, was not influenced by the positive work of his own company. This caveat was not intended to discredit the laudable effort by Broderick Fox to provide a contemporary, meaningful guide for modern media makers.

by Cynthia Close

*Cynthia Close is the former president of Documentary Educational Resources. She currently resides in Burlington, Vermont, where she consults on the business of film and serves on the advisory board of the Vermont International Film Foundation.*