

15-12-2018 Documentary Now!, Session 1 panel: Has the documentary failed?

## Documentary Futures in the Present

Minou Norouzi

Visiting Research Fellow, The Centre for Visual Anthropology, Goldsmiths,  
University of London

[from *The Gods of Times Square* (1999) documentary by Richard Sandler]

*Reality is slipping into the dream world.*

*Really?*

*Yes*

*Can you elaborate on that a little bit? I mean, what does that mean, it's slipping into the dream world?*

*The positive is going into the negative to try to understand the negative in order to destroy the negative.*

*Is the negative slipping into the positive also?*

*Yes*

*So they are both slipping into each other?*

*Yes*

*I see. So, what do we do?*

*Know which side you're on.*

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One approach in taking a position is to formulate a critique, to declare “which side you're on”.

To effectively fast-track discourse, a provocation is typically fuelled by negative critique.

However, my position is in defence of the documentary and for a pluralistic view on how to ‘do politics’ with documentary. This pluralistic view I see reflected today in the proliferation of documentary forms that have greatly advanced its canon, and in the political demand made by artists and filmmakers towards a “decolonized, subjective, and collective formation” of ethical practices (Demos, 2009: 123).

Has the documentary failed? This question conjures images that may include disappointment, loss, defeat. To ask whether the documentary has failed expresses two things: One the one hand, it expresses a desire to examine the political health of the documentary in the present.

In wishing to take stock of documentary's role and utility, the question echoes discourses on the failures of the political left that circulated widely in the aftermath of the 2016 "Brexit" referendum on membership in the European Union in the UK and, following that, the presidential election in the US.

But equally audible in this echo may be a sense of longing for the documentary's past.

In defence of the documentary I wish to ask instead: what was the documentary hoping to succeed in? Is the anxiety of present failure not inextricably linked with assumed past successes that could somehow be recovered? And, does the question not designate a specific role for the documentary and presume consensus on this role?

In the face of heightened geopolitical conflicts, ecologically untenable resource extraction and economic tensions it is understandable that the question arises anew: What can the documentary do? How can the documentary help?

But does this not place too great an expectation on the power and utility of the documentary?

Despite documentary's historic failure to fulfil its assumed socio-political purpose, I suggest we redirect our attention towards the expanse in new compositions, new questions, new methods that have always been present in the expanded field of documentary and that have come into being through interdisciplinary dialogue between the fields of art and documentary.

In this context, what occupies my thinking is not the question, what can the documentary do, but what can the viewer do?

I am interested in shifting classic debates on the responsibility of filmmakers towards the obligation of viewers. And, I would argue, that the role of the documentary – its power and utility – resides in creating spaces for self-interrogation. What is my role here? How am I complicit in maintaining this problem, that suffering? When it comes to responsibility, the viewer is as entangled with these questions as is the filmmaker.

In the context of critical documentary practices then, the space for self-interrogation, I content, can be located in the gaps of artistic expression: in what is not shown, in what is not said.

These gaps of artistic expression may be read as the failure to articulate a political project, to provide anthropological insight or cultural access. However, as experiments with "cinematic opacity," they may also be regarded as a kind of activism (Demos, 2009: 119). It is my hope that the attendant discomfort of an opaque activism may inaugurate a "new corporal and communicative ethics" in viewers (MacCormack, 2012: 86) rather than continue to frustrate efforts to arrive at measurable effects.

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