

Television, documentary and the category of the aesthetic

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- 1 Influential examples of the former position include the work of Pierre Bourdieu, for instance *Distinction* trans Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1986) and Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). In both cases the authors are partly opposing themselves to a dominant 'inflexible and categorical high aesthetic' that they feel has governed discussion of quality in the areas they survey and has ignored the material conditions of the artistic sphere.
- 2 Two recent essays in *Screen* which consider the more general problem in ways that make contact with ideas of the aesthetic are Simon Frith, 'The black box: the value of television and the state of television research', *Screen* vol 41, no 1 (2000), pp 33–50 and Georgina Born 'Inside television: television studies and the sociology of culture' *Screen*, vol 41 no 4 (2001), pp 404–24. See, also the useful consideration of the aesthetic offered in Jason Jacobs 'Issues of judgement and value in television studies' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* vol 4 no 4 (2001) pp 427–47.

The idea of the aesthetic has had a troubled and contradictory history in cultural studies, in ways that have impacted upon the study of television. It has been seen both as a blocking category and a category blocked.¹ The literature has variously positioned it as a source of theoretical displacement and mystification and as an area of neglect and foreclosure. To put it more expansively, detailed attention to the 'art properties' of television has been seen to waste investigative time that might more valuably be spent on questions of institution, practice, thematic content and consumption, on the framing of political and cultural economies and processes within which programmes are produced and circulated. At the same time, some have clearly thought that emphasis on precisely such matters has produced accounts too inert to register properly the imaginative densities and energies of the programmes themselves, those little powerhouses of meaning and value arguably holding a degree of creative mystery even in their most banal modes.²

This is more than simply the old debate about where to position 'the text' in any given piece of study. Textual analysis can take a number of forms, one of which is a tight mix of cognitive and linguistic concerns in which 'art properties' are either ignored entirely or appear principally as devices of concealment and manipulation.

The category of aesthetics points us towards the organization of creative works, the experiences they produce (or, to signal a key crux, that audiences derive from them) and the modes of analysis and theory that can be used in investigation. All three interests

interconnect, clearly, but usage of the term sometimes masks priorities and even exclusions. In this short commentary, I want to explore some arguments concerning the relation of aesthetic issues to television's documentary programming bearing in mind all three points of reference. Quite what counts as 'documentary' nowadays, given the hectic generic mutations that have occurred in television's factual output, has been an issue of recent dispute, raising interesting questions of programme claim and programme value as well of production practice and form³

3 Among the range of accounts Jon Dovey *Freakshow First Person Media and Factual Television* (London: Pluto 2000) is the most radical and comprehensive

To talk of the aesthetic in relation to television documentary opens the far broader question of how ideas of the aesthetic might bear on the medium itself. There has been a tendency to regard television as an aesthetically rather impoverished medium – too extensively dispersed into both industrial routine and everyday life to offer a great deal by way of richness and depth in its own 'works'. The suggestion is that the medium has compensated for this symbolic deficit by exploiting its realist/relay functions and its potential for real or simulated 'liveness', although exceptions to this easy mutuality with the mundane are acknowledged.

Of course, a good deal of nonfictional television is not particularly interested in offering itself as an aesthetic experience anyway. That is, it is not concerned with promoting an appreciative sense of its creative crafting in the audience. Strength of content, including that of onscreen activity, is seen to be enough. Clearly, we would not want to make questions of intention a firm criterion here – programmes can be judged to have aesthetic organization and aesthetic effects without their producers acknowledging this. Indeed, it may be something they explicitly deny, and which audiences seem completely unaware of. But it is helpful to make a differentiation between work that has an overt aesthetic and that in which it is largely implicit, even if this can sometimes only be done with difficulty.

Here, documentary occupies an interesting position in the television spectrum, some of it being extremely self-conscious and aesthetically ambitious (convergent in this respect with 'high-end drama'), some of it committed to reportorial or observational naturalisms that make it very close to news in discursive character. Across its history both in film and television, work within documentary has displayed varied and sometimes rather contradictory attitudes towards what degree of freedom and prominence its aesthetic dimension should enjoy. At times deploying a foregrounded aesthetics (as in classic 1930s texts such as *Coalface*, *Song of Ceylon* and *Listen to Britain*) in which the imaginative appeal of the formal design is part of the 'offer', it has also worked with a marginalized, or even suppressed and denied, aesthetics in an attempt to make its referentiality, its scopic and aural documentation, more direct. The classic reportage of *Housing Problems* (1935) is an early example.

4 Several of the essays in Forsyth Hardy (ed.) *Grierson on Documentary* (London: Faber, 1979) show the varying emphases, sometimes in the same piece

Grierson himself can be seen to veer around a good deal on the balance and priorities to be struck, being alert both to the excitement and appeal of cinematic art but also to the requirement to perform a 'sociological' task.⁴

A gap opens up here between producers, audiences and critics, reflecting in part the three points of reference that I suggest configure the very idea of aesthetics. Those involved in documentary production may routinely watch all documentary material, including that in which the topic itself is of personal interest, with a framing concern for artefactual qualities – for how imaginative, well-crafted or 'beautiful' the documentary work itself is. Audiences, in a way that contrasts with their response to drama, are likely to find these concerns a secondary matter at best, possibly ones of which they are only conscious when something is going wrong (such as an editing rhythm that irritates, problems with the use of music, traits of presenter address). Critics and scholars replicate in part the preoccupations of producers, involving a concern for patterns and conventions, albeit within different frames of reference and for their own professional purposes. In tracing any specific medium or generic aesthetics, however, the kind of experience routinely had by intended audiences must not be neglected or displaced (painting, cinema, theatre, music and literature variously pose this awkward issue, of the 'viewer', 'reader' or 'listener' as well as 'the critic', to their respective bodies of criticism)

I think we can broadly distinguish between what could be called 'thick text' and 'thin text' documentaries in terms of the density and transformative scale of their mediations. It is not surprising that film and television studies has found it easier to develop critical accounts of the former broad category. Works here follow more closely the narrative, scopic and aural protocols of fiction and of 'art film', various stylings of the world are offered for the viewer to experience as kinds of imaginative performance, however much the world is also referenced through them. Moreover, their manifest attractions are often accompanied by the deeper pressures and appeals they apply to the unconscious and to desiring fantasy. They may generate lively critical disagreement, since their values and arguments may often be implicit and sometimes show inconsistency or tension. They may reward repeat viewings in a way that ultimately has little to do with the extractable knowledge they convey. The documentary format that comes closest to fiction, drama-documentary (although one might regard it as a fiction format coming close to documentary), generates this aesthetic-critical response in a most obvious manner, as do works whose symbolic emphasis places them, for some critics, in the category of 'poetic documentary'.⁵ Among other things, this might be to confirm the general idea⁶ that 'art values' will be most pronounced in communications that are able to mark off a degree of separateness from the mundane and directly worldly, that are able both to exercise

5 A number of scholars use this category to indicate documentaries that place a primary emphasis on their artefactual qualities and the appreciation of this by the audience. See, for instance the discussion in Carl Plantinga *Rhetoric and Representation in Non-Fiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially ch. 9.

6 Recently reviewed in Niklas Luhmann *Art as a Social System* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

and to signal their capacities for transformation and for play. In his original and suggestive survey of the broader rhetorics of documentary form, Michael Renov cites Hans Richter on the hardening off of this attitude in post-eighteenth-century western art more generally: ‘The accent shifted, for a “beautiful” image could not normally be obtained except at the expense of its closeness to reality.’⁷

We might compare this kind of situation with, say, an edition of a current affairs series, involving reporter exposition throughout, or a piece organized according to current docusoap recipes, with observation of routine, institutional action overlaid by commentary and interspersed with interview sequences. While there is no difficulty in identifying features of formal construction in such programmes – matters of visual and linguistic organization which bear on the way they work – there may be comparatively little by way of imaginative thrill, symbolic impact or thematic dissonance in the representational practice itself to excite critical engagement. What can be said by way of critical comment is much more likely to take the form of the exposure of implicit textual strategies rather than the appreciation of overt textual display and performance. Such texts will not usually reward repeat viewings unless these are done within the frame either of a ‘content’ value not exhausted by initial viewing or of professional or academic analysis.⁸

It may be noted how much of the above discussion bears on questions of documentary values. The default assumption is that such values inhere largely in the character of the knowledge that a documentary generates (most bluntly, its ‘truth’ rating), whether this is primarily propositional or observational in mode. The only way that a documentary can acquire value with some independence from its content is, of course, by marking its own aesthetic status and preferably by doing this in a way that is registered in routine viewing not just in the vocabularies of specialist critical appraisal. Recognizing, then, the significance of this aesthetic spectrum for documentary work and for documentary studies, I want now to look more closely at the elements from which it is constituted. What can be said by way of outlining a typology of documentary aesthetics?

Documentary aesthetics: a typology

I have already noted that to talk of aesthetics requires reference to three key planes – that of artefactual organization (including its nature as a product of practice), that of audience experience and that of theoretical and analytical inquiry. It is the interplay of artefactual design and subjectivity that generates the aesthetic experience and it is important to stop this being collapsed simply into ‘form’ on one side or ‘pleasure’ on the other. Pleasurable feeling is certainly a part

7 Michael Renov Towards a poetics of documentary in Michael Renov (ed.) *Theorizing Documentary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) p. 25. The reference is to Hans Richter *The Struggle For The Film* trans. Ben Brewster (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986).

8 Aesthetics make contact with the ethics and politics of viewing here. Depending on the subject repeat viewing of a documentary primarily to gain satisfaction from its depictive styling raises questions about the cultural appropriation of portrayal and the evasion of reference.

of much aesthetic experience but a more inclusive attention to its character as a kind of imaginative event is necessary

The aesthetics of documentary can, I think, be regarded under three broad headings – pictorial, aural and narratological

Pictorial

The pictorialism of documentary is usefully considered in relation to the longstanding debate about the aesthetics of photography. Once again, the creative tension between reference and artefact is apparent. There is, however, a certain degree of opacity, a denial of the ‘look through’ at the world, which photography designed for the gallery can press beyond but which documentary cannot – at least not without causing problems of self-identity (which it sometimes may want to do, allowing a primary reading as ‘video art’, for instance). Documentary portrayal is often drawn to a literalism of representation, its compositions, framings, angles, lighting, colourings and movements designed to engage a kind of unselfconscious, realist assent, although its referentiality is always performed through style, however quietly. An apparent absence of style (a kind of ‘degree zero’ television, in Barthes’s terms) constitutes at least part of the conventional grounds of trust and credibility. This has posed a problem more acute for contemporary television documentary than it was for documentary in the 1930s, when its social claims-making was still set accommodatingly within the broader terms of a young and experimental cinema. But what many television documentarists have rediscovered is the impact and attractiveness of the picture not simply to be looked through, but also to be looked at.⁹ The experience of looking at documentary images often combines an aesthetic registration of the qualities of the depiction itself with that of certain, visual properties of the things depicted (their shapes, colours, proportions and spatial relations – as in landscapes, buildings, objects). It may also involve indirect engagement with the subject through the use of metaphor, which usually requires to be read as a discourse about the world rather than a depiction of it.

‘Looking at’ can be seen as one kind of what Niklas Luhmann terms ‘second order observations’.¹⁰ These are ‘observations of observations’ and their effect is to frame parts of the world in such a way as to transform them into ‘imaginary space’ without necessarily thereby losing an engagement with ‘world’. Luhmann’s full account is complex and certainly not neatly transferable to the documentary instance, but I use it here suggestively and will return to it below.

The pictorial qualities of the documentary image, with its organization of screen space into a plane both of reference and of formal design, are in powerful combination with its kinetic properties. In many respects these are in line with those of cinematic fiction, where a considerable body of scholarship has explored how kinetics can derive from the movement of things within the shot, the

9 These approximating terms are generally suggestive about the conditions of documentary organization and viewing. Vivian Sobchack brings them into her thoughtful essay, ‘Towards a phenomenology of nonfictional film experience’, in Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (eds) *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 241–54. Sobchack draws on the relatively neglected ideas about film experience of the Belgian psychologist Jean Pierre Meunier concerning the different kinds of consciousness engaged in acts of viewing.

10 Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, ch. 2.

movement of the camera during the shot or, more broadly, the temporal organization of continuity and change introduced by editing. In documentary, the first two of these produce different kinds of scopical satisfaction, respectively referential and pictorial in their grounding. The second – the shifting perception brought about by camera movement (its glides, its drifts, its swoops, its trackings, its movements across documented space, its shiftings of the relationships of distance and proximity) – is one of the most familiar of aesthetic tropes in documentary practice. Its fusing of the reality of world with the motivation of imaginative design is often stimulating in its bringing together of recognition with kinds of ‘making strange’ or, less radically, what we might just call ‘re-seeing’. Here, the connections made between our apprehension of the physical realities shown and the subjective (affective, conceptual or propositional) world that also forms the documentary topic are significant. Feeling and ideas condense upon objects, bodies and places, modified by the physical at the same time as the physical itself is perceived within the developing thematics. Such a dialectics, at once sensual and intellectual, referentially committed yet often possessed of a dreamlike potential for the indirectly suggestive and associative, is central to *documentary as an aesthetic project*. It is often a factor in producing what Vivian Sobchack has called ‘the charge of the real’ as it appears on the screen.¹¹ Whatever core this has in the naturalistic co-ordinates of documentarism, it can also be extensively theatricalized too (a ‘charged real’ so to speak). It can work through a pictorial authorship comparable with that which carries the denser, latent and more volatile significances of fiction (an imagined example: an aerial shot shows a car following a deserted coast road as dawn begins to break; it turns off to enter a silent village. The musical soundtrack is bleak and brooding. Is this the start of a thriller? No, it’s the opening to a programme on GM agriculture just before the commentary starts).

The third level of kinetics, the much-discussed practices of editing, introduces through its modes of linkage and disjunction the broad range of possibilities for organizing time, theme, space and style in relation to overall documentary design. In doing so, it necessarily enhances and strengthens aesthetic elements at the local level in the management of seeing, knowing and feeling.

I think it is worth noting here how many documentaries attempt to retain referential integrity and yet generate aesthetic value by what we can call an intermittent aesthetics. Such a mode engages a viewing subjectivity of ‘looking through’ for extensive sequences, projecting a relative transparency in the depiction (and bringing about what Luhmann would see as a kind of ‘first-order observation’). Interview, commentary voiceover and archive film, for instance, are likely to establish and sustain this. At other points, however, a shift towards a more opaque representation is made, the aesthetic codings

11 Sobchack, *Towards a phenomenology* p. 253

12 John T. Caldwell, *Televisuality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995). The discussion of documentary occurs in Chapter 8. In what amounts to a pathology of some current tendencies in America, Caldwell identifies a degree of opaque styling, an intensified mode of 'looking at', whose effect is to render the viewing experience 'a numbed, alienated trance'.

13 Murray Smith offers an illuminating example of one form of the combination in the course of an essay on the aesthetics of narrative. Taking a scene from Patrick Keiller's film *London* (1993), a mix of fictional and factual elements, he discusses how portrayal of damage to City of London buildings following the IRA bombings of 1992 works not only as an abstract composition or a political reference, but principally in the combination of the two each through the other. Murray Smith, *Aesthetics and the rhetorical power of narrative*, in Ib Bondebjerg (ed.), *Moving Images: Culture and the Mind* (Luton: Luton University Press, 2000), pp. 157–66.

becoming thicker and perhaps more obvious, temporarily transferring viewers into a deeper imaginative space (and perhaps also further into themselves) without breaking engagement with theme. More attention to some of the precise techniques and patterns involved across different kinds of production would be rewarding. John Caldwell's remarks about the viewing subjectivities appropriate to the newer 'videographic' ways of working upon screen space are relevant here.¹² Moreover, it is quite likely that viewers will shift between primary orientations towards 'looking through' and 'looking at' independently of the 'intermittent aesthetics' of production design, although one would expect the latter to exert some cueing functions on the basic viewing frames deployed. It is worth remarking again that it is in the *combination* of these frames, within different recipes and proportions, that the most interesting questions are posed. Any pure sense of 'looking through' reproduces the fallacy of transparent access, against which documentary studies has directed most of its critical energy, although a temporary sense of unmediated encounter continues to be a powerful and necessary feature of many documentary sequences. A pure commitment to 'looking at' blocks documentarist engagement, unless it occurs only as one element or moment in a larger referential design.¹³

Aural

The aesthetic (as distinct from the cognitive) possibilities of sound in documentary are in most cases secondary to those of images and in some cases are not significantly mobilized at all. However, that which Barthes called the 'grain of the voice' (made distinctive by factors of, for instance, gender, age, class and geographical origin) can be a factor in the satisfaction we obtain from listening to speech, including that of documentary subjects themselves, and also raises questions of speaking style. Different modes of the formal (such as commentaries working essentially as read prose, the speech following literary design) and informal (well-turned anecdotes, colloquial rhythms and diction) can all deliver a style-generated pleasure in listening not reducible to the cognitive. Their impact is, of course, quite often only achieved in combination with specific images and can only be adequately analyzed as such (that phrasing or even word, or pause, across that shot). Here, again, is an aesthetic density that requires more attention, in its local achievement, than documentary analysis has often afforded it to date.

Perhaps the richest and most intriguing aural aesthetic in many documentaries, however, is that provided by music. Its regulation of our sense of place, time and mood as well as its use as punctuation within the documentary narrative system (bridgings, little closures and openings across scenes and episodes) is a regular cue to viewing subjectivity. Its effect is often to provide a (light and unobtrusive) aestheticized framing for scenes working strongly within the

‘transparent’ mode, although it is also used to accompany sequences of ‘thicker’ pictorialism too. Here, it may be intended to figure more fully in the consciousness of the viewer, the resonances of watching deepening with the direct infusion of feelings that music brings. Although scruples about the use of music exist in the broad area of journalistic documentaries (where it is seen to undercut cognitive integrity and fair appraisal) and in some observational formats (where its extra-diegetic character might risk reducing the power of the immediacy-effect) it is another area to which analysis could profitably give more attention¹⁴

Narratological

Most documentary scholarship has acknowledged how narrative satisfactions are a property of nearly all formats, connecting with a broader aesthetics of time and of duration (with its vectors of becoming, of process and transition) that underlies, in different ways, the forms of television. They are particularly obvious in the fictional models of drama-documentary and the action-development structures of observational modes, including docusoap recipes, but they are also at work to varying degrees in the more reportorial and expository programmes. Alongside the function of voiced-over or presenter commentary (literally, *storytelling*), it is clearly in the practices of editing that narrative design is realized. Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow usefully pointed to the ‘little stories’ out of which an ostensibly expository documentary on truancy was made.¹⁵ The excursions into story values and pleasures were sometimes awkwardly related to the development of the official argument, suggesting a degree of production tension between the chosen theme for reportage and the imaginative possibilities to emerge from the case-studies selected to illustrate it.¹⁶ Story formats in television documentary have undergone change and intensification in recent years as part of the requirement to increase viewing enjoyment within circumstances of stronger competition. Attention to their varieties and to the particular kinds of viewing experience they offer will need to be another feature in the development of documentary scholarship

I have suggested that we need to keep in mind the way in which what is at issue in ‘aesthetics’ interconnects across artefactual organization, the viewing experience and, at some remove from these, the categories that an analysis needs to understand both. The aesthetically generative role of practice requires consistent recognition too, however difficult this might be to document independently. In recent writing, Georgina Born has eloquently made the case for taking the ‘production aesthetics’ of television seriously, as part of a more general claim for a non-reductive sociology of art.¹⁷

14 I have tried to take this further in John Corner ‘Sounds real music and documentary’ *Popular Music*, vol 21 no 3 (2002)

15 Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow ‘Television: a world in action’, *Screen* vol 18 no 2 (1977) pp 7–59

16 These imaginative possibilities are fully confirmed in a remarkable letter to *Screen* by the person who actually edited the material. Dai Vaughan himself subsequently a writer on documentary topics. He notes among other things that the way in which a particular sequence (showing a boy with an air-rifle) was shot and cut has a great deal to do with the conventions within which sequences of hunting, and in particular of ambush are traditionally presented in fictional cinema. See Vaughan ‘Correspondence’ *Screen* vol 18 no 4 (1977) pp 123–5

17 A number of her papers and unpublished talks have explored this theme in original ways. Born ‘Inside television’ incorporates it within broader terms

18 Here I agree with the arguments about the need for renewal and reorientation in the critical project put forward by Alan Durant, 'What future for interpretative work in film and media studies?' *Screen*, vol. 41 no. 1 (2000), pp. 7–17. Jacobs also makes the case for greater clarity about the distinctive contribution of criticism in 'Issues of judgement and value

In posing the question of how to engage further with television's documentary aesthetics, the notion of 'criticism' remains central, if not sufficient. Criticism, unlike linguistics, sociology, political economy or psychology, typically takes its initial ground in a declared subjective experiencing. How does the programme work? What engages and satisfies, what does not? Fine art, theatre, literature, dance and cinema all show different models of critical practice in which this subjective experience is then made the basis for a more technical, more general and perhaps more socially diagnostic assessment. The dangers of over-categoric approaches are clear enough, but television scholarship, including that on documentary, needs to foster the practice of criticism alongside its other analytic tools and its more general theoretical concerns.¹⁸ A vigorous documentary criticism would help to keep aesthetic issues contentiously in view when other perspectives and priorities show their tendency to hide, displace or reduce them. By taking its bearings from 'inside' the documentary experience, with its distinctive mix of objective and subjective dynamics, criticism's value for understanding lies not in contesting the more externalist approaches to explanation but in keeping up a reflexive commentary on some of the most important things to be explained.