

Observing the Observers

How I Judged Documentaries and Learned to Teach None

By Alexandra Juhasz

SINCE 2017, I HAVE HAD THE DISTINCT PLEASURE of serving as the chair of a preliminary judging committee for the Peabody Awards in broadcasting and digital media. Along with two graduate students from the Feirstein School of Cinema at Brooklyn College, CUNY, where I teach, we judge a slate of about 35 films. Each time we get to see a slate of diverse films which represent the state of the field that year.

As a documentary maker and theorist, I take strong positions on the genre as it has developed over the past 25 years. *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye, 1996), which I produced, is considered a hallmark in the fields of Black and queer cinema, as well as in fake documentary, the subject of my co-edited scholarly book in the field, *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing* (2005). Most recently I co-edited the *Blackwell Anthology on Contemporary Documentary* (2011) with Alisa Lebow, and with her have written a manifesto and associated special issue of the documentary journal, *World Records*, both called “Beyond Story.”

In those recent efforts, Lebow and I, joined by scholars and practitioners of documentary, press against the counterintuitive smallness of the current documentary ecosystem—not in how many films are being funded, produced, and seen (more than ever), but in how very limited is their formal and ideological scope. We see a homogenizing, standardizing, one-size-fits-all mandate on what is and should be a capacious and adaptive format for art and education. We know that documentaries are made about the world’s most pressing issues, and as is true of any art or rhetoric, we believe that flexibility and responsiveness in form is critical for its most powerful effects. We believe that form matters.

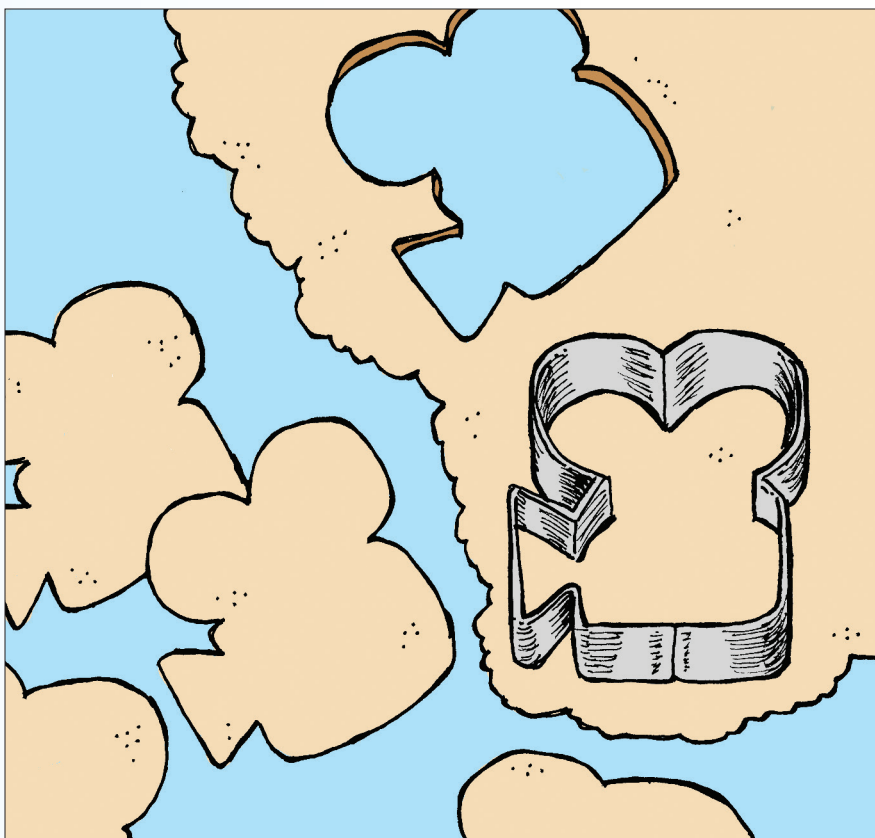
Over the four years of judging for the Peabodys, I have witnessed a change in documentary form noticeable enough that I am moved to try to understand my observations as another contribution to this larger effort. First, the good news. This year’s 35 submitted films are significantly “better” than those from previous contests. Production values are higher, arguments clearer, foci significantly more relevant

and important culturally. It’s as if the sea level of quality rose: the worst entries are suddenly competent, and the vast majority are quite good. Hooray!

One explanation for this is simply funding. Films are one site of culture where you can clearly see money spent: from lighting, to score, to editing, to locations. As documentaries take up and enjoy their rightful place and continue to gain audiences, their budgets and available funding sources and markets are growing as well. So: they get better, they look good. They are good.

But another aspect of this improvement is equally noticeable: the 35 docs on our slate this year all looked good ... but disturbingly, in almost exactly the same way. So much so, that I found myself compelled to make this list of stylistic qualities to see if any film *didn't* do these things in service of their professional, polished story. The list?

- Drone shots to establish location(s) but also as transitions in time. i.e., an over-reliance on beautifully rendered vistas to establish place and time
- Ominous droning score to create tension
- Sweeping orchestral score to create drama
- Goofy, colorful, local sounds or music to create color. i.e., an over-reliance on score to carry meaning, pace, and feeling
- Quick-paced editing connecting interviews of well-lit and well-chosen subjects with cuts to illustrative renderings of related objects, places, or re-enactments
- Subjects’ highly, closely, quickly edited and illustrated words imparting an opinionated and closed version of an important cultural topic. i.e., the editing of beautifully rendered images over interviews as the common rhetorical structure
- Character-driven stories moving from deprivation to conquest
- Contest- or event-based stories arcing to a win
- Investigative stories that find the culprit. i.e., complex stories that resolve in a way that feels good even, or particularly if, the subject at hand itself feels overwhelming (racism and



other forms of systemic injustice; environmental degradation, COVID, and other natural catastrophes)

- Looking to the Black American experience as the space of deprivation, injustice, and conquest to be bettered. i.e., a Black Lives Matter influenced agenda that corrects and/or contributes to this ongoing systemic crisis

Given that each of these formal tics are rendered professionally, even artfully, you might ask: what is the problem? Let me answer by demonstrating how my discomfort grew even as—or, perhaps, because—the films stayed so good across 2021’s slate. Whenever I returned to my online queue of films, I found myself ever more confused. When I was looking at any particular film, or perhaps worse when I was looking again, I couldn’t tell which film it was: was this the film about breaking out of racist poverty through sport, politics, or art, or about deftly using the legal or investigative systems to fight corporate and racist injustice? All the docs looked, sounded, and flowed the same. Nary a one had a narrator (omniscient or on-screen). Each was reported on by a caring but absent outsider or team. Regardless of the place or person, the conflict or question, all the films took up the same pacing marked by similar music. Not one took up an observational or verité style—letting the camera roll and allowing the subjects to be shot in long takes, allowing the audience to observe and make (some of the) meaning or interpretation. None is quiet or slow. Stylistically, while they all use the camera beautifully—rendering places, people, objects, and events with lovely color, framing, camera movement, and so on—none of them rely upon this exquisite visual language to do more than illustrate an interviewee and her words. And, while all had strong characters, not one engaged

these powerful people in the making of the film.

Anyone who has taken or taught a class in documentary must see where I am going. The 35 documentaries occupy only one of the “six modes of documentary” outlined by scholar Bill Nichols, which have become something of a trade standard. All 35 sit neatly in what he identifies as the “expository mode,” where “the voice” of the documentary uses words to inform the viewer what it knows and wants you to think about the subject at hand (and this lightly so, given that the score and editing contribute so strongly to the “voice” of all these documentaries). The other five familiar (and powerful) forms of documentary seem to have been taken off the table: poetic, performative, observational, reflexive, and participatory. If you are curious about these other modes, you can learn all about them in a college class, find them at film festivals (particularly those which support art documentary), at art or revival houses, on television channels that support art or political documentary, and in online collections of great cinema. Just not on good TV, apparently.

A great many of the films we judged this year, supported by the deep pockets of Netflix, Sundance, HBO, etc., are better made, seen by more curious viewers, and connect more deeply to important issues. These traits are admirable. However, this success is enabled by wringing a robust and adaptive form into an immediately recognizable, well-

wrought, easy-to-imitate, easier-still-to-watch genre, much like a western or a sit-com. Will these films please audiences? Of course! Will they provide work for professionals in the media industries? Certainly. Will they be bought and sold like any high-quality product on the market? They will!

But will I teach any of them? No.

This negative is because memorable, teachable films approach their subject with a formal palette that is fundamentally suited and carefully crafted to support each unique question, story, subject, or feeling under consideration. We teach our students to find their own voice within the medium, and it is my belief as a teacher, scholar, and critic that the industry, as it continues to grow and improve, should make room for us as artists and audiences, making space to put theory and creativity into practice.

Observing the observers who make and show documentary this year, I feel compelled to report what I consider bad news: the might of corporate muscle is giving us more and more fine but expendable stuff: defanging possibilities and numbing us to the very differences that can most inspire, energize, mystify, and sustain us. ■

Dr. Alexandra Juhasz is a Distinguished Professor of Film at Brooklyn College, CUNY. She makes and studies committed media practices that contribute to political change and individual and community growth. She is the author of scholarly books on fake (and real) documentaries including *Beyond Story: A Community-Based Manifesto*, with Alisa Lebow, and YouTube, *Learning from YouTube* (MIT Press, 2011). Her current work is on and about feminist Internet culture, fake news, and poetry: fakenews-poetry.org and with Nishant Shah, *Really Fake!* (Minnesota, 2021).

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