

A poetic approach to documentary: discomfort of form, rhetorical strategies and aesthetic experience

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Certificate of original authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

Working in the borderlands between art and document, a poetic approach to documentary disrupts commonsense understandings of what documentary can be. However, it is frequently viewed as marginal to the main body of documentary practice for its foregrounding of aesthetic choices around form and materiality.

Pushing to the extremes of what is recognisable as documentary, a poetic approach to documentary highlights the rhetorical impact of aesthetic choices within the broader field of practice. Experiential ways of knowing are emphasised so that the work is conceived of as an experience in itself rather than a replication of reality.

Moving beyond realist representations of evidence, a poetic approach can make use of techniques of defamiliarisation as a strategy to renew perception and enable a reimagining of preconceived connections. In diverging from established pathways unexpected combinations can occur, allowing complex and changeful conceptions to emerge.

Utilising a methodology of practice based research to produce a 28 minute single channel documentary and the close examination of pertinent creative works, this thesis argues that a critically engaged poetic approach to documentary can work to encourage thoughtful contemplation as part of an ongoing conversation in the process of knowing.

Introduction

Ways of knowing

There is considerable potential for screen based documentary, as a cultural practice engaged with coming to better know ourselves, the world and each other, to embrace multiple ways of accessing and processing information. However, this scope is frequently limited when the worth of a documentary is fundamentally judged in terms of fidelity to strict interpretations of truth and the strength of relationships to reality. Consequently, there is a tendency to employ audiovisual strategies, such as a realist visual style coupled with expert analysis and eye witness accounts, in order to build credibility, authority and an impression of authenticity. Such an approach permits only limited possibilities to explore knowledge not arising from tangible evidence or intellectual engagement. While it is generally accepted that knowledge can result from rational thought and experience (as evidenced by documentary strategies of reasoned argument and the provision of audiovisual evidence), there is also relevance in considering how exploring, sensing, feeling, remembering, grappling, understanding, articulating, accepting and sharing can contribute to the ways we come to know.

Beyond the collation of evidence and re-presentation of facts, a poetic approach to documentary engages creative methodologies in the production of aesthetic experience as an alternative way of knowing. Within this approach lies the potential to open up spaces of possibility that can accommodate the complexity of perception and the fluidity of how reality can be conceived. The form of the work becomes part of a rhetorical strategy of engagement, contemplation and connection.

Central then to this examination of poetic techniques within documentary practice are considerations of the processes between knowing and articulating. It is of key significance to consider how the way we express knowledge influences the ways of knowing that documentary work can promote.

Rationale

This research project examines a poetic approach to documentary and considers the unique possibilities that this mixing of rationality, perception and poetic expression can create. For the purpose of this thesis, documentaries produced according to a poetic approach are interpreted as creative screen based works that sit across the imagined boundaries of art and

documentary practice. This location means that filmmakers, who have generally been described as applying a poetic approach and more specifically those discussed in this thesis, draw on approaches associated with both art and documentary. Within this combination there is a mixing of methods, philosophy, intention and technique that results in an engaged critical aesthetic practice. The realisation of a critical aesthetic practice depends upon a close alignment between the form of the work and the ideas being expressed so that in the very mode of representation new arrangements of knowing are provoked. While the overall aesthetic approach may, at times, disguise the political intent of the work, there are frequently strong social concerns motivating choices of form and representational technique.

In creating documentary poetry, the filmmakers explored in this thesis draw on material from the knowable world, reworking it in ways that draw attention to the form of the creative work, encouraging new ways of perceiving the familiar and offering points of access to things that are as yet unknown. The creative process and resulting works are acts of translation with an underlying concern to preserve some of the radical difference of the original source inflected through the perceptual filter of the creator.

Objectives

This thesis will analyse works that have adopted a poetic approach to documentary production and examine what happens when the creation of a poetic aesthetic experience is the primary method of promoting audience engagement. Such an emphasis on the effect of audiovisual style and modes of exhibition requires an expansion of our understanding of how rhetoric can manifest in documentary as we consider what is at issue in a shift from an evidentiary approach to an evocation of an aesthetic experience. To this end, I will consider what the implications for audience engagement are when a critically engaged poetic approach is applied to documentary practice.

Methodology

The research for this thesis has been conducted through a dialogue between creative practice, analysis of examples of pertinent creative work and consideration of theoretical material from documentary theory, screen studies, visual arts aesthetics, philosophy and cultural studies. As such, the project consists of two parts: a traditional written thesis and a 28 minute documentary video. However, while physically discrete, these two parts are intended to work in tandem as the thesis addresses key issues raised in the production of the creative work and

the creative work is a practical demonstration of certain theoretical concerns outlined in the thesis.

The label *poetic documentary* reflects a somewhat nebulous cluster of creative work. Indeed attempts to precisely pin down the parameters of a notional category of poetic documentary recall the results of similar attempts within literary poetry.¹ Nonetheless, some sense of the terrain is important in order to frame the conditions for this research project. While this research project does not aim to come up with a new definition for poetic documentary, I will be responding to existing definitions and considering the gaps that exist in the descriptions of poetic approaches to documentary. In addition I am performing a somewhat semantic shift to indicate the difficulty of defining a poetic documentary by instead considering how a poetic *approach* to documentary practice might manifest.

In order to examine the practical and creative issues that arise from a poetic approach to documentary practice I have engaged in close analysis of a range of single and multi-channel screen-based documentary works. These works have been selected on the basis of their use of real-world, indexical material, their engagement with ideas in the tradition of the essay form, reviews or program notes describing the work as poetic and representational strategies that emphasise the potential for aesthetic practice to add further layers for interpretation. Additional criteria have been the relevance of the examples to the concerns of the creative project, their innovations in form and creation of poetic aesthetic experiences. Fundamentally, they are works that can challenge the way that we talk about and conceptualise poetic documentary practice in their deviations from traditional and accepted documentary conventions.

There is a lot that can be learned as a practitioner through the close analysis of the work of other creators that are doing interesting work in documentary poetry. Most of the chosen works² have not been widely written about. The consideration of marginal works, or works that might not at first appear to be documentaries, offers the opportunity to reframe documentary discussions. They also provide an important context of practice within which to develop and conceptualise my creative research project.

¹ The more successful attempts at capturing the idea of what poetry might be tend to use poetic language to describe the intention of the work rather than listing formal characteristics. I am thinking here of writing such as that by Jeffrey Wainwright who uses the metaphor of a prayer mat to describe how poetry can use everyday materials but yet create a space of different attention (2004, p. 8). Other notable examples of poetic descriptions of what poetry can be are to be found in the work of Percy Shelley (1904), Carl Sandburg (1923) and Peter Meinke (2012), to name but a few examples.

² with the notable exception of Isaac Julien's *Ten thousand waves* (2010)

The aim of the research is to apply aesthetic theory and experimental moving image theory to documentary works as well as include experimental and art installation works in my list of examples. Although I will discuss these experimental and art installation works in more detail in chapters 3 and 4, I want to briefly explain my rationale for their inclusion in this thesis. Part of the research strategy involves, for example, analysing the installation work, *Ten Thousand Waves*, by Isaac Julien (2010) in terms of its operation as a documentary text as well as an artwork. With its combination of recreations, elaborate staging and actuality footage, Julien's work problematizes documentary concerns with the real and authenticity. There is additional relevance for this research project in the way that the aesthetic form of the installation becomes a way of thinking through issues and events. The collection of materials that Julien has used and the way that the installation is staged are all part of the rhetorical approach of the work. In *Ten Thousand Waves*, Julien is looking at a cluster of ideas and exploring them through a range of aesthetic practices including actuality footage, recreation, fantasy and performance. For example, the inclusion of footage showing a master calligrapher practicing his craft with a large broom on the studio floor or showing green screen sequences, both in their constructed and pre-composite forms become ways to explore a cultural history and issues of memory.

Another installation work discussed in this thesis is *Disorient* (2009) by Fiona Tan. Although exhibited as a two screen projection within a gallery space, it is here being considered for the way it functions within a documentary paradigm. The juxtaposition of two streams of visual material with unanchored soundtrack is thought provoking and gives the spectator reason for pause as they grapple to unlock the meanings created through these particular associations. Applying strategies that are comparable to an exploratory documentary approach, the work prompts further discussion as it activates the viewer through the openness of form. In combining actuality footage, an art directed imagining of a mythical archive and spoken excerpts from *The Travels* by Marco Polo, Tan effectively raises questions regarding the stability of history and concepts of *the archive*. By putting the staged footage of the archive or museum storehouse up against footage taken in current times of the different places visited by Marco Polo, the work encourages association between elements as a way to think through themes such as collecting, travel and orientalism (to name but a few). At the same time the space is prepared for the active engagement and participation of the audience. The opposing of somewhat discordant representations and deliberate exploitation of the consequent tensions stirs an active grappling toward understanding. Such effects indicate there could be

considerable benefits for strands of documentary practice aimed at generating social change in adopting practices and thinking associated with media art.

By applying a wide range of theoretical sources I am also attempting to keep up with changing practices within documentary and art production. Not only are there documentaries that take quite experimental and avant-garde approaches to their subject material, there are also art projects that are crossing more and more into territories that might have been considered as documentary terrain. Within this collection, I am specifically looking at works that have consequently attracted the label of poetic because of the way they have worked with visual and audio material.

The creative practice based research component of this project has resulted in the production of a 28 minute single channel documentary project that engages with specific questions relating to the research project. In *How many ways to say you?* I explore a fragmented structure, offering a series of brief glimpses that work strongly with moments of pause, repetition, stretching and condensing of time. Influenced by the work of Chris Marker, Peter Greenaway, Trinh T Minh Ha and films such as *Phantom limb* (Rosenblatt 2005) and *32 short films about Glenn Gould* (Girard 1993), this practice led research has offered a space to test approaches and equally to spark avenues of enquiry.

I rejected the approach of solely relying on the analysis of other works as the basis for my research because I felt, as a creative practitioner, my working knowledge of production techniques could inform discussion of how certain effects were achieved. Equally there was an opportunity for me to learn from the analysis of other work and explore ways to achieve similar impacts in my own practice. I rejected the approach of just relying on my own creative practice in order that I could come to better understand the context in which I am working and explore ways in which I can contribute to a tradition of practice.

My approach to this research puts a greater emphasis on the written thesis over the creative work. As a practice based researcher, I am interested in theoretical approaches and how they can inform my practice and a broader community of practitioners. The dialogue between theory and practice is fruitful for the way that it raises further possibilities for research enquiry, resulting in a rigorous and lively examination of the field. My enthusiasm for this research project stems from a desire to understand how to make creative screen based work that can engage an audience with new and unfamiliar experiences. I see great value in

practice that is informed by theoretical research as there are opportunities to move beyond the reactive and the intuitive to achieve a more considered and critical approach.

I have adopted this overall methodology in order to explore the practical application of poetic techniques in documentary. It has been a process of pushing my own limits of documentary practice, responding intuitively to the material and then revising the work in response to issues raised in analysis of examples and feedback received on my own creative work along the way. While this approach hasn't been straightforward and has thrown up certain difficulties in testing the practical application of theoretical concepts, in resolving these tensions a richer implementation of practice and analysis has resulted.

Principal findings

In line with an awareness of the pleasures associated with audiovisual representations, there is potential to explore how an audience's appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of a creative work can give rise to affective engagement with the subject matter being addressed. My hypothesis is that the creation of aesthetic experiences that closely align with the content or ideas being considered can be an effective tactic for a rhetorical or persuasive text that also seeks to foreground subjectivity, make room for complexity and the possibility of multiple truths.

Where there has been a tendency for theoretical discussions to focus on the appearance of poetic documentary and consequently to undervalue the social and persuasive intentions of such work,³ there are indications that an emphasis on aesthetics does not necessarily result in the rhetorical element in a poetic approach to documentary remaining underdeveloped. Instead it appears that the persuasive powers of these texts are working in different ways to straightforward, reasoned argument. These works are appealing to aspects of reception that lie beyond clear and rational logic. Through beauty, poetry, affect and formal experiments, a poetic approach to documentary can seek to engage the audience through the senses and through the affective pleasures of aesthetic technique. Through an openness and an overall feeling of spaciousness, the audience is drawn in to a moment of pause that holds the possibility of connection through a moment of recognition and shared humanity.

While the works I consider are coming from a tradition of visual arts practice that takes a different perspective on issues of truth and authenticity to that associated with traditional documentary practice, they nonetheless engage with strategies that can be applied to more

³ For example in Bill Nichols' description of the poetic mode of documentary production (2010).

generically observational documentary works. The potential inherent in the application and operation of these aesthetic techniques argues for expanding our conception of what can constitute a documentary as we come to comprehend the different ways of knowing that are possible. It also proposes a way to appreciate equivocation and uncertainty in documentary as the openness of the approach permits the audience to embark on an ongoing process of understanding. Just as a non-realist approach can foreground subjectivity and problematize notions of an objective voice, techniques that promote ambiguity, ambivalence, creative tension and complexity can activate audience engagement and address criticisms of documentary didacticism.

Thesis structure

The written component of the thesis is made up of four chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter 1 examines key theoretical debates around ways of understanding the corpus of screen based documentary texts and considers the positioning of a poetic approach within this field. The implications for financing and producing poetic documentary works are considered with an emphasis on the Australian context for funding and exhibition.

Chapter 2 considers the poetic use of observational documentary footage by exploring three examples that use deliberate formal strategies to emphasise the poetic nature of everyday life. The effect of using the experience of time alongside formal approaches to composition and expressive editing techniques are explored in detail.

Chapter 3 moves more specifically into the territory of visual arts and installation practice as it considers the documentary tendencies of works created for exhibition within gallery spaces. Examples range from the intricate single channel screen work, *Static no. 12*, by Daniel Crooks to the lavish nine screen installation project, *Ten thousand waves*, by Isaac Julien.

Chapter 4 focuses on how granular approaches to structure in poetic documentary can allow new connections to be made between component parts, thereby promoting the formation of new pathways of understanding. To this end, examples have been drawn from a range of exhibition circumstances and include the two screen installation, *Disorient*, by Fiona Tan, the online photographic essay, *Iraqi Kurdistan*, by Ed Kashi and an online storytelling platform, *Cowbird*, developed by Jonathon Harris.

The creative practice based research component to this project, namely the documentary video *How many ways to say you?* has been produced in dialogue with theoretical material

and analysis of examples pertaining to the three key areas of focus represented in chapters 2, 3 and 4. As referenced by the titles of the three chapters, these areas of focus are:

- a) the ways that observational documentary material can manifest as poetry of the everyday
- b) the impact of an artistic framework and gallery exhibition on poetic documentary expression and
- c) the operation and possibilities of list-like formal structures within poetic documentary projects.

These areas reflect the key concerns that have been addressed through the creative research process thereby determining the points of focus for discussion of relevant examples and consultation of literature. In order to cogently present the outcomes of the creative research process as it relates to each area of focus, the documentary project, *How many ways to say you?* will be discussed at different points throughout the thesis. This permits a focused discussion of the project as it directly relates to concepts explored in each chapter with the additional benefit of providing practical examples to illustrate the application of theoretical propositions.

Chapter 1

The problem of beautiful truths

This chapter details pertinent issues that are raised in debates around how documentary is defined and sets out where a poetic approach sits within this terrain. The discussion considers three key classificatory approaches to understanding documentary, assessing methodologies developed by Bill Nichols, Michael Renov and Carl Plantinga. The focus of this examination is to assess how each system addresses and accommodates a poetic approach to documentary.

This chapter outlines the theoretical, production and exhibition contexts into which a poetic approach to documentary intervenes as a methodology that pushes to the extremes of what is recognisable as documentary. It also examines the tensions that considering poetic works within a documentary framework can create. In subsequent chapters and through my creative practice based research, these tensions are explored for their theoretical and expressive possibilities.

A poetic approach to documentary can productively disrupt commonsense understandings of screen based documentary through an expanded conception of truth. This conception incorporates subjective truths that are evocative of experience. Rather than operating as an ultimate truthfulness, aesthetic experience is introduced as a device that allows for multiple truths, multiple perspectives and undecidability to be explored within a documentary paradigm.

Where an understanding of documentary based upon ideas of objectivity and journalistic balance has resulted in suspicions of an aestheticised approach, I am interested to draw upon aspects of sensory anthropology for strategies to heal a perceived split between aesthetics and rhetoric. To this end, I am using the word aesthetic in two ways. Firstly, to refer to the way we perceive material as a result of formal choices and judgements made by the maker. For this definition, I am drawing on the work in sensory ethnography by C. Nadia Seremetakis which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter. Secondly, I use the term aestheticised to describe work that emphasises these formal choices to create an experience through which the audience can engage with the material. At the same time I am using an expanded concept of rhetoric that incorporates acts of communication (including non-verbal means) aimed at persuading or provoking consideration of a particular perspective.

The chapter concludes by proposing a model of intersectionality as a way to conceive of works created through a poetic approach to documentary production. By drawing upon techniques from poetry , documentary, visual and audio art, these works take advantage of the permeable boundaries between forms in a bid to “utilize more effectively the potentialities of its chosen medium to convey ideas and feelings” (Renov 1993, p. 35) as well as acknowledge the avant-garde antecedents of moving image documentary practice.

Documentary territories

There are problems associated with definitions that attempt to define things as concrete, solid, bounded and static, when the reality is more difficult to pin down. Definitions may be useful in conceiving of and understanding works but the borders surrounding the territory of these definitions are not solid. Even with thorough analysis and the best of intentions, in application the boundaries between forms may be porous and the distinctions specious. They may exist more for convenience than as a reflection of practice. Attempts at drawing up divisions are most often exercises in history – they indicate past ways of doing things rather than showing what is current or still to come. Indeed lists of genre characteristics are largely a result of observed practice over time. Definitions and categories are blunt instruments, not the imagined, finely honed blades that are capable of precisely ruling a work in or out. The divisions don't always stand up to close scrutiny and it is usually possible to find exceptions to the generalisations. Indeed, as Paul Ward points out, “one simply cannot come up with a model of documentary that explains *all* documentary texts and their variants, precisely because it is an ‘open concept’ with ‘fuzzy’ boundaries” (2005, p. 12 [original emphasis]) .

Change is an important concept to consider here too, as Corner notes: “Scholarship will never ‘resolve’ the issue of definitions and borderlines, these will actually become more uncertain and ‘thin’ as audiovisual culture becomes more inter-generically fluid” (in de Jong & Austin 2008, pp. 26-27). Developments in technology, use, social relations, subject material and intention will continue to have an impact upon how documentary is conceptualised. The high degree of change in screen culture, broadcast models and audience expectation witnessed, even in the last 5 years, also requires us to consider just how important the divisions between categories are in the face of developing modes of exhibition and increasingly innovative approaches to representation. However, this *problem* of definition need not be seen as a deficiency. For Olivier Lugon, “what might seem to be the documentary project’s fundamental weakness—the nebulous definition, the assorted approaches—has undoubtedly been the chief factor influencing its viability: a propensity to keep on discussing its methods and goals,

reinventing ways of providing a faithful, correct description of reality" (2008, p. 31). The continued questioning of methods, forms and intention that documentary practitioners and theorists engage in is indisputable evidence of a concerned and reflective practice. It is also part of the process of reimagining and responding to the mutable circumstances into which the experience of documentary intervenes.

It is not within the scope of this thesis to exhaustively address the totality of attempts to define documentary as a practice or a creative output. However, from the mass of scholarship on this topic some key concepts do emerge as pertaining to a general understanding of the field. Truth claims, relationships to the real, authenticity, authority and trustworthiness are characteristics put forward as markers of documentary works. In a sweeping and somewhat omniscient claim, Brian Winston declares, "I know of no theoretical position, no definition of documentary, that does not in some way reference the relationship to the real" (2008, p. 9). Whether it is based on *commonsense*, practice or a more theoretical understanding, at some point definitions of documentary refer back to the truthfulness and/or authenticity with which a work connects to *the real*. Indeed Dirk Eitzen goes so far as to assert that "All documentaries – whether they are deemed, in the end, to be reliable or not – revolve around questions of trust. A documentary is any motion picture that is susceptible to the question 'Might it be lying?'" (1995, p. 81). The question arises, however, to whose truth are we referring? Within this framework of judging truthfulness and relationship to reality it is important to note that these are concepts that can take many forms. In light of the multiple ways it is possible to know the world, emotional truths, experiences of reality and individual authenticities need to be acknowledged.

Even though the efficiency and confidence of statements such as those by Winston and Eitzen are appealing, documentary is a highly complex, nuanced and evolving concept that cannot be adequately summed up by a short, snappy phrase. Networked analyses that observe a range of tendencies or modalities operating within works labelled as documentary encourage a broader conception of the area and allow for a diversity of material to be considered. Even so, there are likely to be gaps, oversights and exceptions. The difficulty with a categorical or classificatory approach to theorising documentary is that it, in many ways, closes down the ways and types of works that can be thought about within these frameworks. Definitions can offer a way to begin thinking about a work but from there the work needs to breathe and not be criticised for a lack of adherence to generic principles. It is important to be attentive to the

limitations of the taxonomic process and be aware that it is an imposed order rather than being inherent to the items being categorised.

However, this does not mean that the process of analysing and thinking through the implications of documentary work should be abandoned. As Ward indicates “the existing categories bring to bear a *material* force on documentary practice in the sense that practitioners and audiences understand (or misunderstand) any documentary they watch by referring to categories of documentary” (2005, p. 12 [original emphasis]). A key work that has wrought just such a material force on documentary practice and spectatorship is that developed by film studies academic Bill Nichols.

In an attempt to include a very broad range of material under the umbrella of documentary, Nichols developed a set of six modes of documentary representation that “function something like subgenres of the documentary film genre itself” (2001, p. 99). Admittedly, it is a challenging task to apply the notion of subgenres to a constellation of works that are loosely gathered around varying relationships with the real world. However, Nichols’ modes of documentary production do provide a benchmark formulation of how we can begin to map out the geography of documentary. In the second edition of his book, *Introduction to documentary*, Nichols proposes two main ways to categorise documentary works. The first is through “pre-existing nonfiction models” (2010, p. 148), that is, forms used by other kinds of (primarily literary) non-fiction discourse that have been adopted by documentary projects. Examples include diaries, biographies, manifestos, essays and reports. The second way he proposes is through reference to what he terms “distinct, cinematic modes”, which reflect the use of “specifically cinematic techniques and conventions” (2010, p. 148). Nichols lists his six modes of documentary representation as: poetic; expository; participatory; observational; reflexive; and performative. He describes these in terms of their chief characteristics and also lists what he sees as each mode’s primary deficiency. These are summarised in the table below.

Mode of production	Chief characteristics	Primary limitations
<i>Poetic documentary</i> [1920s]	reassemble fragments of the world poetically	lack of specificity, too abstract
<i>Expository documentary</i> [1920s]	directly address issues in the historical world	overly didactic

Mode of production	Chief characteristics	Primary limitations
<i>Observational documentary [1960s]</i>	eschew commentary and re-enactment; observe things as they happen	lack of history, context
<i>Participatory documentary [1960s]</i>	interview or interact with subjects; use archival film to retrieve history	excessive faith in witnesses, naive history, too intrusive
<i>Reflexive documentary [1980s]</i>	question documentary form, defamiliarise the other modes	too abstract, lose sight of actual issues
<i>Performative documentary [1980s]</i>	stress subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse	loss of emphasis on objectivity may relegate such films to the avant-garde; “excessive” use of style

Although linked to historical cinematic developments, Nichols cautions that “the modes do not represent an evolutionary chain in which later modes demonstrate superiority over earlier ones” (2001, p. 100). The modes are, however, proposed as having developed in response to filmmaker dissatisfaction with the limitations of existing forms of documentary. As a result it is possible to observe an evolutionary trajectory in how the modes have been formulated, despite Nichols’ demurals. Within this framing then, the lack of specificity in poetic documentary provokes the didactic, voice-over driven approach of expository documentary. The fly on the wall style of observational documentary is a response to the lecturing of expository documentary. The lack of context and history in observational documentary prompts the turn to interviews and archival material in participatory documentary. The questioning of form and defamiliarisation in reflexive documentary is a reaction to the excess of faith in witnesses that is demonstrated in participatory documentary. The abstraction and distance of reflexive documentary gives rise to the subjective representations seen in performative documentary.

Nichols’ addition of pre-existing non-fiction models to the set of six cinema specific modes of documentary representation is a new development coming out of the second edition of

*Introduction to documentary.*⁴ In the first edition of the book, Nichols proposed the six modes alone as the categories within his “loose framework of affiliation within which individuals may work” (2001, p. 99). The updated version is intended to operate as an expanded way to conceptualise documentary with the modes and the models overlapping but also covering a wider range of material. However, discussion of the non-fiction models is not developed to the same extent that the six modes of documentary representation have been in this and previous iterations of Nichols’ documentary taxonomy.

The interesting thing about this system is that it enables the discussion to be framed in terms of dominant modes of production, acknowledging that a documentary can operate within more than one mode at once but will tend to work in one more dominant mode. This helps to evade some of the difficulties faced by attempts to define the documentary category by allowing for interaction across classifications. Nichols’ modes represent a very effective description of different ways that documentary can operate and provide a reference point that is widely understood when talking about documentary forms. Even so, there are difficulties with the modes and I will now address those that are specifically related to a poetic approach to documentary.

Nichols’ system of classification considers poetic documentaries to be an outgrowth of the modernist avant-garde and an experimental body of filmic works. As a consequence, under his system they are seen to operate outside many (latterly) received documentary conventions. The kinds of films that Nichols groups under the poetic mode of representation include: Joris Ivens’ *Regen* (1929), Jean Mitry’s *Pacific 231* (1949), Francis Thompson’s *N.Y, N.Y* (1957), Bert Haanstra’s *Glass* (1958) and Les Blank’s *Always for pleasure* (1978). These are open works that aim to create an impression through sound and image rather than directly proposing an argument or following an evidentiary logic. While the examples cited extended across a significant span of time, the poetic mode is described as beginning “in tandem with modernism as a way of representing reality in terms of a series of fragments, subjective impressions, incoherent acts, and loose associations” (Nichols 2010, p. 164).

The historical positioning by Nichols of the poetic mode as an early manifestation of documentary form calls into question histories that align the trajectory of nineteenth century assertions of the truthfulness and evidentiary status of photographic and cinematic images

⁴ Interestingly, the modes themselves are an evolving approach. They began as a direct and indirect address in *Ideology and the image : social representation in the cinema and other media* (Nichols 1981) and were developed into the four modes of expository, observational, interactive and reflexive in *Representing reality : issues and concepts in documentary* (Nichols 1991). Although cited as being the beginning form, the poetic mode was not included as part of the classifications of documentary practice by Nichols until *Introduction to documentary* (Nichols 2001).

with the development of documentary production. Such an alignment, which emphasises the evidentiary at the expense of the experiential, results in a very limited formulation of what constitutes a documentary. In a correlative discussion Stella Bruzzi comments that “many theorists view...reflexivity as breaking with documentary tradition – but that is only valid if one takes as representative of the documentary ‘canon’ films that seek to hide the modes of production” (2000, p. 154). Similarly, to consider poetic works as outliers to the main corpus of documentary practice is to ignore works (including those mentioned in the preceding paragraph) that affectively use cinematic manipulations to produce their effects on spectators. The timing and development of poetic documentary forms clearly demonstrates the twin antecedents of documentary practice. It can be observed that impulses from both the avant-garde use of quotidian images as material and the evidentiary use of photography to bear witness to events are discernible on a continuum of documentary practice. Nichols’ six modes of documentary production extends membership of the documentary canon beyond dominant institutional forms to include works that have influenced practice, challenged conventions and brought about a change in thinking and approach.

Still, there is something of a disconnect between Nichols’ use of the term *poetic* as a mode of representation and the way the adjective *poetic* is more widely used in relation to documentary. Nichols describes documentaries that are dominated by a performative mode of representation as sharing with the poetic mode “...a deflection of documentary emphasis away from a realist representation of the historical world and toward poetic liberties, more unconventional narrative structures, and more subjective forms of representation” (2001, p. 132). So it would appear that under Nichols’ taxonomy of documentary modes of representation, recent poetic works are gathered under the performative mode. However, we need to evaluate the effectiveness of such classification when more general usage, among documentary practitioners and theorists (including Nichols) describes these works in the performative mode of representation in terms of their poetic qualities.

By calling one mode *poetic* Nichols appears to be implying that other modes are not – or perhaps less so – as it is the poetic tendencies that distinguish this mode from the others. And yet there is a return to certain poetic forms in his discussion of the performative mode.⁵ Working on historical and stylistic axes, this kind of labelling becomes problematic when, in theorising the form, we become tied to more limited applications of the terms. In addition,

⁵ For example: “Like the poetic mode of documentary representation, the performative mode raises questions about what knowledge actually amounts to” (Nichols 2010, p. 199); and “Performative documentary approaches the poetic domain of experimental or avant-garde cinema but gives, finally, less emphasis to the self-contained formal rhythms and tones of the film or video” (Nichols 2010, p. 206).

there is a sense in which aspects of poetic practice can be seen in operation in works from across all the modes of documentary production. Whether a work is classified as expository, observational, participatory, reflexive or performative there are compelling examples that exhibit a clear poetic tone behind the conception of the work. More than a crossing of different modes of production this manifests as an alternative intention. There is an openness of expression and a shift in emphasis whereby the aesthetic and affective elements become the dominant strategies for persuasion. Case studies of poetic works that operate within a realist framework and that largely conform to generic formal expectations for observational documentary screen work are explored in more detail in chapter 2.

Picking up on Nichols' early work with modes and exploring ways of incorporating intention into a classificatory model, Carl Plantinga also addresses aspects of poetic practice. As a starting point he adopts a broad rendering of nonfiction as a category of films where the events represented "are asserted to occur as portrayed in the actual world" (1997, p. 109). While this is a very simplified rendering of a highly problematic distinction (between notions of fiction and nonfiction) it does allow for the inclusion of, what Plantinga terms, "avant-garde nonfiction film" (1997, p. 175). In particular, it permits discussion, within a documentary frame of reference, works that come from an experimental moving image art practice and use sound and vision drawn from realist depictions of the world.

Plantinga's system of classification is structured so that different forms of documentary (and other works of nonfiction) are arranged underneath the overarching category of nonfiction according to a series of strategies that affect approaches to voice, structure and style. These strategies are labelled the formal, the open and the poetic. Rather than emphasising form or chronology, Plantinga privileges the relationship to knowledge and authority exhibited in a work as the factor determining what he calls its voice. For Plantinga, voice refers to "a discourse that takes an implicit stance or attitude toward what it presents" (1997, p. 100). So the formal voice "*makes sense* of its subject and passes that sense to the spectator" (1997, p. 115 [original emphasis]). The open voice "may withhold high-level generalizations about its subject not in the name of imitation, but in an unwillingness to offer neat explanations and contextualizations" (1997, p. 118). The manifestation of voice in the poetic form, however, is not so clear cut in its relationship to knowledge and authority.

Plantinga's explanation of the poetic voice positions it as "less concerned with observation, exploration, or explanation – traditional epistemological concerns – and more with the nonfiction film as art and/or as a means of exploring representation itself" (1997, p. 109). His

formulation positions the poetic voice, not as a withholding of epistemic functions (as in the case of the open voice), but as a lack of engagement with or disregard for knowledge in favour of representing “its subject as an aesthetic object” (1997, p. 173). Here *poetic* and *aesthetic* are being used somewhat interchangeably – a not uncommon substitution. However, I question the rendering of aesthetic practice as necessarily part of a hierarchical process that puts beauty before all else.

Rather than it having to be an either/or process I see the application of a poetic, aestheticised approach as part of the communicative approach of the filmmakers. It is more an issue of what the filmmaker wants to share with the audience and how best to do that. Yes, the work may be beautiful and accentuate formal aspects but the works that are the focus of this thesis take the art practice beyond simply creating pleasing audiovisual encounters. These are actually quite muscular works that can use audiovisual pleasures to embrace the radical possibilities that Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1992, p. 154) sees in poetic forms when they are shifted out of the realm of art-for-art’s-sake. The aestheticised representation becomes a point of access to the encounter and to forms of authenticity that operate on a sensory level.

While Plantinga’s idea of applying the formal, open and poetic inflections to style and structure as well as voice negotiates the difficulty of a poetic relationship to knowledge and authority to some extent, his system still does imply a separation that does not, in practice, exist. There are many examples of works that employ a poetic voice not just to privilege aesthetics but as a means to make a rhetorical point. This mixing of approaches cannot be explained away by saying that a film can “speak with heterogeneous voices, or a single voice” (Plantinga 1997, p. 110) when the voices, styles and structures are being put to uses other than those outlined in this typology.

This interdependence, overlapping and cross pollination of categories can perhaps be more helpfully navigated using Michael Renov’s matrix of documentary tendencies. In what presents as a strategy to negotiate difficulties associated with linear definitions of documentary, Renov provides a framework that enables us to consider works that have been or can be called documentary. Following on from an Aristotelian urge to show “what poetry is and what it can do” (1993, p. 12), he sketches out a model for a poetics of documentary. However, in place of description that seeks to exclude a range of works for non-compliance, this model aims to be broadly inclusive of a range of material. Renov’s matrix centres around what he terms “The Four Fundamental Tendencies of Documentary” which, by his definition are: 1) to record, reveal or preserve; 2) to persuade or promote; 3) to analyse or interrogate;

and 4) to express. These tendencies are proposed as “modalities of desire, impulsions which fuel documentary discourse”(1993, p. 22).⁶

The advantage of a networked approach to understanding a *fuzzy* concept like documentary is that it allows for a range of combinations, strengths and emphases among the elements. The structure of this analysis shifts the discussion from the to-ing and fro-ing of incomplete definitions to a more thorough-going consideration of what a documentary does and the conditions of its impact. Rather than getting bogged down in trying to pinpoint the categorical boundaries, the four fundamental tendencies allow the conversation to move on to a more fruitful contemplation of what a documentary can do and how.

In addition, as Renov points out, the four tendencies are interdependent and cannot be considered as discrete characteristics. Each of the tendencies can be observed to rely upon or reinforce the action of the others in varying degrees. For example, as Renov explains “one crucial parameter of persuasion in documentary could not occur were it not for the veridical stamp of documentary’s indexical sign-status, itself a condition of the record/preserve mode understood as the first documentary function”(1993, p. 29). While I would propose that documentary is able to engage other methods of persuasion (such as emotional authenticity) beyond an “indexical sign-status”, the point remains that the tendencies are woven together to form a mutually supportive fabric.

Significantly, the fourth of Renov’s tendencies, (that is, to express) accommodates exploration of poetic approaches that are the focus of this thesis. Described as “the aesthetic function that has consistently been undervalued within the nonfiction domain” but which is “nevertheless, amply represented in the history of the documentary enterprise” (1993, p. 32), the expressive tendency can refer to work along a continuum “of great expressive variability—from that which attends little to the vehicle of expression (the not-so-distant apotheosis of cinema verite—surveillance technology—might serve as the limit case) to that which emphasizes the filtering of the represented object through the eye and mind of the artist”(1993, p. 35).

Where Nichols’ description of the poetic mode positions a poetic approach as emphasising fragmentation, “incoherent acts and loose associations” (2001, p. 103) where “people more

⁶ In his keynote address to the *Truth or Dare: Art and Documentary* conference in 2006, Renov developed a fifth function as particular to documentary practice, which he described as “the ethical function, its attentiveness to the mutuality and commensurability of self and other despite the differences of power, status and access to the means of representation, a ‘you’ and an ‘I’ placed in delicate balance” (2007, p. 23). This function and its implications for the intersectional practice of poetic documentary will be discussed in chapter 3.

typically function on a par with other objects as raw material that filmmakers select and arrange into associations and patterns of their choosing" (2001, p. 102), and Plantinga sidelines engagement with knowledge and authority as outside the purview of the poetic voice, Renov's four fundamental tendencies allow for a diverse range of manifestations of a poetic approach.

Television and the appearance of truth

However, there remains a tendency to understand documentary in terms of a binary opposition between truth and beauty. John Corner's descriptive book title, *The art of record* (1996) is a deliberate play on what he sees as the two poles of documentary practice. He describes it as the "problematic duality in documentary work – its character as both artifice and as evidence" (1996, p. 2). Significantly though for the intersectional material of a poetic approach to documentary, Corner's examination privileges televisual incarnations of documentary. Mainstream, English language broadcast outlets for documentary are not known for their embrace of experimental or poetic practice. Nonetheless, Corner's formulation of the two polarities of art and record does point toward the strength of these forces in our understanding of documentary works. Outside of a model of binary oppositions they are not necessarily contradictory forces. Some level of *art* is surely present in all documentary acts of representation and in poetic works it can be emphasised to support and convey the points of *record*. Indeed it is possible that the aesthetic experience produced by the work is the instance that is being recorded and conveyed. The art is the record and the record is the art brought together through the subjective processes of creation that go into its design. However, Corner sees problems for the term documentary "as one moves away from work using elements of the recorded real" (1996, p. 3). So while the combination of art and record is productive, his concern with issues of fidelity and indexicality as primary markers works to exclude some of the more highly aestheticised works that I want to consider.

Interestingly though, Corner's use of the broadcast television paradigm for thinking through documentary issues is helpful in another respect. His proposition that it could be "useful to see documentary positioned culturally somewhere between [television] 'news' and 'drama'" (2008, p. 22) works to shift the discussion out of the fiction vs. nonfiction realm. The framework of the television system shifts the discussion out of a binary opposition (where the thinking proceeds along the lines that documentary is not fiction therefore it is *non-fiction*) into a more fluid and apt continuum where documentary actually borrows or uses something from news as well as aspects of drama. It recalls the discomfort of form that is noticeable

when discussing poetic approaches to documentary in the context of traditional conceptions of documentary, particularly those that relate to form. Although Ward does in some ways address the problems by asserting that “the key distinction is never one of form or style, but rather of purpose and context” (2005, p. 7), form is still a key element of how we conceive documentary and an aspect that is central to my thinking around poetic documentary. For the practice I am considering, form is vital; not only in identifying relevant works but also in conceptualising how they communicate and build an aesthetic case.

In Australia, current funding models, in particular production funding available through Screen Australia,⁷ emphasise television broadcast as the primary exhibition outlet for screen based documentary in Australia.⁸ Even without any reference to a working definition, this has implications for not only the kinds of films that can be fully funded but also for the scope and development of the documentary form more generally that tend to steer stylistic choices toward the easily accessible and away from open, poetic approaches.

Popular conceptions of documentary, evidenced in television programming decisions and viewer discussions, frame it as an authoritative and educative format with intentions to reveal something interesting, important, strange or remarkable about the world. In these accounts, it is an inherently unproblematic category that relies upon the evidentiary or indexical qualities of photography and audio recording to make claims of truthfulness and authenticity while attempting to offer a direct expression of the real. This is most often manifested in modes of production (recalling those described by Nichols) that also emphasise the importance of presenting evidence in the form of expert opinion (expository), interview material (participatory), the camera as on-the-spot-witness (observational) or a combination of all three with little scope for the alternative ways of knowing that are embraced in a poetic approach.

These alternative ways of knowing can manifest in an experiential approach whereby it is the experience of the open, poetic work in itself where the examination and consideration of ideas occurs. In an evidentiary approach the emphasis may be on establishing an appearance of objective and decisive authority so that mainstream modes of documentary are frequently constructed around informational dichotomies such as good/bad, left/right, predator/victim, human interest/corporate greed. While this kind of neatness may be “one of the prime

⁷ Resulting from an amalgamation of the functions of the Australian Film Commission, the Film Finance Corporation and Film Australia, Screen Australia is the “Commonwealth Government screen agency providing support to Australian film, television, documentary and digital media makers”. Source http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/about_us/ accessed 17/05/2013.

⁸ Four out of the five funding streams available through Screen Australia for documentary production require a commitment “in the form of a minimum licence fee” from an Australian broadcaster. Source <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/funding/documentary/default.aspx> accessed 17/05/2013.

attractions of the form”(Nichols 2001, p. 25), it glosses over the fact of the many choices that are made in putting a documentary work on the screen.

The Screen Australia funding guidelines refer to a definition of documentary that was developed for the Australian Content Standard (ACS).⁹ The ACS states that “*Documentary program* means a program that is a creative treatment of actuality other than a news, current affairs, sports coverage, magazine, infotainment or light entertainment program” (Australian Broadcasting Authority 2004, p. 3). This definition, recalling a quote attributed to John Grierson describing documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality”(Grierson & Hardy 1979, p. 11), is interesting as much as for what it excludes as for what it allows. In its combination of creativity and actuality it poses something of a threat to persistent desires for unmediated documentary truth and transparent renderings of the world and has the potential to open the way for more poetic approaches. The notion of documentary’s problematic relation to truth has been addressed by diverse theorists such as Nichols (1981), (1991), (1994), (2001); Renov (1993), (2004); Winston (2000), (2008); and Vaughan (1999). However, bolstered by the predominance of direct cinema forms that attempt to film as if the camera wasn’t there, there is still a tendency for broadcast television documentary to slip back into a belief in direct connections between the audiovisual representation and the original event.

As pointed out by Michael Renov, the Griersonian definition “appears to be a kind of oxymoron, the site of an irreconcilable union between invention on the one hand and mechanical reproduction on the other” (1993, p. 33). And this is where the ongoing tension in the documentary project rests. There is an expectation on the part of an audience watching a documentary that they are engaging with a truthful and authentic representation of the world. Even more than that, there can be an insistence that the documentaries retain an indexical trace of the subject being recorded as proof of authenticity. While perhaps this insistence is weakening in the wake of continuing developments in high resolution, photo-realistic digital fabrications, there remains some residual belief in the power of photography (and by inference motion picture technologies such as film and video) to provide what John Berger termed an “automatic record through the mediation of light of a given event” (2001, p. 216).

However, these are beliefs that need to be disrupted and brought forward into consciousness. Screen images and sound do not give us direct access to reality. This re-presentation of the

⁹ The Australian Content Standard requires that commercial television broadcasters screen in each year “at least 20 hours of first release Australian documentary programs” (Office of Legislative Drafting and Publishing Attorney-General’s Department 2010, p. 21) that are a minimum of 30 minutes duration, between the hours of 6am and midnight, to satisfy local content quota requirements.

real is always mediated. There are perhaps echoes remaining from the original capture in the sound, lights and forms we see on-screen but these exist more as iconic resemblances than as indexical links. As Bruzzi notes, in documentary there is “a perpetual negotiation between the real event and its representation...the two remain distinct but interactive”(2000, p. 9) and this is something that the aestheticised, poetic approach to documentary is able to foreground.

In creating a re-presentation of the world, documentary filmmakers make formal decisions that impact audience understandings. Through application of a range of production techniques including camera work, sound recording, editing, even what is put in front of the lens and how, “[d]ocumentaries repair not only the directionlessness of that [uncontrolled socio-historical] world but also its apparent moral neutrality” (Spence & Navarro 2011, p. 5). Cohesive arguments are built out of disparate elements. Logical narratives are woven from proximal but not always connected threads. Documentary is a rhetorical form that aims to persuade or engage its viewers with a point of view and does so using all the tools at a filmmaker’s disposal. From the moment a subject is chosen for our attention the strategies of influencing our understandings and opinions are in operation.

In a fantastically circular demonstration Nichols describes how “All discourses, including documentary film, seek to externalize evidence – to place it referentially outside the domain of the discourse itself which then gestures to its location there, beyond and before interpretation”(2008, p. 29). Through reference to convention and a range of aesthetic manoeuvres a documentary can construct and assemble the full evidentiary force of audiovisual persuasion and with a flourish point and say, ‘look, here this proves what I’m telling you’. The advantage of reflexive, poetic and other aestheticised, self-conscious forms is in the foregrounding of these choices. Nichols goes on to point out that “our analysis must not accept what others represent the case to be but must ask: “What light is thrown on the subject in which I am interested by the fact that this person made this statement?”(2008, p. 31). While documentary can and does make truth claims and asserts its authenticity, these must be understood as situated, subjective and contextual.

The Australian Content Standard (ACS) guidelines acknowledge the difficulties in attempting to define program types by noting that “the definition of a documentary is a term of art rather than a precise description” (Australian Broadcasting Authority 2004, p. 3) but the phrase “a term of art” seems to raise more questions than it addresses. Although the ACS guidelines are working with a deliberately (and perhaps appropriately) vague definition for an admittedly fuzzy concept, understandings of what is possible within documentary practice are likely to fall

back to the dominant forms that are currently broadcast through commercial television networks unless possibilities for alternatives are raised. As a result there are limits on the kinds of documentaries that can attract funding through schemes requiring broadcast presales. While Screen Australia's *Signature Documentary* program supports "documentary storytelling that is bold in form and/or content, with a strong creative vision and the potential for national and international acclaim", this is contingent upon "a highly developed understanding of how to reach and engage their target market and audience" (Screen Australia 2013). This shackling of funding to "reach" seems short sighted in terms of the continued development of documentary form as this kind of audience understanding is generally based on established practices. Approaches that are more experimental, that may be at the outset of building an audience or target market or that are intended for a smaller scale community must find other avenues for production funds such as through festival awards, academic research programs and arts based practice. This is particularly the case with poetic and other non-traditional documentary approaches.

Poetic disruptions and the veracity of experience

In his analysis of "Grierson's idea for the documentary, its sources, its practice, its development and its current state" (2008, p. 9) Winston limits his considerations to realist documentary work. While the justification for this seems fair,¹⁰ by the conclusion of the book, with "digital image manipulation...in combination with the documentarist's imagination" threatening to "bring down the entire Griersonian construction" (2008, p. 286), the very works that were excluded in the opening pages are now proposed as ways to reinvigorate the documentary project. Citing a list of documentary approaches that includes agitprop, animated documentary, documusicals, poetry and pictorialism he declares that "[t]he post-Griersonian documentary is upon us" (2008, p. 290).

However, the distinction of Griersonian and post-Griersonian documentary when referring to the development of non-realist approaches is not completely accurate or constructive. Many of these forms, or versions of them, have been around since the very early days of documentary practice. Rather than representing a practice that has come after Grierson, these works are part of a continuing alternative to realist documentary truth claims. As Renov (2004) points out, early documentary works (such as *Berlin: symphony of a great city* (Ruttman 1927) and *Regen* (Ivens 1929)) were part of the cinematic avant-garde of 1920s modernism.

¹⁰ He cites two reasons. "First, the realist documentary makes the greatest 'truth claims' for itself. Second, realist documentaries constitute the dominant tradition, not just in the United Kingdom and North America but also in the rest of Western Europe and all other parts of the world where Griersonian realists trained local filmmakers" (2008, p. 10).

Through differences in form, authorial position and relationship to knowledge, the documentary alternatives reveal truth claims to be a performance of truth depending on aesthetic conventions such as *direct* and unproblematic representations of *the world as it is*, hierarchies of credibility that rely upon authoritative presentations of expert, eye-witness accounts and other rhetorical devices of persuasion for their force and assuredness.

Use of the term *poetic* in relation to documentary can be found in the work of Russian filmmaker, Dziga Vertov. Around 1920 he labelled his method of filmmaking “poetic documentary” in order to describe a formalist approach that played with “the possibilities of expressive film editing (or montage)” (Dawson 2003). In keeping with notions of literary poetry, expressive film editing links and juxtaposes images to create visual rhythms and rhymes. It often does not observe rules of continuity and constructs sequences without a strong regard to continuity of place or time. It seems to be this tendency that Nichols is picking up on in his definition of the poetic mode of representation in documentary. He states: “[t]he poetic mode sacrifices the conventions of continuity editing and the sense of a very specific location in time and place that follows from it to explore associations and patterns that involve temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions (2001, p. 102). However, it is important to note that use of these techniques can have rhetorical effects. Expressive editing and the creation of visual rhymes are not just formal exercises but are also techniques for constructing ideas about the world.

While for some, documentary and poetry can be unproblematically combined in order to describe an intangible, almost ineffable quality, for others the notion of a poetic approach to documentary has been the site of contradiction and formal discomfort. For Grierson, “documentary was from the beginning...an ‘anti-aesthetic’ movement” (Grierson & Hardy 1979, p. 112). While declarations of this kind may have grown from an intention to inform people through unvarnished truths about social reality, the *anti-aesthetic* aesthetic evolved into a tactic to ensure perceptions of the documentary work’s authenticity and strong attachment to the *real*. Writing about a period of change in European cinema in the years preceding the Second World War, Hans Richter observed that “[i]t became clear that a fact did not really remain a ‘fact’ if it appeared in too beautiful a light. The accent shifted, for a ‘beautiful’ image could not normally be obtained except at the expense of its closeness to reality”(1986, pp. 45-46). At a time when the still new field of documentary was trying to assert its difference from fantastical cinematic forms, the dangerous seductions of beautiful facts needed to be resisted. However, in a twisting of the original intention, what had evolved

as generic features became criteria for judging truthfulness. As Trinh points out “[t]he question is not so much one of sorting out—illusory as this may be—what is inherently factual and what is not in a body of *preexisting* filmic techniques, as it is one of abiding by the conventions of naturalism in film” (1993, p. 98 [original emphasis]). This *naturalism* or the degree to which the appearance of manipulation could be erased came to determine the authority and truth-telling status of all works described as documentary.

Yet, as Jared F. Green observes: “when it comes to the cinematic image...the relationship between ‘truth’ and ‘the real’ is perhaps best regarded as metaphoric rather than metonymic, since the only indexical truth of the photographic image prior to digital technology (still or motion) is the fact of the impression of light on photosensitive film” (2006, p. 69). With this realisation in mind it becomes possible for the conception of documentary to shift so that it incorporates understandings of truth that exceed the factual and can blend the experiential, the contemplative, the transcendent and the phenomenological. The problem then may not be with beauty but with the way that we conceive of documentary’s relationship with truth.

Where a split has developed in Western thinking between mind and body, rhetoric and aesthetic, there are precedents for reconnection in the etymology and current usage of the Greek word *aesthitiki*. As Seremetakis states:

The word for senses is *aesthesis*, emotion-feeling and aesthetics are respectively *aésthima* and *aesthitikí*. They all derive from the verb *aesthánome* or *aesthísome* meaning I feel or sense, I understand, grasp learn or receive news or information, and I have an accurate sense of good and evil, that is I judge correctly. *Aesthísis* is defined as action or power through the medium of the senses, and the media or the *semía* (points, tracks, marks) by which one senses (1996, pp. 4-5 [original emphasis]).

Through this line of derivation, what is often conceived of as an intellectual process is folded back into a sensory methodology – here judgement and understanding require sense-ability. Conceived in this way a poetic approach doesn’t have to exclude rhetorical or intellectual appeals.

Speaking from the perspective of anthropology and in the context of debates around the role of the sensory, Howard Morphy notes that the aesthetics of cultures can give, “...unique access to the sensual aspect of human experience: to how people feel in, and respond to, the world” (1996, p. 255). Aesthetic explorations and evocations in this respect then do not seem like such an awkward fit with documentary.

At some level, all documentary works engage with aesthetic practice as the primary way of connecting or engaging. Echoing Trinh's earlier statement, Belinda Smaill points out that “[t]he perceived authenticity of any performance or event in documentary is reliant, in part, on the aesthetic conventions of documentary. Realist documentary conventions signify authenticity” (2010, p. 69). Successful works put to use aspects of aesthetic treatment to add to credibility, gain support, appear sympathetic and claim authority. This can be through elements such as overall structure, image composition, sound design and juxtaposition to name just a few possibilities. Form is an important aspect of the way a maker chooses to communicate their ideas and intentions. While we might consider politics and social engagement to be first and foremost issues of logic, hearts and minds are operating together when we are struck by and become committed to a cause.

While it may be that a poetic approach cannot be objective¹¹ (and there are very few, if any, creative endeavours that truly can be) documentaries made in this way show us a version of the world and perhaps more importantly give us an experience of the world. At the level where creativity can be understood as a process of imaginatively expressing a particular perception, the experience of documentary is created through the formal choices a filmmaker decides can best convey the ideas with which they are working. In doing so, poetic documentary works can reveal a class of truths that move beyond facts to reveal a new perspective on that which is familiar and insights into the subjectivities of those outside our immediate range of experience. It is this expanded field of understanding that a poetic approach is pushing toward. For a poetic approach, aesthetic treatment is a way to get closer to the subjective truth, the authenticity and veracity of experience. It is work that promotes different ways of knowing and understanding that rely on feeling, sensory perception and formal exploration and experimentation.

Works arising out of a poetic approach are still documentary works but just not in a form that is strictly obedient to the generic conventions of realism or naturalism. The aestheticisation of material plays with our expectations of works that engage with the real in that they exceed factual depictions. There is potential to accommodate complexity, difference and subjectivity while maintaining an ambivalence which might question the authoritative status that is more usually associated with documentary. Where documentary gets read, not only as truth but

¹¹ The idea of a detached (but not objective) poetic voice is described in Anne Carson's poetic manifesto “First Chaldaic Oracle” (2000, pp. 10-11). The methodology set out in the poem will be explored in more detail as it relates to observational approaches to documentary in chapter 2.

also as an expert witness, a credible source or the last word on a subject, these clearly subjective works raise a flag to indicate that they are something else.

It is not difficult to understand these works as engaging with notions of documentary practice under the three key theoretical frameworks of Nichols, Plantinga and Renov as discussed earlier in this chapter. However, in terms of form, works created under a poetic approach can differ greatly from commonsense expectations of documentary. By disrupting documentary's indexical relationship to truth as the core for how it claims legitimacy, it becomes possible to shift the emphasis of the work from the need to be a verifiable account of truth to an exploration of ideas and subjectivity. We can see that this approach does not radically differ from what fiction or drama can do. Indeed there are already overlaps of which we are aware – recreations, the participants as social-actors, scripting of narration, editing to continuity principles, sound track editing and design practices. The difference between commonsense conceptions of documentary and the results of a poetic approach would seem to be then a matter of degree, a matter of intention.

The documentary label is generally an indication of a connection with real events.

Documentary brings with it certain sets of expectations — argument, social commentary, exploration of actual events, rhetorical structure and conceptual engagement. Admittedly these are not characteristics that are exclusive to documentary practice but they do adhere to a *commonsense* understanding of such works. What is not generally associated with documentary is an idea that, as a mode of communication, it can be about more than facts. It can also be a way to explore experience, to connect with awe and transcendence and be a way of witnessing particular qualities of humanness. Nonetheless, these elements that are in excess of factual representations *are* present in documentary works and in a poetic approach are further emphasised as important in generating rhetorical, persuasive power.

The relationship between poetic representations and reality can be strong or tenuous, evocative, metaphorical, figurative or allegorical, to name just a few possibilities. It doesn't have to be a direct, indexical relationship. This variability can make the nature of the relationship to the real a problematic criterion for deciding documentary value. Nonetheless, consideration of how the representation engages the real provides an important anchor for understanding documentary work. Significantly, the variability of connections to the real points to the possibilities for relationships to exist along a continuum, rather than as binary oppositions. In this respect it is important to think through the audience's role in reinforcing these relationships, particularly in light of Nichols' statement "that there are two kinds of film:

(1) documentaries of wish-fulfilment and (2) documentaries of social representation" (2001, p. 1) in which both have the potential to "convey truths if we decide they do" (2001, p. 2). This statement is an interesting and somewhat more effective echoing of Eitzen's notion that a documentary is "any motion picture that is susceptible to the question 'Might it be lying?'" (1995, p. 81). The notion that documentary can "convey truths if we decide they do" emphasises that the variability in the relationship to the real can be a factor determined by the audience's acceptance, or rejection, of the premise with which they are presented.

Such a highly contingent and variable conception of relations to the real is not aimed at dismissing notions of authenticity and truth telling as markers of documentary or to say that truth and authenticity are not present in a poetic approach. Conceiving of divergent connections in such a way is about putting forward different, more subjective understandings of what might constitute truth and authenticity in the projects being examined. Rather than the kind of didactic truths that might be expected according to a commonsense understanding of documentary, I am proposing mutable and individual truths that acknowledge difference while still encouraging engagement. This conditional, dependent formulation is about recognising the agency of the audience and bringing them more fully into the contract of meaning creation.

The tentative nature of the work offers another avenue for exploring manifestations of a discomfort of form. These are exploratory works. There may be possible answers or insights offered but the intention is less about asserting definitive truths and more concerned with querying what is known. In many ways the works represent a thinking through of ideas and events. Where certainty of outcome, purpose or belief (as demonstrated through the compilation of evidence) is an expected part of documentary, these works can deny or withhold such certainty and require an active engagement from the audience to look closer.

It is important to note that I am not proposing the poetic approach as the ultimate documentary form, nor do I think it is the appropriate mode or approach in all situations. However, there do seem to be possibilities for the form beyond what is allowed by Nichols' definition of the poetic mode or Plantinga's conception of the strategy of the poetic voice. In many ways the justification for this is similar to the way Renov justifies his examination of film autobiography:

the very idea of autobiography challenges the VERY IDEA of documentary. Documentary studies is animated (or perhaps bedevilled) by debates regarding the potential for film, through

recourse to ‘facts’ and the logical dispositions of arguments, to produce something like ‘verifiable knowledge’. (2008, p. 40 [original emphasis])

The subjective, aestheticised approach of these intersectional works does a very similar thing. As marginal works from areas of theoretical overlap between art practice and documentary, they may be instructive for territories of future practice.

Creative intersections

The kinds of works I am interested in for this study are those that operate, at some level, within a documentary paradigm, whether through “lookalikeness” (Gaines in Renov & Gaines 1999, p. 5) of material, rhetorical intentions (in that they are exploring ideas, putting forward a particular way of understanding the world/events) or critical purpose. These works embrace certain elements of the documentary practice but shift the emphasis off the construction of evidence and raise aesthetic priorities that enable an evocation of experience. At the same time, this evocation becomes a new kind of evidence that is less an externalised fact and more of a subjective understanding that encourages the viewer to feel “for and in ourselves” (MacDougall 2006, p. 18). Personal authenticities are privileged and the truthfulness of experience is evoked through aesthetic treatment.

Sometimes these works are called poetic or experimental; sometimes they are sited within art practice, or may operate within a range of documentary representational modes such as the reflexive, performative, observational, expository, participatory and poetic modes described by Nichols (2010). In applying the poetic descriptor in program notes, reviews and other discussions around these works, filmmakers, critics, programmers and audiences seem to be trying to capture something of the experience of the work.

Rather than thinking of these works as marginal or even illegitimate documentaries then, we can consider them as intersectional works as they represent an overlap between documentary, literary practices, audio and visual arts. This overlap can be an extremely productive and fertile ground that permits the creation of critically engaged and aesthetically rich work.

As a study of intersectional works, it is interesting to consider where the works conform to understandings of documentary and where they diverge from the territory of documentary. Somewhat surprisingly, there is scope for a theoretical fit. Indeed theory is frequently far more accommodating of marginal works within the field of documentary than broadcasters or the general viewing public. This is perhaps because theorists are responding to practice rather than trying to *legislate* it. The issue then, isn’t about the deficiency of documentary theory but

a desire on my part to explore the creative possibilities that are offered by thinking these works through visual arts and poetry practice as well as documentary.

By formulating the territory of this thesis as a consideration of an intersection of ideas it becomes possible to consider screen based works that do not claim documentary status (but are nevertheless working in a poetic way with ideas and the real) alongside poetic works that do claim this label. There is already common ground between socially engaged art practice and the social justice concerns of committed documentary. Considering these works through multiple lenses can be a productive process but it is important to note that there is an uneasy fit.

There is a range of works to which art, poetry and documentary could all equally lay claim. In particular I'm thinking of works by Kutlug Ataman, Isaac Julien, Fiona Tan, Fiona Foley, Marlon Riggs, Jackie Farkas, Merilyn Fairskye, Yang Fudong, Ron Fricke, Takagi Masakatsu and Tan Pin Pin. Audiovisual works by these artists have been exhibited in art contexts as well as experimental and documentary film festivals. We have much to gain then by considering these works through the prism of multiple theoretical perspectives. The theoretical framework does not have to come exclusively from a particular disciplinary strand but can explore the effects of overlaps and intersections. There is potential for this theoretical approach to make more apparent the kinds of practice that could be extrapolated from these works and better analyse the effect of the combinations.

A foregrounding of aesthetic values does not need to undermine the documentary value of the works. It is interesting to question if the reinventing of form with meaning is a result of the influence of documentary or part of a long standing conversation in art practice and philosophy. Form and meaning do not have to be mutually exclusive. In the works that I will be considering as examples, such as the observational documentaries *The 3 rooms of melancholia* (Honkasalo 2004) and *Jade green station* (Yu 2003), installation works *Stati d'Animo* (Fairskye 2006) and *Disorient* (Tan 2009) and my own creative research project *How many ways to say you?*, form enables different ways of addressing a topic that produces depth of expression and meaning. In these instances, the influence of art practice allows engagement with aesthetic principles which consequently enlarge the scope of what a documentary can be.

These are creative works that strongly engage with ideas and abstract concepts. The notion that documentaries are "of the world" (Renov 1993, p. 30) (which forms the basis for truth

claims) doesn't capture the sense of what a poetic work, that utilises aspects of an essay form, can do. There are gaps in the descriptions. In some ways these gaps are part of the attraction of this poetic documentary practice. Yet, a wider range of creative responses are possible.

There are many positive implications for documentary practice arising out of an intersectional understanding of projects and via intergeneric shifts. The resulting cross-pollination and invention is how the form of expression develops and is revitalised. In terms of theoretical consideration, the study of innovations, developments and exceptions – including those that successfully transition into mainstream practice as well as others that are less successful but may nonetheless be referenced as interesting or important – is key in understanding how the documentary achieves its effects. As Ward observes:

it is in the dialectical progression and hybridising of these categories – where a purely observational style meets a more interview-heavy, reflexive style for instance – that innovations are made. Thinking about how we understand and classify such a wide range of material is therefore of vital importance and should continue to remain central to any ongoing documentary studies project. (2005, p. 13)

In this caution is an indication of why an intersectional approach to conceptualising poetic works can be productive. Labels and categories can be useful for funding bodies, programmers, curators and audiences because they help to convey some idea of what to expect and how to respond to a work. And so too for practitioners/creators for whom descriptions of modes and categories can offer boundaries, even if they serve no other purpose than something to push off from. The key is not to let the conceptualisation of the practice stop there. The starting point has to be thinking about what the creators want to achieve. It needs to be a broad, sweeping, panoramic, all-inclusive questioning that includes notions of the kind of work desired, what it speaks to and the intended impact on an audience.

I am also exploring this intersectional and hybridised approach through my creative practice. The qualities in documentary works that interest me as a viewer and filmmaker include self-awareness, political engagement, transcendent aesthetics, simple observation, stillness, formal experimentation, moments of pause which open gaps allowing for deeper thought, a strong sense of structure, reserve, detachment, the sense of an insightful subjective presence plus a feeling of spaciousness. My film *How many ways to say you?* pushes at representational issues by actively working to shift the material away from a perceived direct relationship with the real. I have worked to achieve this in numerous ways. The visuals use footage I gathered in Cambodia as raw material. This material has then been reworked through editing, the use of

visual effects, compositing, titles and colour grading. The intended effect is to create an experience of the material both as an echo of my experience travelling through Cambodia and also as a way to think through ideas relating to human interaction, memory and representation.

My creative practice in making *How many ways to say you?* then, is a key part of the research for this project. Through my creative practice led research I am interested in expanding the range of what can constitute knowledge in a documentary context. I want to advocate for the importance of conveying experience and the role that a non-naturalistic, poetic approach plays in offering up that experience in a way that encourages audience connection. In many ways this means that I am working at the edges of what might properly be considered documentary. I am drawing on materials from the world to conjure something of the experience and the emotion of a story. I am trying to embed theory, ideas and concerns in the very way that I treat and approach the material. I am working to generate a practice that addresses issues in an essayistic way. It is a tentative approach that acknowledges complexity, difference, difficulty, lack, insufficiency and incompleteness. I am interested in the territory of documentary that does not seek to be an expert witness but that can engage with serious issues nonetheless. It is my contention that this combination is possible through a poetic approach to documentary.

In this chapter I have examined theoretical systems developed by Nichols (2010), Plantinga (1997) and Renov who each aim to chart and describe the territory of screen based documentary. This provides a starting point from which to consider the position of a poetic approach to documentary in relation to the broader body of documentary work. Following this discussion with an assessment of the public funding and exhibition circumstances for documentary in Australia, I have drawn attention to some of the institutional pressures that can limit the aesthetic innovations that may occur under a poetic method. I have argued for the important role that non-traditional approaches can play in disrupting the illusion of objectivity that some documentarians try to cultivate. Working at the intersections between art practice and documentary, a poetic approach can draw on material from the real world, and by employing a critical aesthetic practice, reframe it so that there is a productive and conscious alignment between form and content.

In the next chapter I focus on how realist, observational documentary footage can provide the material for poetic explorations of everyday life.

First Chaldaic Oracle

There is something you should know.
And the right way to know it
is by a cherrying of your mind.

Because if you press your mind towards it
and try to know
that thing

as you know a thing,
you will not know it.
It comes out of red

with kills on both sides,
it is scrap, it is nightly,
it kings your mind.

No. Scorch is not the way
to know
that thing you must know.

But use the hum
of your wound
and flamepit out everything

right to the edge
of that thing you should know.
The way to know it

is not by staring hard.

But keep chiselled
keep Praguing the eye

of your soul and reach—
mind empty
towards that thing you should know

until you get it.
That thing you should know.
Because it is out there (orchid) outside your *and*, it is.

— Anne Carson (2000, pp. 10-11)

Chapter 2

Observational documentary as poetry of the quotidian

This chapter looks at manifestations of a poetic approach to documentary in films that can be considered to also operate in an observational mode of production. These are works that combine the two approaches of observation and poesy, creating an effect that goes beyond a direct factual representation of the world. To frame the discussion I start out by referencing the poem, *First Chaldaic Oracle*, by Anne Carson (2000) in terms of what it brings to a consideration of observational documentary as poetry of the quotidian. Presented in the form of a poetic manifesto, the poem speaks directly to perceived tensions between a systematic, intellectual approach and a more experiential, perhaps even longitudinal method for approaching knowledge. It is my contention that the framing of this poem demonstrates possibilities to see sympathies between the observational and poetic modes especially in the context of presentations of everyday life. There are a range of characteristics associated with an observational approach to documentary that can also be seen as strategies to emphasise poetic ways of seeing the world. A durational approach to the presentation of time is simultaneously central to observational work while it also creates a sense of spaciousness conducive to poetic ways of perceiving. This dual functioning of time coincides with a quality of attention that emphasises the aesthetic experience of the representation in itself thereby creating conditions for exploring complexity, ambiguity and the limits of knowing.

I will also be considering how a poetic approach to structure provides scope for quotidian patternings, connections and intersections to emerge while employing an observational strategy in gathering audiovisual material. Where three act narrative structures require that a clear story arc be developed, a poetic approach to structure grants opportunities for dwelling on peripheral moments, following side tracks, diversions and other more circuitous routes. This consideration of structure then opens on to a discussion of the metaphor-making properties that are embedded in the filmmaking process. In addition to the combinatory practices of editing, juxtaposition and sound accompanying vision, there is also potential for producing metaphor and metonymy through use of the frame as a bounded space. A thing's position on the screen, its centrality (or otherwise) as well as what is excluded or framed out speak to ideas of the frame as a poetic meaning-making device in its own right.

This generalised discussion of technique is supported through more detailed analysis of specific single channel screen works as examples. In addition to discussing the poetic use of observational material in my own creative work, *How many ways to say you?*, I will analyse three other recent poetic observational documentary films – *Jade green station* by Yu Jian (2003), *The 3 rooms of melancholia* by Pirjo Honkasalo (2004) and *sleep furiously* by Gideon Koppel (2007). All three films employ techniques associated with an observational mode of documentary and have been described in program notes or critiques as in some way poetic. While clearly employing key elements of observational style, the choice of material, approach to composition and editing give these works an openness of form. Sequences in these works are not strongly driven by narrative, frequently very little happens for a long time or the relevance of what does happen may be somewhat occluded or even opaque. Nonetheless, we get an impression; we are presented with aesthetic forms to consider; we see outward signs of differing subjectivities; we discern metaphor and metonymy; and critically, we experience time. In each of these films, the tempo does not hurry us from one event to the next but accommodates moments of pause. These moments may not have significance as plot points but they do create a sense of the worlds they are presenting. Just as time becomes an important factor in relation to literary poetry, so too it is an underlying element that allows for a poetic space in the audiovisual work of documentary.¹² In such a space, we as audience can reflect on the way elements are brought together and the sparks of connection that result. This is a space where meaning is offered but not fully resolved.

Filming as if not there

This quality of nothing happening can be seen as characteristic of the original intentions behind the observational approach. Adapted from origins in cinéma vérité and direct cinema, “on the back of the invention of portable synchronous sound in the early 1960s” (MacDougall 1998, p. 4), a strand of observational cinema emerged that became strongly associated with the discipline of visual anthropology and which continued to develop as a genre of ethnographic filmmaking. As a counter to the fragmentary constructions of early avant-garde and modernist cinema, the aim here was to “observe what happens in front of the camera without overt intervention” (Nichols 2010, p. 172). Embedded in the form then was a respect for the unfolding experience of time and the revelatory power of duration. However, from the mid-1970s on, the form attracted considerable criticism from theorists, such as Nichols, as well

¹² See Malin Wahlberg’s book *Documentary time: film and phenomenology* (2008) for a detailed assessment of the confluence of existential phenomenology and classical film theory as a frame for considering the experience of time in documentary.

as proponents of observational work, such as David MacDougall. In particular, MacDougall voiced concerns that the conceit of filming as if the camera was not present would potentially create a disinterested observer reduced to passively watching. As he sets out:

[w]hat is finally disappointing in the ideal of filming ‘as if the camera were not there’ is not that observation in itself is unimportant, but that as a governing approach it remains far less interesting than exploring the situation that actually exists. The camera *is* there, and it is held by a representative of one culture encountering another. Beside such an extraordinary event, the search for isolation and invisibility seems a curiously irrelevant ambition (1998, p. 133 [original emphasis]).

At the time of writing¹³ MacDougall’s solution to the problem was to advocate for a more collaborative, participatory form of cinema that would allow for “joint authorship between filmmakers and their subjects” (1998, p. 138). Similarly, Nichols saw as problematic the tendency to present the observational work as unmediated. His concerns also related to the ethical difficulties to which observational practice could give rise such as a seemingly inherent voyeurism and the filmmakers’ levels of responsibility and (perhaps unseen) intervention.¹⁴ In addition, charges of *visualism* saw observational work come to signify “a distanced, disembodied, controlling gaze that objectified human subjects and denied them agency and history” (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009, p. 541). This may in part be a result of structures that followed thematic logics rather than seeking to maintain the integrity of an event or period of time.

Development of the observational form in documentaries that are made for broadcast and cinematic release increasingly has come to follow an earlier trend noted by MacDougall whereby the dramatic fiction film is used as the structural model (1998, p. 127). In part inspired by the work of the Italian Neorealists, this has led to a form of observational documentary that adheres to a three act narrative structure. With its emphasis on story, this approach seeks to create films that resonate “with the power of a Greek tragedy” (Everett 2006, p. 35). This is a trend that gained considerable momentum with the critical and commercial success of films such as *Hoop Dreams* (James 1994), *Spellbound* (Blitz 2002), *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* (Berlinger & Sinofsky 2004), *Mad Hot Ballroom* (Agrelo 2005) and *March of the Penguins* (Jacquet 2005). Part of a strategy to attract audiences, these films

¹³ The essay quoted here was first published in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, edited by Paul Hockings (The Hague: Mouton, 1975). In 1998 it was republished in *Transcultural Cinema* with an epilogue that contained a revised view on how to approach the problems of observational cinema through “a form of *intertextual* cinema” that “may be in a better position to address conflicting views of reality” (MacDougall 1998, p. 138).

¹⁴ See *Representing Reality* (Nichols 1991) and *Introduction to Documentary* (Nichols 2010).

“promise that nonfiction cinema can tell stories that are as dramatic and entertaining as feature films” (Everett 2006, p. 36). While undoubtedly attractive and compelling, this approach must, by necessity, erase some of the diversions and openness that are at the core of the observational mode. The films become less about an exploration of experience and being as they trace a character’s quest in order to “provide the film with a narrative spine” (Everett 2006, p. 41). At the same time, the demands of broadcast and cinematic time-slots conspire to eliminate or severely restrict opportunities for an accretion of understanding to accumulate through experience, rather than key plot points.

More recent developments in anthropology, particularly where a phenomenological approach is folded into the method, are working to rehabilitate the form from theoretical concerns and the determined narrative drive of commercial manifestations. This is partly being pursued through approaches that take a *“relational perspective*; one that conceives of the human subject as a complex organism enmeshed in a dense web of relationships that includes other sentient beings, non-human animals, and the material environment itself” (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009, p. 550). In this framing, periods where nothing seems to happen in an observational documentary can actually be grasped as opportunities to perceive and process the detail of these networked interactions, their context and aesthetic quality.

Nichols’ description of the observational mode posits it as an alternative to “poetic expression” (2010, p. 210).¹⁵ While I can see that he may be differentiating between the long takes of durational observational footage and the more fragmented approach to editing seen in the examples of a poetic approach that he cites, such as *Pacific 231* (Mitry 1949) and *N.Y., N.Y.* (Thompson 1957), in many cases the fundamental materials and camera style are strikingly similar.¹⁶ It is also noteworthy that in Nichols’ discussion of early cinematic developments, his description of Jean Epstein’s concept of *photogénie* is analogous to the effect that can be observed in the poetic observational case studies that will be discussed later in this chapter. For example he describes how:

[d]etails of reality could become wondrous when projected onto a screen. The image offered a captivating rhythm and a seductive magic all its own. The experience of watching film differed from looking at reality in ways that words could only imperfectly explain. (2010, p. 130)

¹⁵ Interestingly though, Nichols also has described the observational films made by Fred Wiseman in terms of a mosaic structure where “[t]he whole thus tends toward poetry (metaphor, synchronicity, paradigmatic relations)—an all-at-once slice through an institutional matrix re-presented in time—rather than narrative” (1981, p. 211). This approach to structure is discussed in detail in chapter 4

¹⁶ Indeed MacDougall notes that “Many considered Vertov the father of observational cinema, and to the extent that he was committed to exploring the existing world with the “kino-eye” there can be no doubt of his influence” (MacDougall 1998, p. 138)

Films such as *Regen* (Ivens 1929), *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Ruttman 1927) and *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov 1929) use significant amounts of footage from everyday life that is essentially observational in style but that have also been arranged in fragmentary ways or according to poetic structures so that sequences and connections are made through visual rhymes and graphic similarities. The voice of the artist was foregrounded and “[v]isible evidence served as a vehicle for poetic expression” (Nichols 2010, p. 129).

However, the collection of films I look at in this chapter, while also using similar quotidian footage, differ from films such as *Regen* in three main ways. Firstly, the voice of the artist is more subtly expressed although no less powerfully so for this restraint. Using the form of observational cinema the artist constructs a poetic view of the presented world that uses the aesthetic experience of the work as the means for connection. Secondly, specific and recognisable characters emerge from the examples discussed in this chapter. We get a sense of lives being lived through what we can observe in these films. In most cases, the people shown aren't faces that stand as archetypes or non-particular symbols of humanity. The characters come through as complex and nuanced individuals with their own set of experiences and ways of making sense of them (or not). Thirdly, there is a strong sense of time unfolding that truly allows us to observe the people and situations being shown from multiple angles. This experience of durational time is related to the second point and generally works to reinforce the effect of complex characterisation. The approach to editing this material is less fragmented with extended shots and longer sequences that reveal more particular details over time. We come to recognise faces and locations as they return over the course of each film with every new perspective adding to our conception of who or what they are and increasing our sense of their depth and complexity. At the same time there remains a sense of these films offering a different view to that gained by looking directly at the world and just as with the effect of *photogénie*, this provides insights “that words [can] only imperfectly explain” (Nichols 2010, p. 130).

Reaching, mind empty

This kind of observational poetic approach evokes something of what Anne Carson is describing in her poem, *First Chaldaic Oracle* (2000, pp. 10-11). Situated as a preface to this chapter, the poem is included to introduce what I see as the methodology at work in a poetic approach to observational documentary. The poem is about knowledge and ways to seek knowledge. It is through this quest and a shared striving toward meaning and understanding that the poem connects with the practice of documentary. The approach to gaining

knowledge suggested in this poem aligns with the way that a poetic approach to observational documentary works. The sense of an openness of meaning and purpose in these works stands in opposition to a strategy of pressing “your mind towards it / and try to know / that thing” (Carson 2000, pp. 10-11). There is an oblique quality to the films presented here for consideration. Understanding, it seems, is to come through lateral approaches, patience and intuition. There is a sense of accumulating understanding that speaks of an experiential kind of knowing that cannot be articulated or contained in a few rhetorical dot points. This is also where the sense of spending time and being open to *nothing* happening and seeing where that might lead, is valued as part of the process of coming to know “that thing you should know”(Carson 2000, pp. 10-11).

Catherine Joyce’s discussion of “the detached voice in contemporary poetry” (2008) that is at work in *First Chaldaic Oracle*, speaks to questions regarding how the poetic might be operating in documentary work. While the scholarship of Laura Marks on the senses, embodiment and intercultural cinema has been very helpful in expanding our understanding of how audiences connect with the material of screen work, there remain gaps around the operation of some of the more transcendent and less bodily aspects of poetic documentary. This is not to discount the significance of her argument that “for people whose histories are represented in few other ways, it is these valuable and deeply guarded memories of tastes, smells and caresses that must be coaxed into audiovisual form” (Marks 2000, p. 243). Rather I wish to advocate conceptions that address the experience of formal pleasures in addition to the sensory. Part of my difficulty here lies in the fact that not all poetic documentaries can be explained by the sensory turn. There are other works that create a connection through aesthetic experience while operating at the same time on a more formal level. An example of this is *Static no. 12* (Crooks 2010) which is discussed in detail in the next chapter. This work still creates an affective response but does so through a broader understanding of experience that can incorporate visual rhyme, formal experimentation, abstraction, patterning and other iterative approaches that create a detached observer.

The notion of aesthetic experience is central to my understanding of the poetic impulse in documentary. The idea is that the emphasis in a poetic approach to documentary is on creating an experience that acts as the means for connecting with the material and also the ideas behind the material. Rather than a rhetoric that is based upon a convincing, spoken argument, this is a rhetoric that draws you in through shared experience. The experience can be emotional, sensory or a purely formal exploration of visual or auditory elements. The

intention is to offer alternative ways to consider events, people, places and concepts. Where mainstream forms of documentary may use these tools as ways to reinforce the arguments constructed via words, a poetic approach foregrounds this aesthetic experience as the primary means of expression.

The detachment associated with a poetic approach does not equate with disinterest nor does it mean that a poetic response is any less authentic or real. The approach is just less reactive. It is at a remove from the-thick-of-it and not as direct as direct cinema claims to be. It is more clearly mediated. There is a deliberateness of pacing that is achieved through both the style of shooting and the approach to editing. Formal, well composed, still frames, structural devices and intervals between cuts that seem more akin to poetic lineation all work to set up these poetic observational documentaries more clearly as representations and constructed aesthetic experiences. This deliberateness of technique may also go some way to explain the predominance of the quotidian in these works. Although the anthropological antecedents of observational documentary are undoubtedly a factor, the everyday-ness of the subject material also allows better access for longitudinal filming. The cycles of repetition that may be predicted and anticipated allow for coverage to be pre-planned. To some extent the filmmaker becomes embedded in the community that they are observing. The development of this relationship is key to the access that allows for an aesthetically refined approach to filming whereby practitioners can gather and combine glimpses of life to poetic effect.

However, a poetically mediated approach also speaks of the incompleteness of knowing and so keeps knowing alive as a practice rather than seeing it as a concrete and attainable goal. In her analysis of *First Chaldaic Oracle*, Joyce describes the process as a “relentless pursuit of what remains forever out of reach” (2008) – a kind of Tantalus task that can never be achieved. I think this is quite relevant to what is happening in poetic observational works. We can see reflexive acknowledgements of the limits of knowing, the limits of seeing and the limits of experiencing. The insights offered into the daily lives and being of the subjects of these films are at best partial, providing glimpses of worlds without the pretence of completeness. This recalls the voice over in Trinh’s *Reassemblage* and her intention not to “speak about, just speak nearby” (1982). There can be detailed and dimensional depictions but the act of knowing remains a receding horizon. It is not possible to fully grasp “that thing you should know” (Carson 2000) through its image or sound. In this instance the poetic impulse is a significant means of admitting “a recessive incalculability” (Gosetti-Ferenczi 2007, p. 136) where indexical reproduction (and knowing “that thing” by such means) is not the key

objective, but that the experience may contain an inkling of what cannot be otherwise conceptualised.

Through my encounter with *First Chaldaic Oracle*, I have come to think about how the experience of the work is in itself a rhetorical device and that openness to this experience was a key part of trying “to know that thing”. This brings to mind O’Sullivan’s discussion of the aesthetics of affect through the framework of theoretical writing by Lyotard. He writes:

Jean-Francois Lyotard is perhaps most attuned to this experimental and rupturing quality of art. Lyotard calls for a practice of patience, of listening – a kind of meditative state that allows for, produces an opening for, an experience of the event, precisely, as the affect. In *Peregrinations* Lyotard writes:

[One must] become open to the ‘It happens that’ rather than the ‘What happens’ ...[and this] requires at the very least a high degree of refinement in the perception of small differences ... In order to take on this attitude you have to impoverish your mind, clean it out as much as possible, so that you make it incapable of anticipating the meaning, the ‘What’ of the ‘It happens...’The secret of such ascesis lies in the power to be able to endure occurrences as ‘directly’ as possible without the mediation of a ‘pre-text.’ Thus to encounter the event is like bordering on nothingness. (2001, p. 128)

There is a resonance between the viewing position described by Lyotard (via O’Sullivan) and Joyce’s reading of *First Chaldaic Oracle* which she sees as proposing “that one may move so far in and out, that there may be no self, only the dissolving state of perception itself” (2008). There are also strong similarities between the language used by Lyotard and Carson. Compare Lyotard’s ideas of “impoverish your mind, clean it out as much as possible” with Carson’s “keep Praguing the eye//of your soul and reach - /mind empty/towards that thing you should know” (2000). Both encourage a dissolution of ego and preconception to enable an experience of “the event”(O’Sullivan 2001) or “that thing” (Carson 2000) with the aim of an other than intellectual knowing. There is also sympathy between the two in the idea that the knowing offered is not complete and consuming but allows for complexity over simple, straightforward answers.

The images of Carson’s poem tug at the edges of what we can rationally unpack as definitive meaning. There is a level at which we have to be open to the “It happens that” rather than trying to grasp at “What happens” if we are to gain an experience of the work. It is through demonstration and example then, as well as through its content as a manifesto, that *First Chaldaic Oracle* is instructive of how we should come to know that thing we should know. At

one level I know what it is to cherry my mind and to Prague my eye, but I risk killing off the power of the imagery if I try a too literal and precise unpacking of the references at work that create the knowing. Partly this is an effect of trying to translate or explain the knowing accessed through one form into another form, but also it is the difference between intellectual and affective knowledge. Where intellectual knowledge may have a logical structure that permits it to be explained and rationalised, affective knowledge is more often experienced at an intuitive, often pre-cognitive level.

It is possible to see links between the pure perception described by Lyotard (O'Sullivan 2001) and Carson (2000) and the call to sensory memories detailed by Marks (2000). However, the idea of a detached observer that is operating in these poetic observational works more directly evokes a state of ecstasy or the experience of standing outside of the self. The concept of ecstasy captures a sense of transcendence and awareness of the greater human experience that can be produced through affective encounters with the aesthetic work of art. The observer, being at a remove, is able to detach themselves from the drudgery of the everyday and experience the revelations available through witnessing the world from outside. As Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferenczi explains it:

Ecstasy occurs through the viewer's intense responsive perception as well as a meditative silence between viewer and work. While this may be alien to everyday seeing in its practical habitude, as critics of Cézanne have claimed of his work, such experience affords renewal of the visual texture of quotidian life. (2007, p. 185)

This "intense responsive perception" (2007, p. 185) speaks of a very particular quality of attention that is called upon when we engage with work that has an openness of purpose, such as observational documentary. Where meaning is not served up as something clearly stated or pinned down, the fluidity of the experience requires that we be open to uncertainty at the same time as we are trying to make sense of it. In her defence of the observational documentary form, Gillian Leahy speaks of this process as an openness leading:

to an interplay between the viewer and the text, as the viewer struggles to interpret meaning and understand the filmmaker's intentions, and this interplay leads to greater audience involvement with the text, in the way 'showing' may involve the audience more than 'telling'. (1996, p. 46)

This kind of active engagement is very similar to that demanded of audiences for works created in a more specific fine arts context where defamiliarisation is often part of a deliberate strategy to evoke intense grappling with works. As noted by the "critics of Cézanne" (2007, p.

185), it may be a rare and particular engagement that is “alien to everyday seeing” (2007, p. 185) but this is not to discount the power and potential in such forms of experience.¹⁷

The observational can begin to shift into a poetic register when the conditions for “a meditative silence between viewer and work” (Gosetti-Ferencei 2007, p. 185) are created. This can be through structuring devices that create both poetic interconnectedness between elements and a sense of spaciousness. It is this expansiveness, where moments of *nothing* are happening, that allow us to focus on the quality of the experience so that we are able to see with fresh eyes what we might otherwise have overlooked. This “renewal of...quotidian life” (2007, p. 185) is a key feature of what is taking place in the combination of the observational and poetic documentary impulses. As O’Sullivan tells us,

[t]his is art’s function: to switch our intensive register, to reconnect us with the world. Art opens us up to the non-human universe that we are part of. Indeed, art might well have a representational function (after all, art objects, like everything else can be read) but art also operates as a fissure in representation...art does what is its chief modus operandi: it transforms, if only for a moment, our sense of our ‘selves’ and our notion of our world (2001, p. 128).

This transformation allows the detached but perceiving observer to ethically negotiate concerns over voyeurism, passive consumption and “visualism” (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009, p. 541). There is a change here from merely taking in what is shown to reaching out, “mind empty / towards that thing you should know” (Carson 2000). It is a manoeuvre into an active register where knowing is a striving, collaborative process that recognises that “consciousness too must be awakened from its tendency toward a prosaic grasp and reception of the world, its tendency to dominate or objectify things” (Gosetti-Ferencei 2007, p. 132). It is a manoeuvre that works to reveal and renew a sense of wonder and awe in the material of everyday life.

Jade green station

Jade green station, directed by prominent Chinese language poet Yu Jian, is a detailed melding of the poetic and observational impulses in documentary. It was selected for screening at several top tier documentary festivals shortly after its 2003 release. Festival screenings include the *International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam 2004*, *Internationales Dokumentarfilmfestival München 2005* and *Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival*

¹⁷ Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarisation will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3.

2005 (YIDFF). The film was programmed as part of the *Yunnan Visual Forum*¹⁸ in Yamagata with the 2005 YIDFF catalogue describing *Jade green station* as a “cine-poem” (Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (NPO) 2005).

On the surface the film is about a train station in the small town of Bise, located in the Chinese province of Yunnan. Once a lively stopover on the railway built by the French between China and Vietnam, the station now sees little traffic. On a deeper level though, the film is an exploration of change and what remains behind once historical upheavals have passed through. The film observes the everyday rhythms of life for the people of Bise and these ordinary scenes are presented as worthy of different attention through the aesthetic framing of Yu’s camera. We are encouraged to contemplate and look anew at the daily realities that might otherwise be overlooked or absorbed as utilitarian and part of the routine. The mostly observational material is arranged to produce a sense of the passing of daily life in Bise although it is organised more around episodes than a strict structure connected with the passage of a day. We see montages of night time, early morning and daytime footage but these are not necessarily used to mark out a clear sense of chronology. Instead, there is a tonal approach to the ordering that draws together moments to highlight similarity or throw differences in to relief.

In his 2009 paper, John Crespi outlines Yu’s theoretical approach based on his reading of two essays by Yu titled *Poetry’s Presence* (from 2007) and *Lineation* (from 2008)¹⁹. Arising from a Daoist view of existence, Yu’s theory of poetry holds that “everything in the world is poetry” (Crespi 2009). He goes on to say “[t]he Earth, world, human life are all fundamentally poetic, and the poetic is a priori. Without poetry these still exist in the poetic. But this poeticity is hidden in the natural, and language opens up the poetic” (Crespi 2009). This thought process goes some way to explaining the deft combination of the poetic and observational we can see at work in *Jade green station*. Indeed, from the foundation of this philosophy a poetic observational approach appears as the obvious choice when translating these literary concepts into a screen documentary form. It is poetry drawn out of the material of everyday life. So we see a montage of the village as families gather inside for the evening. We look in through a window at a station employee waiting for the arrival of a pre-dawn train. We watch others

¹⁸ Interestingly the *Yunnan Visual Forum* program was presented in two parts. The first part showcasing examples of visual anthropology from Yunnan province and the second, titled *A New Wave of Yunnan Images* focused on innovative visual styles that “are emerging, perhaps due to the rich backdrop of Yunnanese culture where poetry, song and dance are an integral part of life” (Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (NPO) 2005). *Jade green station* was in this second part of the program.

¹⁹ Unfortunately these essays are not available in English translation so I am relying here on the quotes excerpted in Crespi’s 2009 paper.

working to unload cargo. We see corn cobs everywhere and people diligently prising the dried kernels free. We see peanuts being harvested and the nuts being roasted. We are instructed in the historical events of the village by eighty one year old local farmer Sun Zihe with his handful of written notes. We see children riding too-big-bikes and other young ones clambering over abandoned steam train engines. We travel with the director and his crew as they are shown around the village by a tag-team of officials. We see a stone wall being built and we watch village elders watching. We see details giving echoes of the past and extreme wide views giving a perspective on the landscape of the village environs. This is both an impressionistic gathering of moments and a task of archaeology to uncover the collective village memory.

The task of the poet/filmmaker becomes one of lineation as for Yu, “[w]hen you lineate, all this comes to light” (Crespi 2009). However, the notion of lineation is more than just the design process of visually laying out text on the page. As Crespi explains it “lineation for Yu refers not just to breaking poetry into lines, but to ordering raw materials of life to make them into art, in a manner that manifests the order of the Way” (2009). It is a conceivable extension then to see techniques and devices of lineation as key structural elements at work in the choices made by Yu in realising *Jade green station*.

In addition to an underlying sense of the passage of daily life, the film is strongly structured through lineation devices that effectively break the film’s 122 minutes of screen time into a series of segments. The key device used to separate out segments involves the use of a black screen accompanied by the sound of voices telling short anecdotes. These black screens occur eleven times during the film and serve to punctuate the scenes of village life. At first it seems like the voices are coming out of the darkness of night as the first instance of the device appears amid shots of activity (or lack thereof) around the town as darkness descends. However, the second black screen section appears amid shots of the town and surroundings during daylight hours. This positioning then flags the black screens as something more than the result of filming under low (or no) light conditions.²⁰

In the context of the cine-poem label, Yu Jian’s practice as a poet and his theorising of that practice, these segments can be seen to operate in a way that is similar to the extra space between stanzas on a page. Our sense of the flow of time is for a moment, paused, as if we are stepping outside of chronological time. This is the time of darkness, when we must wait and endure. The movement of time is slowed and quotidian time is rescued from passing by

²⁰ Even though it does continue to evoke the darkness of rural night.

without notice. Our attention is refocused on the stories being told. There is also an effect whereby the lack of visual information calls upon the imagination of the audience to fill in the gap left by the black/blank screen. No matter whether the story related is quite mundane (e.g. the unbreakability of French made tiles) or verging on the supernatural (e.g. tales of foreign girls dancing at night and will-o-the-wisps), a more active level of engagement is encouraged as the audience provides their own images to go with the words being spoken.

The topics discussed during the black screen sections are (in order): a runaway dog; how the town got its name; a group visit to Kunming; a young man who had an affair with an older woman during revolutionary times; tales of ghostly foreign girls dancing at night; spontaneous singing while working the fields; sex before marriage (complete with “kids today” type exclamations); unbreakable French tiles; comparisons between a mother and her daughter; the story of a man who died sitting on the roof watching the sunset; and dogs on the loose. This somewhat circular structure, where we return at the end to what could be a continuation of the story we heard over a black screen near the start, plays into the exploration of change that is central to the thematic approach of the film. While it is similar, the first black screen story is not the same as the last. Just as we emerge slightly different from the experience of watching the film, so too life in Bise is subtly changed through the passage of historical time and its variable tide of influence. The black screen sections emerge as markers of our journey through the film, giving us a sense of the everyday preoccupations of the people of Bise and the broad palette of memory. This structural operation calls to mind the way Seremetakis considers the operation of senses in culture and how they are altered over time. She contends that:

[s]ensory changes occur microscopically through everyday accretion; so that which shifts the material culture of perception is itself imperceptible and only reappears after the fact in fairy tales, myths and memories that hover at the margins of speech. (1996, p. 3)

The use of the black screen sections plays as something of a metaphor for this process. Our perception and engagement with the stories are shifted over the course of the film as we build up context and connection with the material.

In between observational footage of quotidian activities the film touches on the everyday, the unexplained and the philosophical, alongside accounts of the sweeping changes that have affected the town over the last 100 years. This shifting of focus is part of what Crespi describes as the “meticulously discontinuous poetic structure” (2009) in *Jade green station*. Rather than following an individual narrative thread or presenting a meticulously historical

account, the film touches down on moments of differing reach in significance. Broadly impacting events and movements are remembered and retold. Everyday occurrences are witnessed from our privileged observer position. Access to the diversity of conversations (as an indication of the speakers' thought processes) and some of the local backstory (as a measure of their experience) frame these as people with dimension and ongoing lives. In its use of an observational camera style to create a poetic effect, *Jade green station* offers a counter to Nichols' formulation of the poetic mode as a form arising from "fragments of the historical world" that the filmmaker combines to create "a formal, aesthetic integrity peculiar to the film itself" (2010, p. 166). While there is a particular poetic structure driving the ordering of shots and sequences, there remains a sense of time passing that is faithful to an observational approach. A sense of local, everyday time emerges as the observational footage gives an experience of time unfolding. These quotidian revelations accrete a picture of local life and subjectivity in the small village of Bise that embraces both the particularities of their experience and the grand sweep of wider history.

Moving between observation, montage, interview and the previously discussed black screen sections, a series of visual ideas and narrative fragments is developed. These are sequences that take "their temporal and spatial structures more from the perceptual psychology of the observer than from structures of the events being filmed" (MacDougall 1998, p. 138). Through repetition, intercutting and shifts in perspective our understanding of, and connection with, the subjects build and deepen through a process of accumulation. Motifs emerge through returns to images such as a leaking water pipe; the pharmacist tending to people day and night; guards filling in time between the few moments of activity when the trains pass through; harvesting peanuts; drying corn cobs and building a stone wall. These repetitions work with the concept of change and quotidian rhythms. There is a feeling of life continuing on with its routines, rituals and patterns. But this is not to imply that things do not change at all. The sense is more that life goes on, that the big events of the world do have an impact and can shift a trajectory but in the end, people will accommodate what they can and get on with their lives as best as they are able. By intercutting these threads we are given a stronger sense of the multiplicity of lives being lived and of individual subjectivities. Returns to individuals mean that they become familiar – each revisiting offering a little more insight into their characters and lives. Rather than unidentified faces, there is a sense of character specificity accruing over the course of the film. Time spent with people who speak and returning to those that we only observe adds dimension to the sense of multiple subjectivities and the diversity of lives being lived. Each return also affects the kind of attention we give to the characters

shown and prompts us to consider in more depth the reality of this person's life and them as an individual. There is a shift occurring where we move from seeing the person as an archetype or metaphor as we perceive a level of connection and poetic linkage between subjects. However, at the same time the knowing is never complete. While the people exist as more than material or non-particular symbols of humanity, in the film they are still just sketches of complex real lives. Nonetheless, Yu does employ techniques that serve to add some flesh to the bones of these sketches.

Described as "abiding folk" (Crespi 2009) most of the inhabitants exhibit a patient and calm countenance. However, this dispassion is not universal and throughout there are a few who emerge with outbursts that shatter the smooth illusion of idyllic rural life in Bise. There is the railway lineman, whose job it is to walk a 20 kilometre round trip each day checking the condition of the rails making "sure there's no vandalism or loose screws or broken fishplates" (Yu 2003). Subject to an official inspection of his equipment, the fears of the linesman at being fined thousands of Yuan erupt into a heated defence when he is goaded and teased by station workers over the reasons why he might be in trouble. At the completion of this exchange, as the linesman's anger starts to subside, a brief 5 second shot of a barking dog chained to the track is cut in before we return to another shot showing the linesman heading off on his return trip once the train has passed through. A strange non-sequitur, the sequence of images calls up the possibility of a metaphor-producing collision of signs. The impact of this juxtaposition is to propose that this linesman is also chained to the track and that his plight is given no more heed than the continual barking of a tied up dog. Preceded by a sequence showing bored station workers listening to a series of pronouncements (presumably from an official newsletter or memorandum) declaring, among other things that "[t]he ideological and political work among the workers isn't thorough enough" (Yu 2003), the linesman is set up as being outside of the group of stationary station workers. Where the station workers listen impassively to the lukewarm reading of the official calls for improvement, the dressing-down of the linesman is far more personal and elicits a much stronger reaction. The shot of his receding figure heading off down the track shows the load that he carries and the solitude of his occupation.

Linesman sequence from Jade green station



Figure 1 Jade green station



Figure 2 Jade green station



Figure 3 Jade green station



Figure 4 Jade green station



Figure 5 Jade green station



Figure 6 Jade green station

Figures 1-6 are frames from shot 1 of sequence – duration 2min 2sec



Figure 7 Jade green station



Figure 8 Jade green station



Figure 9 Jade green station

Figures 7-9 are frames from shot 2 of sequence – duration 39sec



**Figure 10 Jade green station
shot 3 of sequence – duration 58 sec**



**Figure 11 Jade green station
shot 4 of sequence – duration 5 sec**



**Figure 12 Jade green station
Shot 5 of sequence - tilts up to next figure**



**Figure 13 Jade green station
Final framing of shot 5 – duration 43 sec**

The other significant crack in the veneer of tranquil village life occurs towards the end of the film when a domestic argument over money owed to a family plays out in the street outside a small shop. Lasting less than 4 minutes, the scene seems to drag on without resolution as an argument between husband and wife draws in other family members and lookers-on who just can't tear their eyes from the spectacle. Bookended by shots of people peacefully going about their daily life the sequence comes as a rupture to the "abiding" picture that has been built up so far.

Domestic argument sequence from Jade green station



Figure 14 Jade green station
Shot 1 of sequence – duration 10 sec



Figure 15 Jade green station
Shot 2 of sequence – duration 1 min 53 sec

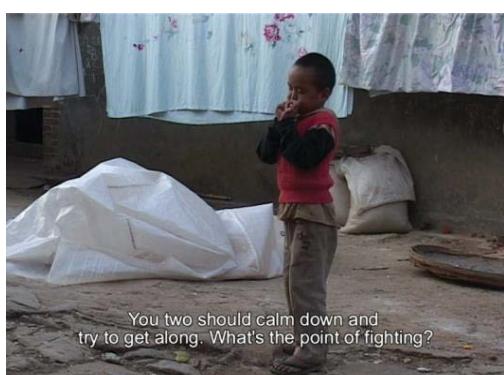


Figure 16 Jade green station
Shot 3 of sequence – duration 6 sec



Figure 17 Jade green station
Shot 4 of sequence duration 35 sec



Figure 18 Jade green station
Shot 5 of sequence – duration 13 sec



Figure 19 Jade green station
Shot 6 of sequence – duration 23 sec



Figure 20 Jade green station
Shot 7 of sequence – duration 15 sec

These sequences largely depart from the poetic approach used in much of the film. The first sequence starts as an observation of two linesmen undergoing an equipment inspection. This then transitions into an explanation of what just happened, direct to camera by the main linesman. This interview is roughly framed with the speaker's head at times partly cut off by a quite mobile camera. While the final shot of the linesman walking off down the track does return to the visual aesthetic of the poetic quotidian, what has gone before disrupts our reading of him as another abiding worker heading off to obediently complete his tasks. In the case of the domestic dispute sequence, it begins quite abruptly, coming out of a series of carefully composed shots set to music and overlaid with the text from two poems by T.S. Eliot. The point of view is not privileged and most of the time we just see the back of those involved in the dispute. At times what is being said is obscured by the sound of a passing tractor or our view is blocked by people wandering through. It is an awkward scene with much hovering around, waiting and watching as those involved and on the periphery have their say. A moment of possible on-screen physical violence²¹ (where the husband tries to snatch grandmother's walking stick away from her for a second time and she raises it as if to hit him) passes quickly with the husband retreating out of frame not to be seen again, although the argument continues with him now off screen. Interestingly this treatment makes the argument seem more like a soap opera than a personally affecting event. This sense of performativity is possibly because the long shots give us few clues as to the impact of the situation on the participants. There is also the feeling that behaviour is in part constrained by the very public nature of arguing in the street at the same time as well-worn phrases ricochet back and forth between the sides. Counter-intuitively then the spontaneous, witness-on-the-spot camera style plays against our connection with the affect of the situation, our gaze remains voyeuristic, engaging with the public display of an argument. The emotion and conflict of the exchange does not lend itself easily to an aesthetic rendering that would emphasise the formal beauty of the scene. The responses of the camera are raw and direct, capturing the graceless discomfort of the combatants, while lookers-on continue their knitting and children continue to play in cutaway shots. Once the disruption has passed, life in Bise seems to quietly continue on as before. However, even with the ostensible performativity of the dispute, a level of questioning is added to our perception. We view the remaining sequences with the undercurrent awareness that there is difficulty and hardship behind the peaceful façade of village life.

²¹ There is a reference in the exchange to previous violence as one of the wife's supporters asks "Why did you hit her?".

Juxtaposing the everyday images of village life with these scenes of conflict produces a nuanced picture that allows for complexity and differing views of reality to combine. This has the quality of “interillumination” which Black speaks of being at work in the way meaning is produced through metaphor (Black 1962, p. 39). Metaphor has “its own distinctive capacities and achievements” (Black 1962, p. 37) that reside in the ability to create new connections, exploit interactions between signifiers and point to different ways of framing representations and understandings. It is also the process at work in the telling of stories from the past by Sun Zihe early on in the film. These tales of the establishment of the railway, the presence of foreigners, then revolutionary persecution, struggle sessions, incarceration and executions enact a contextualising force on all the material that comes after. With the stories operating as a horizon to everyday life, I found myself searching the faces of people thereafter for traces of the events that had gone before. As Gosetti-Ferencei portrays it:

the experience of what is present in actuality requires the horizon of the merely potential, for that which does not directly appear is needed for the identification, context, and meaning of what does. (2007, p. 124)

In *Jade green station*, the stories add layers of possible meaning to the quotidian scenes in the film. At the same time then as the act of framing marks this as material deserving of “a meditative silence between viewer and work” (Gosetti-Ferencei 2007, p. 185) we are led to gather traces left behind by events that have gone before. While Crespi contends that this approach of intercutting interviews and narratives “with shots of the quotidian present” frames and subordinates “grand events to a local spontaneous order” (2009), the metaphor making process of interillumination can also be seen at work. A two way flow sees us reading the local experience in terms of our knowledge of revolutionary times, and the past is seen through the scraps and remnants that remain in Bise. As the poem by T.S. Eliot quoted in the film elucidates:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable. (1935 cited in Yu 2003)

This idea of multiple layers of time being present at once and a horizon that bounds current experience is further explored through the use of the frame and what it excludes. At one point we follow a set of overgrown train tracks that in the end lead nowhere. Buildings that are left

over from the French, although run down have been repurposed and are now used as dwellings, storage areas and places to dry corn. These yellow cobs seem to penetrate deep into the fabric of Bise and appear in all manner of unlikely spots throughout the village. Their bright golden yellow recalls the colour of sand and contrasts with the lush green of overgrown weeds and the muted grey of the station platform. A visit to a building that once housed the school (and prior to that was the temple of wealth) is overlaid with different layers of time. There are the ever present corn cobs of now, as well as printed leaflets and scraps left behind and the stories told about past teachers, past students and their fates. There is a concrete echo of the past in the cupboard that sits in the corner of a room, its contents now spilling out onto the floor. More ghostly figures are called into being by the incomplete memories of those who had been here before.

Components of moving shot inside Temple of Wealth from Jade green station



Figure 21 Jade green station
Beginning frame tilts to figure 22



Figure 22 Jade green station
Zooms to figure 23



Figure 23 Jade green station
Total shot duration 56 sec

This particular sequence is followed by a montage that is cut to the rhythms of a passing train, with the edits mimicking the shafts of light thrown from carriage windows journeying through. It is a particularly poignant expression of what is left behind by history and how what was once at the centre is now bypassed and falling into disrepair. Breaking from a strictly observational

approach it becomes a highly charged moment with the implied movement and force of the train contrasted by the stillness of the empty, uncared-for rooms.

Sequence cut to the rhythms of a passing train from *Jade green station*



Figure 24 Jade green station
Shot 1 – duration 3 sec



Figure 25 Jade green station
Shot 2 – duration 1 sec



Figure 26 Jade green station
Shot 3 – duration 2 sec



Figure 27 Jade green station
Shot 4 – duration 1 sec



Figure 28 Jade green station
Shot 5 – duration 2 sec



Figure 29 Jade green station
Shot 6 – duration 1 sec



Figure 30 Jade green station
Shot 7 – duration 2 sec



Figure 31 Jade green station
Shot 8 – duration 2 sec



Figure 32 Jade green station
Shot 9 – duration 5 sec

The town is depicted as being contained both by the wall that surrounds it and its seeming lack of connection and interest in the world outside. This is reinforced by the fact that there are only a couple of instances where we see any of the trains in motion and when we do they are a long way off in the distance. The trains are generally just on the edge of the frame and not the focus of the shots. The tracks, however, are ever present – they cut through the frame, are revealed after being hidden by weeds and long grass. At other points we see people sitting on the rails, animals grazing at the edge and the ubiquitous corn cobs laid out to dry beside sleepers. We may hear the sound of the train passing by, see the shadows they cast²² or watch people following the train's movements with their eyes but the actual trains are most often framed out of the shot. The implication is that while there is this ever present history of the station and traces of the influence of the outside world, the trains themselves are at the periphery of the villagers' lives.²³ The trains become a metaphor for change and the passing

²² Early on in the film the play of the lights from a passing train creates an effect that recalls a time-lapse recording of daylight moving across the face of a clock. It was something of a surprise to realise that it was not the result of a filming technique to compress time. It was quite effective though in signalling that time ran differently in this place.

²³ Toward the end of the film after seeing a group of women having their bags searched by a guard while waiting on the platform, we hear a girl say "I don't like travelling by train. I hate taking the train". This is not synchronous dialogue but presented more as an overheard conversation. We do not see the speaker so the words are not connected to an individual and take on the quality of a generalised statement.

tableaux of history that impact on life to varying degrees. Remnants of past events can be found but village life still continues on.

In this film about history, decay, storytelling and remembering the techniques of poetic meaning making are reinterpreted through an observational approach to documentary. A poetic approach is used to augment the metaphor creation that is inherent to the filmmaking process and Yu's theoretical approach is seen manifested in a cinematic context. Using the quotidian material gathered in Bise, Yu has ordered the "raw materials of life to make them into art" (Crespi 2009) in a combination that is at once poetic and observational. The juxtaposition of shots through editing, the placement of people and objects within the frame, the play of light, the mix of colour and the combining of sound with image are largely within the bounds of what we might expect from an observational approach while managing to achieve a poetic effect. However, the next example, *The 3 rooms of melancholia*, takes the observational into more deliberately stylised territory. This film explores different poetic registers within an observational framework and creates a highly affective experience through well-defined aesthetic choices.

The 3 rooms of melancholia

Released in 2004 with a world premiere (and multiple award winning) screening at the Venice Film Festival, *The 3 rooms of melancholia* (Honkasalo) is a documentary that contemplates the impact of the Chechen war on children in Russia and Chechnya. The 106 minute running time of the film is divided into 3 sections or rooms. Conceived as a triptych, each part is set in a different location and through observational style footage gives a view of young lives that are in some way connected to the war in Chechnya.

Finnish director Pirjo Honkasalo has adopted a highly aestheticised approach to the subject that draws our attention to the beauty, fragility and humanity of her young subjects. We see it in the formal framing of compositions, high contrast lighting, meditative pace and musical accompaniment that bleeds sorrow and unexpressed grief through every note of the countertenor part. I will discuss a sequence from each section of the film in order to not only look at the different visual approach of each section, but also to examine the different registers of the poetic that are operating.

The first room of the film is titled *Longing*. It is set in a military academy in the town of Kronstadt near St Petersburg. More than just a training ground for the future soldiers of the

Russian defence forces, the academy also operates as something of a welfare program. Orphans, homeless children and those from troubled family situations are given preference in entry selection. At the time of filming, the school received special protection from then President Putin. The filmmakers were given special dispensation by the school bureaucracy that afforded them good access and time to get to know the students. This first room operates in a highly aestheticized poetic register. In particular a sequence from near the beginning of the film draws heavily on the codes of composition, colour and pace to underscore the individual stories being revealed.

It is early morning, and the students and their instructors have gathered outside in the snow for assembly and drills. In a series of medium close ups, six of the boys are visually introduced through a seven shot sequence lasting just over a minute. The pre-dawn winter light creates deep shadows and their pale faces stand out against the darkness of their cadet's uniform – thick, black great coat and black fur ushanka (hat). Profiles are highlighted by the orange glow of street lights. They seem luminescent and otherworldly, the chiaroscuro lighting drawing attention to the vulnerability of each. It is as if the cherubic quality of these beautiful young faces is enhanced by the contrast, the contrast in turn emphasised by the narrow, almost monochromatic colour palette. The boys stand in rows at morning assembly, chins held high, turning their heads right, centre then left on command. This simple action concisely conveys much about each character as the quality of movement, facial expression and degree of poise varies so greatly from student to student. As we cut from face to face we see, in succession, uncertainty, detachment, focus, anticipation, an eager desire to please and resignation. While there is a level of context associated with their presence in this particular film, the opportunity to meet them unencumbered by their particular history presents them first as possibilities before specific emotions are engaged through backstory and our sense of their subjectivity becomes more determined. We see them first as beautiful young boys at the edge of manhood. The artful presentation with its formal, pared back compositions focuses our attention on the individual intensities of each, as yet unknown, boy, thereby making their transformation, (at least in our knowledge of them) into young people caught up by the catastrophe of war, all the more poignant.

The location sound drains away, leaving the voice of the commander and the music of the sparsely accompanied countertenor. With its intimations of existing between vocal registers, the countertenor part is strongly evocative of the liminal world in which these young people exist. On the cusp of maturity they are not able to act to change the circumstances of their

lives. As the filmmaker points out “the inability of adults to resolve the war gives rise to a generation who believe that hatred originates from them. There is no need to seek its causes. They are accompanied throughout their life by an inexplicable melancholia and sudden outbursts of rage” (Pervilä 2005).

Sequence of 7 medium close up shots of boys at morning assembly [from *The 3 rooms of melancholia*]



Figure 33 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 1 in the sequence



Figure 34 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 2 in the sequence



Figure 35 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 3 in the sequence



Figure 36 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 4 in the sequence



Figure 37 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 5 in the sequence

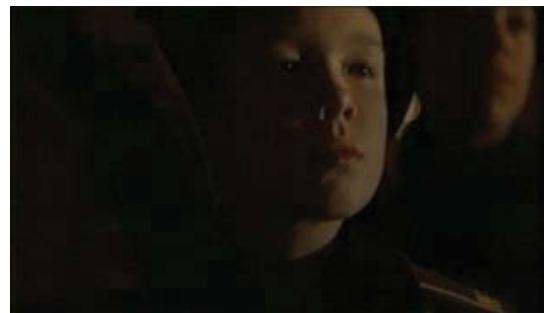


Figure 38 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 6 in the sequence



Figure 39 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 7 in the sequence

This technique, of *framing out* or draining away all but the key details, has a multi-layered effect. It operates as both a metaphor and an effective audiovisual technique. It also works as an underlying principle that guides the film. As a sound design concept it takes us to an interior space where we might try to imagine the thoughts, hopes, wishes and dreams of each boy. At the same time it is similar to Viktor Shklovsky's idea of defamiliarisation²⁴ that manifests in this instance whereby the sometimes invisible lens of documentary is shown to be subjective and inflected. An ambivalence occurs between distant observation, which allows us to appreciate aesthetic pleasures, and affective proximity, that draws us in to feel something of what the subjects might be feeling.

The ethereal quality of the music track has a multi-layered impact on our perception of the images. At the same time as it operates as a metaphor for interiority, there is also a sense that it assists us in stepping outside of quotidian time into a space of suspension and contemplation. While it is through the quotidian that we come to know a little of these young lives, the music works to create a feeling that we can connect to them through a level that exceeds the everyday and that calls upon something originating from deep in our being.

These poetic and quite mannered sequences are interspersed amongst some of the more everyday moments of lessons, chores and play. At first I had some difficulty accepting them within the format of an ostensibly observational style work. The emphasis on aesthetics creates some unease of form that made me question to what degree the action had been staged for the camera. Something of the *beautiful fact* dilemma (as mentioned in chapter 1 of this thesis) seemed to be giving rise to this unease. But then when we consider the subject material at the military academy in Kronstadt, we are looking at a regular, regimented schedule resulting in a repetitious cycle of events. This is perhaps the reason that this first room has been able to focus on formal compositions to the point of appearing to be staged. Rather than with suspicion of its authenticity then, we might view this material as having been captured by a knowing observer/camera that has been granted considerable access and is, in most cases, able to anticipate actions and events in order to position itself for best vantage and aesthetic effect.

These sequences come as moments of pause that create space for us to take in the story of these boys' lives, the impact of their circumstances and the futures towards which they are headed: futures that for many could include military service in Grozny, Chechnya, the location of the next room.

²⁴ The operation of an aesthetics of defamiliarisation will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

Room 2: breathing opens with scenes of Grozny in ruins. Starting in black with slow fades of the section titles and sparse instrumentation, the first image of the section registers with a shock. It creates a numbness that is augmented by the lack of any location sounds accompanying the first three shots. And these shots are so striking for the absence of people from a place that would at one time have housed thousands. The landscape has the appearance of a post-apocalyptic world where none have survived except the scraggly, limping, stray dogs that can be seen sitting alone or wandering about in packs. Then slowly, unimaginably, we see human figures emerging – moving between buildings, carrying water. Young children are crouched, perhaps playing in the mud. The signs of life struggling to carry on become more and more apparent.

The proportions of sky and brutalist architecture diminish the size of the people in the frame. The apartment towers are crumbling with façades blown open by shells and floors collapsed to the level below. For me it recalls the Deleuzian notion of “any-spaces-what-ever” (Deleuze 2005, p. 112). It is a landscape that is so overburdened with melancholia and unexpressed sorrow that, while an emotional and quite visceral response is provoked, no action seems possible. As Marks puts it in another context: “emotion or feeling opens us to the experience of time” (2000, p. 28). The experience of dwelling on the specific details of this landscape and the events that are implied by the damage provoke a struggle for understanding as we search the screen and our own subjectivities for a framework to process what we are being shown.

These exterior shots set us up for the devastation that is to come. The sequence from this section that I want to examine is of a group of three young sisters leaving their mother. Described by one reviewer as possibly “the most painful scene I’ve ever seen in a film” (O’Hehir 2005) it is a powerful example of how the work operates in an affective register. The bleak desolation of Grozny sets the context for this agonizing event. The exterior landscape becomes a metaphor for the personal tragedy that follows.

The sequence starts as we go inside a sparsely furnished apartment, following Hadizhat, a Chechen woman who rescues orphan, homeless and at risk children, taking them away from the war zone of Grozny to her home in nearby Ingushetia. Knocking on doors, seeking out signs of habitation, she moves from floor to floor of a bombed out block finally arriving at number 22. A little girl answers the door and lets her in. Mother is lying on a bed with her three young daughters clustered around her. Hadizhat proceeds to interview the mother with, at first, only the oldest of the three girls truly aware of what is about to happen. She stays closest to her mother, protective and afraid. This fearful little one with the big watchful eyes

shows great care and concern, wiping both her mother's and her own tears away with her shirt sleeve. As the time draws near for them to depart they all draw closer to their mother, the younger ones picking up on the sadness of their older sister and mother. But then there are jobs that must be done – forms to be signed, coats to be put on and bedding to be packed away. After a final heartbreaking goodbye the children are prised away from their now sobbing mother and with a last look back they are out the door. Silence, emptiness and stillness remains. The mother lies alone. After the flurry of the little ones' departure the only thing left moving in the room are the bubbles in a bottle of water.

Filmed on digital video that has been converted to black and white, the image has a different aspect ratio to the other two sections that were shot on 16mm film. Here, the visual style emphasises texture, shape, form and contrast. There is also a sense of taking further the almost monochromatic colour palette of the preceding section. As the signs of life and vitality have drained away, so too has the colour. This room is about shadow and highlight; about what is implied as much as what is seen and said.

Differing from the much more mannered approach of the prior section, here there is a stronger sense of spontaneity, of a camera capturing events on the fly, now removed from the predictable routines of life in the academy. Nonetheless this is still artful observation with iconic cutaways such as an abandoned woman's heeled shoe and compositions that capture the intimacy of a mother and her daughters and the conditions in which they are living.

In this section, not only are the aesthetics different but the emotional content has changed too. The intensity has been ramped up and the stakes are so much higher here. Through tight framing, architectural features used as frames within frames and lensing that gives a strong impression of the confines of the apartment space, we are drawn close to this fragile little family. Our attention is firmly directed toward them, observing every nuance of their emotions and reactions. The coverage is as intimate as the looks shared between mother and daughter, as intense as the heartbroken sobs of the children. The closeness of the family and the care and affection they have for each other is made clear through a grammar of proximity, touch, glances and facial expression. It is as evident in the moments of quiet nearness as it is in the frenzied clinging as the children resist being removed.

There are obviously others present in the scene who play a role in the events taking place – for example the woman who shares the space with the sick mother, and Hadizhat's companion – but they are framed out of shot. As a result we barely register their presence or significance.

Our attention is on the foregrounded subjects ensuring that our engagement with the event is not diluted or distracted.

In a correlative editing technique this scene of affective intensity is surrounded by shots of stillness and silence. The soundtrack carries this through so that the musical accompaniment ends as Hadizhat enters the building and does not recommence until the very end of the final shot of the sequence. These stylistic choices bring to mind a description, attributed to Mallarmé, of the job of poetry being to “clean up our word-clogged reality by creating silences around things” (cited in Stern 2001). Here the silences and framing-out give us the space to take in the events that have just occurred. They allow us a moment of pause to absorb the humanity of the subjects, the fragility of life and the tragedy of the circumstances.

Sequence of sisters' removal from bombed out apartment in Grozny from *The 3 rooms of melancholia*



**Figure 40 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 1 in sequence**



**Figure 41 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot in sequence**



**Figure 42 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 3 in sequence**



**Figure 43 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 4 in sequence**



**Figure 44 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 5 in sequence**



**Figure 45 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 6 in sequence**



Figure 46 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 7 in sequence



Figure 47 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 8 in sequence



Figure 48 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 9 in sequence



Figure 49 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 10 in sequence



Figure 50 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 11 in sequence



Figure 51 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 12 in sequence



Figure 52 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 13 in sequence



Figure 53 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 14 in sequence



Figure 54 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 15 in sequence



Figure 55 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 16 in sequence



Figure 56 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 17 in sequence



Figure 57 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 18 in sequence



Figure 58 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 19 in sequence



Figure 59 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 20 in sequence



Figure 60 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 21 in sequence



Figure 61 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 22 in sequence



Figure 62 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 23 in sequence

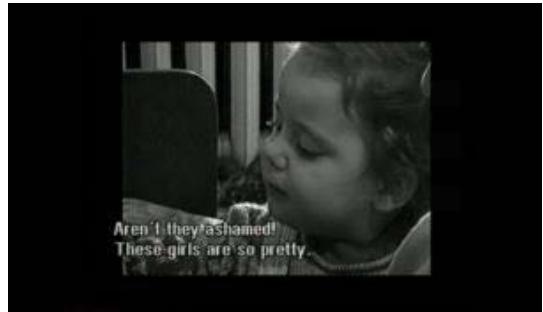


Figure 63 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 24 in sequence



Figure 64 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 25 in sequence



Figure 65 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 26 in sequence



Figure 66 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 27 in sequence



Figure 67 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 28 in sequence



Figure 68 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 29 in sequence



Figure 69 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 30 in sequence



Figure 70 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 31 in sequence



Figure 71 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 32 in sequence



Figure 72 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 33 in sequence



Figure 73 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 34 in sequence



Figure 74 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 35 in sequence



Figure 75 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 36 in sequence



Figure 76 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 37 in sequence



Figure 77 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 38 part a in sequence



Figure 78 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 38 part B in sequence



Figure 79 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 39 in sequence



Figure 80 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 40 in sequence



Figure 81 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 41 in sequence



Figure 82 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 42 in sequence



Figure 83 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 43 in sequence

The third leaf of the triptych, subtitled *Remembering*, takes us to the neighbouring Islamic republic of Ingushetia. This is where many refugees from the Chechen war have ended up. This is where Hadizhat lives with the 63 orphans she has rescued from the war. It is early morning. In a scene that is a tender echo of the beginning of the film where the boy soldiers-in-waiting were filmed still sleeping, the young refugee children are being eased from sleep by soft but persistent calls and gentle encouragement to get up. The older boys are already awake and outside doing their chores. A simple enough sequence but amazingly effective for the strong sensory impact it leaves.

For me, this waking up sequence is an example of how this form of sensory aesthetic approach might be able to create a connection between screen and spectator. On first viewing it had a particularly powerful sensory impact on me that I think recalls Marks' notion of haptic visuality whereby a tactile experience is evoked through a visual stimulus (2000). Images of the

younger children being gently woken up are intercut with images of the older children already up and at work. With visuals that show light we contextually read as morning, we hear a gentle but persistent female voice rousing the little ones. The quality of the voice recording is such that you can almost feel the brush of breath on your ear. The sound of the children's snuffy, sleepy morning breathing puts them within range of touch, as if in the crook of your arm. This sound quality only adds to the haptic power of the images.

My experience of this scene is that the feeling of *morning-ness* and becoming awake that it invokes gives me a means to inhabit something of the children's world. This sensory dimension to an experience that is framed by "the everlasting Chechen war" (Millennium Film 2004) sets up the possibility of a strong connection between audience and film subjects.

Sequence of children waking up in the orphanage in Ingushetia from *The 3 rooms of melancholia*



Figure 84 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 1 in morning sequence – dissolves in

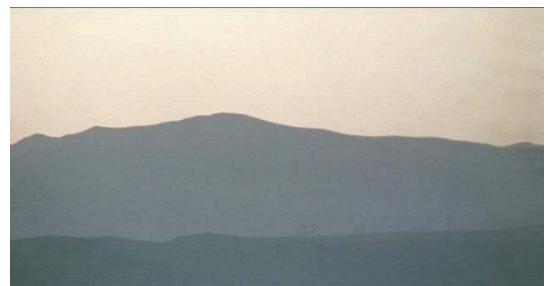


Figure 85 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 1 tilts up to show the ridge of distant mountains



Figure 86 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 2 in morning sequence – dissolves in



Figure 87 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 3 in morning sequence



Figure 88 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 4 in morning sequence



Figure 89 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 5 in morning sequence



Figure 90 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 6 in morning sequence



Figure 91 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 7 in morning sequence



Figure 92 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 8 in morning sequence



Figure 93 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 9 in morning sequence



Figure 94 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 10 in morning sequence



Figure 95 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 11 in morning sequence



Figure 96 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 12 in morning sequence



Figure 97 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 13 in morning sequence



Figure 98 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 14 in morning sequence



Figure 99 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 15 in morning sequence



Figure 100 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 16 in morning sequence



Figure 101 *The 3 rooms of melancholia*
Shot 17 in morning sequence

This morning sequence is followed by preparations for and the carrying out of a religious ritual. With our senses now attuned by the sensory intimacy of the preceding scene there is an immediacy about our response that connects us to the newly arrived young children in their first experience of the rite. There is a feeling of being viscerally linked as we watch the women turn away from the sheep being slaughtered. There is a moment of recoil as the mufti calls for the girls from Grozny to be brought forward. My response was to brace as I watched the youngest of the girls stiffen while blood from the sheep was daubed onto her forehead. These unfamiliar actions are seemingly transformed and reconceptualised as idiosyncratic but nonetheless parts of a caring, human welcoming in of the new arrivals. The sequencing of the quotidian before the unknown gives the audience access to reference points in otherwise mysterious territory. It enables us to reach a level of engagement where, when we see one of the boys, a 12 year old orphan also from Grozny, shedding heartfelt tears during the prayer and chanting session, we can perceive it as a kind of release from some of what has come before. As MacDougall points out:

[f]ilms allow us to go beyond culturally prescribed limits and glimpse the possibility of being more than we are. They stretch the boundaries of our consciousness and create affinities with bodies other than our own. (MacDougall 2006, p. 17)

The 3 rooms of melancholia is particularly noteworthy in this regard for the differing poetic registers that are employed to bring us into empathetic affinity with the people and situations that are portrayed.

It is a film of echoes, reflections and resonances across the three parts of the triptych. These poetic re-soundings and visual rhymes are effective elements in a strategy to make us connect with the devastation that is wrought on young lives on both sides of a conflict. While these depictions do risk buying into a problematic construction of who are (and can be) innocent

(and therefore worthy) victims,²⁵ the audio and visual style is nonetheless effective in summoning our compassion through a poetic application of formal beauty, fragile vulnerability, emotional impact and sensory engagement.

Although melancholia may appear at first glance as a depressive state into which one can fall as a result of a loss, Jonathon Flatley argues that “[i]t is a practice that might, in fact, produce its own kind of knowledge” (2008, p. 2). Flatley points out that the poetry of Charles Baudelaire specifically sought to turn our attention to the experiences that gave rise to the melancholic state, so that we might emerge:

aggrieved, clearer about what the losses at the origin of one’s grief might be and what or whom may be to blame for them. At the same time, however, as in ‘A Une Passante’, for example, we are shown how one’s losses might be a secret source of connection, interest, and perhaps even pleasure. (2008, p. 6)

It is possible to recognise something of this in the strategy behind Honkasalo’s presentation of the Chechen war in *The 3 rooms of melancholia*. While there are moments that are almost too awful to bear, there are still undeniable pleasures in some of the exquisite depictions of sadness, grief, affective withdrawal, loss of interest and the emotional intensity that presents as the opposite of affective languor. As we reach out to engage with this superlative rendering, the knowledges produced are absorbed through aesthetic experience, emotional empathy and sensory memory. Rather than resignation, there is potential for recognition of shared humanity across difference and incredulity at the burden borne by some as a consequence of historical events beyond the horizon of their everyday world. A similarly melancholic strategy is at work in the next film that I will analyse. While the stakes are perhaps not as high as those explored in *The 3 rooms of melancholia* there is an analogous use of poetic observation to convey a melancholic sense of loss.

sleep furiously

Focusing on a small farming community in the land of Dylan Thomas, *sleep furiously* explores a disappearing way of life that is frequently romanticised for consumption by urban dwellers. Described as “a low budget project” (Koppel 2008, p. 5) jointly funded by the Film Agency for Wales and the National Lottery through the Arts Council of Wales, the documentary was nonetheless shot on 16mm film. The intention behind this choice was the director’s hope that

²⁵ See Birgitta Höijer’s discussion of this issue in the article *The Discourse of Global Compassion: The Audience and Media Reporting of Human Suffering* (2004)

shooting on film “may allow the audience to ‘fall into’ the image, to engage with it through their imagination, not simply their powers of recognition” (Koppel 2008, pp. 5-6). After premiering at the 2008 Edinburgh Film Festival and garnering considerable critical acclaim, *sleep furiously* went on to have a limited theatrical release in the United Kingdom over 2009-2010. Subsequently it was accepted to screen at other prestigious film festivals such as Telluride and Sundance. In 2011 its distribution was extended through a coordinated digital and U.S. theatrical release where the film was available online to *Fandor*²⁶ subscribers for 24 hours on 29 July, the same day that it premiered at New York’s Cinema Village Theatre.

Described by the director, Gideon Koppel, as presenting “a world of endings and beginnings” (2008, p. 3), *sleep furiously* is a noteworthy example of a poetic approach to observational documentary that uses extended takes and a very formal compositional style to emphasise the aesthetic experience of the representation. In this work the local is privileged above all else and the horizons of the film are restricted to the rural life centred on the small village of Trefeurig in central Wales. We are not given a direct sense of the broader context of what we see, although it is obliquely implied through references to the powers behind the planned closure of the local school.

This is a film that confines itself to the quotidian patterning of pastoral life where “moments of intimacy and human gesture” are “juxtaposed with the infinite space and time of the landscape” (Koppel 2008, p. 4). And the landscape is indeed a key component in the creation of a poetic effect in this work. There is an emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of form through compositional balance that presents the land as fixed, perhaps monolithic and inured to the rhythms of the people who have made it their home. Long distance perspectives draw attention to the spread of the land in comparison to the miniature scale of the human.

The sense of proximity in the interior human realm is enhanced through the use of a narrow depth of field that pulls us into close and focused attention. Frequently there is a quite frontal approach to composition with subjects presented like elements of a still life. The formal approach to composition and the stillness of the frame gives us the time and space to watch the unfolding processes and appreciate them as a formal experience of seemingly choreographed movement. People, cars and animals enter and leave the still frame so that we are made aware of the limits of the frame as we wait, patiently for their return. As a result this

²⁶ *Fandor* is an online distribution channel that specialises in independent and international films. They provide movies both “on demand and as part of the professionally programmed Fandor Channel” (Our Film Festival Inc. 2012)

compositional strategy works on both our perception of time and of space in the world of the film.

We get a sense that the scale of this small enclosed world ranges from the mundane (e.g. “Jimmy, do you want leeks or cabbage for dinner?”(Koppel 2007)) to the transcendent and many levels in between. Having grown up in the village, Koppel uses his status as welcomed, familiar observer to gain us privileged access to the intricacies of daily life in Trefeurig. It is through the small quotidian details revealed over time that we come to know something of this community which is in many ways anachronistic to contemporary life.²⁷ From the judging of various local competitions for gardening, baking, flower arranging and sheep dog trials we see demonstrated the knowledges that have accumulated over generations and the pursuits that may be lost as village life dwindles. While there is a fussiness of manner that may make some of the practices seem like remnants of another time, the warmth and fondness displayed in the film consistently affirms the sense of purpose and community that is produced through local agricultural shows and working on shared interests.

The opening sets the tempo for the film as over the course of a 44 second shot a town crier walks slowly along a country road advancing toward the camera, all the while ringing his bell and gently urging his two dogs to keep up. The sound of the bell ringing continues over coloured screens – red, yellow, green, red, yellow – for another 19 seconds. The colours evoke the costume of the town crier and open us up to questioning and wondering what is next in store. The silence of the landscape surrounds the sound of the bell and gives us a sense of the expanse of open countryside around the meandering lane along which the bell ringer walks. The sustained and steady ringing slows us down to the pace of a country stroll as we begin to watch in sync with the footsteps that set the rhythm of the tolling bell. As the ringing concludes we are deposited in the school room where an as yet unknown woman (who turns out to be the filmmaker’s mother, Pip) asks the quiet and attentive children, “Who’s got little hands?”. Throughout this film our attention is continually brought back to the details of processes and interactions. As we watch Pip interacting with the school children during a pottery class our attention is on the gentleness of the interactions, the reserve of the children and the detail of “little hands” working clay in various ways.

²⁷ This is particularly the case with the World Bank estimating that 74% of people across the European Union lived in urban areas in 2010. “Urban population refers to people living in urban areas as defined by national statistical offices. It is calculated using World Bank population estimates and urban ratios from the United Nations World Urbanization Prospects” (2012).

There is a strong sense of time unfolding before the camera as we are shown the minutiae of a range of everyday processes. This is a durational approach to the presentation of time as the rhythms observed evoke the pace of village life. In most cases Koppel uses a still, locked off camera frame that does not seek to contain his subjects as they wander on and off screen, following a country lane or attending to some task that is just out of frame. Frequently the camera is set up below eye level so that the foreground is emphasised, even when this isn't where the action is taking place. *sleep furiously* employs a studied approach to camera coverage that encourages the viewer to just look and appreciate the quietude of the scene as it is. It's a strategy that calls to mind Lyotard's exhortation that we "become open to the 'It happens that' rather than the 'What happens'" (O'Sullivan 2001, p. 128) as well as invoking Carson's instructions for how we should come to know that thing we should know (2000).

At first glance this may appear to be a film that idealises the pastoral life, populated as it is by people who are quirky but caring, sharing company and memories in their gentle, understated way. Indeed, there are several instances where the work seems about to romanticise the material of the film particularly where a musical theme is used. However, on six occasions this is undercut by an abrupt interruption of the music on a cut to the next shot or by some other cue within the action on-screen. In most cases (4 out of 6) the music is a piano theme that is tied to the library van and its progress across the landscape. On these occasions the interruptions come from the bark of a watchful dog, close shots of men working to attach a plough to a tractor, a shot of the van parked in a country lane and an extreme wide shot of a shepherd and his dog walking along a ridge in rain. The other two instances of interruption occur with music accompanying an extreme wide shot of Pip as she returns from visiting her husband's grave and a time-lapse sequence showing a night scene of a bonfire and fireworks being let off. The shot of Pip is a very lonely frame as she crosses the scene along a path at the very bottom of the screen. It is a very moving moment, particularly in the context of the previous sequence where she walks alone, picks up a stone and places it on her husband's grave. The interruption, brought about by the cut to a close shot of a sheep being shorn, shakes us from the sadness of the scene and our contemplation of the wild beauty of the landscape, bringing us back to the practical realities of country life. The interruption at the end of the bonfire sequence manifests more like a gentle joke at the expense of city viewers. The bonfire night is presented in time-lapse and comes complete with glow sticks and an appropriately clubby music track. This sequence is abruptly stopped as we cut to close footage of piglets being born. This interruption is a very visceral, earthy scene with the baby pigs smeared with shit and afterbirth.

As a device, the use of interruptions indicates a reflexive awareness and a refusal to buy into a tradition of the pastoral that simplistically romanticises the country, packaging it for the easy consumption of an urban audience. The interruptions consistently remind us of the unvarnished truths of farming life, creating a sense of sharp contrasts and jolting us from idyllic reverie. It seems to be an extension of the strategy of undercutting moments that are at risk of becoming maudlin, caricatures, or stereotypical. The interruptions also set up interesting expectations so that when the music is permitted to finish and the last notes allowed to naturally fade away we are prompted to question what is different about this instance? Why is the affect of this moment permitted to linger?

Structurally the film is similar to *Jade green station* in that it seems to observe a “meticulously discontinuous poetic structure”(Crespi 2009). Indeed, the director speaks of looking for an editor who “was comfortable working without a linear structure, who enjoyed finding rhythmical movements rather than imposing them...and one who had never made television programmes” (Koppel 2008, p. 8). While a chronology tied to the progress of the seasons provides the basic framework, the finer detail of shot-to-shot and scene-to-scene juxtapositions follows a more lyrical logic that seeks to emphasise tone, dynamics and the subtle nuances of the everyday that might otherwise go unnoticed. It is possible to discern a philosophy at work in this film that appears to be in sympathy with Yu’s notion of the poetic as a priori. Here it is through the framing, the use of silences (that can come suddenly or dawn more gradually) and in the experiencing of time that the poeticity of the world is revealed. Even the job of collecting and wrapping bales of hay is rendered picturesque as the fork lift delivering the bales moves in and out of frame in a series of manoeuvres, now hiding, now revealing. Set out like a tableau with the rolling hills of the valley stretching away into the distance, a tractor sits centre frame, kitted out with a device that wraps black plastic around the cylindrical hay bales as if rolling up balls of wool. This process, no doubt mundane and perhaps second nature to the farm workers, takes on a meditative aspect as the bales, almost as tall as a man, are methodically wrapped and transformed from woolly reels of straw into black, uniform bundles. A close shot as the bales are turned and wrapped both abstracts the form and emphasises the spinning motion. After the wide shot tableau with its seemingly choreographed forklift movements, the sudden shift to intense detail is a striking change. We are focused on the rippled texture of the plastic stretched over the hay bale with the whirring of the machinery providing a soundtrack that is strangely detached and yet calls us back to the rural realities of preparing feed for the winter ahead. There is also a certain level of whimsy in the shot as the levels of foreground, mid-ground and background are variously occupied by a

watchful cat, an equally watchful 'old-timer', farm equipment and scenic rolling hills that stretch away into the distance.



Figure 102 *sleep furiously*



Figure 104 *sleep furiously*
Still frame from continuation of bale wrapping shot



Figure 106 *sleep furiously*
Still frame from continuation of bale wrapping shot



Figure 108 *sleep furiously*
Still frame from continuation of bale wrapping shot

Still frame from bale wrapping shot



Figure 103 *sleep furiously*
Still frame from continuation of bale wrapping shot



Figure 105 *sleep furiously*
Still frame from continuation of bale wrapping shot



Figure 107 *sleep furiously*
Still frame from continuation of bale wrapping shot



Figure 109 *sleep furiously*
Still frame from continuation of bale wrapping shot



Figure 110 sleep furiously
Still frame from continuation of bale wrapping shot



Figure 111 sleep furiously
Final close shot in bale wrapping sequence

In another sequence, about 30 minutes into the film, we are shown the exquisite affect that can be generated by the practice of group singing through a single medium close up of the female conductor during local choir practice. She seemingly sculpts the choral sound with her hands, her face contorting (and at one point grimacing) in response to the music. As the singing continues a wide shot of a landscape transformed by the movement of clouds and changes in light is cut in creating a sublime juxtaposition between nature and a cultural response to it. Much of the impact of the sequence is a result of the fluid movement and flow of emotions across the face of the conductor in response to the music and how this is an echo of the changing weather conditions shifting across the surface of the land. While the conductor's *display* is undoubtedly an element of the non-verbal communication that frequently takes place between a conductor and choir, for such communication to be effective it is still necessary that the affect being displayed is also being truly experienced and honestly manifested. There is also a great deal contributed by the unaccompanied singing as the pure notes combine and soar in untranslated Welsh. The result is profoundly affecting. The lack of translation means that for those who can't speak Welsh, we are responding to the emotion generated by music. It is an inarticulate communication (in that it isn't based in language) but nonetheless intensely powerful for its mode of expression. Interestingly, in a strategy that is repeated elsewhere in the film, any tendencies to overly sentimentalise what we are being shown is quickly undercut by the wry response of the conductor in Welsh at the end of the singing, "Well done...at least we have an end now" (Koppel 2007). While this is a film that skilfully uses affect, beauty and sublime aesthetic experiences to engage audiences, it continually pulls back from taking it all too seriously.

These combinations where the everyday-routine (such as wiping down the table after lunchtime at the school) is set against the everyday-miraculous (such as the visceral witnessing of the shit smeared birth of piglets and the farmers heartfelt congratulating of the sow) construct us as viewers who must "keep Praguing the eye // of your soul and reach— / mind empty / towards that thing you should know" (Carson 2000) as the various registers of the

quotidian are treated with equal attention and inquisitiveness. Indeed most aspects of life in Trefeurig are presented in ways that create surprising and occasionally jolting collisions. As an audience we need to stay open to the possibilities of these quotidian juxtapositions and let our consciousness “be awakened from its tendency toward a prosaic grasp and reception of the world, its tendency to dominate or objectify things” (Gosetti-Ferencei 2007, p. 132). Set free from a strict narrative structure, the material is able to catch at some of the complexities and multi-layered understandings that might be garnered through close attention to the everyday.

At key points throughout the film the focus is on the particularities of processes. We see the full range of steps involved in a task but on two occasions we do not see the faces of those who are carrying out the tasks. The close focus on details draws us into a sensory experience of this world so that we can almost smell the melted butter used to grease the cake tins and feel the warmth of the cakes freshly taken from the oven.



Figure 112 *sleep furiously*
Shot 1 from cake making sequence



Figure 113 *sleep furiously*
Shot 2 from cake making sequence



Figure 114 *sleep furiously*
Shot 3 from cake making sequence



Figure 115 *sleep furiously*
Shot 4 from cake making sequence



Figure 116 *sleep furiously*
Shot 5 from cake making sequence



Figure 117 *sleep furiously*
Shot 6 from cake making sequence



Figure 118 sleep furiously
Shot 7 from cake making sequence



Figure 119 sleep furiously
Shot 8 from cake making sequence

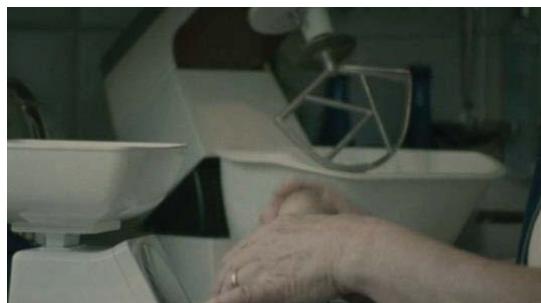


Figure 120 sleep furiously
Shot 9 from cake making sequence



Figure 121 sleep furiously
Shot 10 from cake making sequence



Figure 122 sleep furiously
Shot 11 from cake making sequence



Figure 123 sleep furiously
Shot 12 from cake making sequence



Figure 124 sleep furiously
Shot 13 from cake making sequence



Figure 125 sleep furiously
Shot 14 from cake making sequence



Figure 126 *sleep furiously*
Shot 15 from cake making sequence



Figure 127 *sleep furiously*
Shot 16 from cake making sequence



Figure 128 *sleep furiously*
Shot 17 from cake making sequence



Figure 129 *sleep furiously*
Shot 18 from cake making sequence



Figure 130 *sleep furiously*
Shot 19 from cake making sequence



Figure 131 *sleep furiously*
Shot 20 from cake making sequence



Figure 132 *sleep furiously*
Shot 21 from cake making sequence



Figure 133 *sleep furiously*
Shot 22 from cake making sequence

As in the third example from *The 3 rooms of melancholia*, the intimate space of these sequences created through close shots, narrow depth of field and the quality of light induce a haptic visuality drawing us into a closer relationship with the actions being performed. Although the sound does not have the same proximity texture of audio that has been recorded through a close microphone placement, there is still a strong sensory aspect to these scenes produced through the approach to filming. The colour of light gives us a notion of time of day

and temperature. Seeing the cooked cakes, fresh from the oven, sitting to cool provokes memories of the delicious smells of baking. The sound of sugar being sprinkled on top of the cake recalls the sweet taste. These sensory traces connect us to the aesthetic experience of these practices and through this experience we gather hints as to the outlook on the world that enables the attitudes and efforts that are being demonstrated. However, by denying the audience a shot of the face of the cook (or of the cabinet maker repairing a laminated surface in another scene), identification with the subject is not being facilitated as it was in the waking up sequence from *The 3 rooms of melancholia*. There is a distancing effect operating here whereby we are being encouraged to engage with the form of the actions (and the competency and care implied through attention to detail) rather than with specific emotional content.

The director writes about his desire to “make a film that was ‘evocative’ of Trefeurig rather than ‘about’ it” (Koppel 2008, p. 4). This evocation translates into a work that creates an experience of time and place through its attention to rhythms, qualities of light and ways of being. The sense of time created through long takes and relaxed conversation gives a sense of a general unhurriedness where there is time to chat and linger. This generally contemplative pace throws the several instances of time-lapse into stark relief. Where the standard speed footage meanders and has a slow kind of grace, the time-lapse footage jerks and jolts, drawing attention to its rushing past of time. The application of this technique alludes to the relativity of the experience of time, depending on attitude and context but also implies the brief moment of human existence in comparison to the monumental scale by which the time of the landscape is measured.

Toward the end of the film a written statement appears on-screen in parts. It reads...

“It’s only when I sense the end of things that I find the courage to speak.

The courage

but not the words”

These words are followed by a two sequence coda. The first is a montage of farm equipment tagged with lot numbers for auction. The objects look isolated and forlorn in the frame but have a stark beauty. The collected objects emphasise a limited, muted colour palette and are lit by a diffuse, pearly, natural light, producing a kind of halation that is reminiscent of the paintings of Vermeer. The second sequence shows us around the inside of an apparently

abandoned house. After a series of shots showing evidence of disrepair, neglect and objects lying, as if waiting for their owner to return, we see a time-lapse shot of a window and curtains. The window, with its partial view to the outside is framed by curtains, their otherwise gentle billowing transformed into shuddering and twitching by the change in speed. The combined effect of these two sequences is to imply the impossibility of halting the change brought about through the steady progress of time. It seems to suggest that the opportunity to save a way of life, associated with places like Trefeurig, is draining away. At the same time, however, the idea is raised that something beyond the everyday of the human world does endure. This is reinforced by the final image that returns us to a lone tree on a hill that we have seen on two other occasions in the film, under different weather conditions in different seasons. This shot is held for 17 seconds before fading to the final title. This feels longer than we might expect of a post credit shot and this holding appears to be a metaphor for the survival of the land.

In this film about the passing of time and the fading of a way of life, there is a gentle and complex dignity to the people and the place that is conveyed through the stillness of frame and working of silences. While a gentle humour accompanies many of the scenes, there remains a mournful tone as though we are watching a way of life begin to fade before our eyes. Once again this is using melancholy as a means to produce understanding. If melancholia is a means to become “clearer about what the losses at the origin of one’s grief might be” (Flatley 2008, p. 6), in this instance it manifests as a rhetorical strategy to demonstrate what is at risk as this way of life fades and diminishes. A similar strategy is at play in the creative project that accompanies this thesis. However, in *How many ways to say you?* the affective tone emerges from the experience of the film as it explores the ambivalence of daily life lived against a background of historical damage that is just below the surface of the everyday.

How many ways to say you?

Structured around a range of Khmer words that are used in place of the pronoun *you*, *How many ways to say you?* creates an experience through the audiovisual material of the film both as an echo of my experience travelling through Cambodia but also as a way to think through ideas of interpersonal relationship, history, memory and representation. At the time of filming there were constant questions raised for me about the impact of recent Cambodian history upon both locals and visitors, their interactions with each other and ways of understanding their world. My approach to and treatment of the raw footage has been an attempt to explore

these ideas. Through a methodology that applies notions of photogénie as a way to provide insights “that words only imperfectly explain” (Nichols 2010, p. 130), the piece works to convey a sense of the affective impact that the place and people encountered had on me.

In *How many ways to say you?* I am deliberately working with tensions between observational footage and a fragmented approach to structure. The work presents a poetic impression and uses the aesthetic experience of viewing the piece as a way to open possibilities for connection with the underlying ideas. Similar to previous examples explored in this chapter, the audiovisual material of the film is arranged according to a poetic structure. In this case, the structure is based on fragmentary sketches of the relationships implied through the use of the different *you* words that occur in Khmer. So in the section titled *koan aing* (the word a parent would use when addressing their child), we see children at play dragging branches through the dirt, interacting with each other and being called to by an adult and other children from behind the camera. In *borng* (used between close friends or relatives of a similar age) we see a brother and sister gathering water and discussing the foreigners who are watching and filming them. The structure of *How many ways to say you?* becomes a manifestation of the relational perspective “that conceives of the human subject as a complex organism enmeshed in a dense web of relationships that includes other sentient beings, non-human animals, and the material environment itself” (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009, p. 550) as discussed earlier in this chapter. In foregrounding these relationships through the titles of each section and the sketches that they herald, attention is drawn to the specificities of each version of the relationship within an otherwise fragmentary and limited representation.

In addition, moments of connection and interaction, which present as micro narratives, reveal brief glimpses of a broader story expanding out from these fragments. There is a small exchange in *koan aing* where a boy grabs a bag of fruit off a younger girl and searches through for a piece for himself. The little girl wanders off, apparently unconcerned. Another young girl, slightly taller than the boy runs over to get a piece of fruit too. However, just as she reaches into the bag the boy picks it up and returns it to the original young girl, denying the tall girl a share of the food. It’s a small moment, taking up around 10 seconds of screen time but from it we can extrapolate relationships and patterns of preference that might structure such a deliberate denial to share. This exchange is recognisable as something that might occur amongst children in a range of other cultural contexts but it also speaks of a very specific instance resulting from the particular network of relations at play in creating this moment.



Figure 134 Still from *How many ways to say you?*
Koan aing: a moment of denial and preference

The section titled *neak sreay* (formal address to a female acquaintance) focuses on an exchange between two women in a provincial fruit and vegetable market. The seller is expressive, wagging her finger and waving her arms. The customer is subdued. We can't see her face for the big, floppy hat that she is wearing. She is concentrated on counting out the notes to pay for the vegetables she is buying. The seller seems to be lecturing or admonishing her customer who is quiet and seemingly unmoved by the display. To emphasise the tone of this interaction I used motion effects to create a sense of divergent spaces for the two women. While we first see them in a two shot together, in their subsequent single shots time behaves differently for each one. Aside from the moments where she looks at the camera, the seller is shown in real time as she was originally recorded. For the impassive customer, time is slowed so that she moves at her own pace, to all intents unaffected by the reproaches that are directed at her. It is a way of interpreting the observational material and drawing out the sense of a moment that could otherwise pass without remark. Even though it arises from my subjective response to the situation it is a way to tease out the dynamics of the encounter and convey a sense of the individuals involved as people with lives that extend beyond the images in this documentary.



Figure 135 Still from *How many ways to say you?*
Example from neak sreay of an exchange in the
marketplace



Figure 136 Still from *How many ways to say you?*
Example from neak sreay of an exchange in the
marketplace

The filmed interactions demonstrate the relationships that each *you* word describes and are part of a strategy to add dimension to the otherwise abstract concepts that language attempts to convey. However, the clear boundaries of the inner frame indicate the limits of these representations. The people depicted don't simply stand in as archetypes to help explain a word. The specificities of the filmed context and the exchanges witnessed point to something more than is being represented. In *nieung* (used when addressing a girl under 20 years) we see two young men and a girl playing rock, paper, scissors. Over the course of the game, through their playful banter and teasing a sense of the relationship between them all emerges. All of them are workers at one of the historical buildings in the vicinity of Angkor Wat. As the scene plays out questions emerge about their life beyond this scene and the complex web of relationships that could be imagined. The familiarity and pleasure in each other's company indicates much more than a simple game to pass the time.



Figure 137 Still from *How many ways to say you?*
Nieung: a moment of banter and play points to lives that extend beyond the confines of this film.

The footage for the documentary was captured under conditions that are similar to those of a street photographer with no pre-arranged or pre-scripted sequences. Over the course of a journey through Cambodia, the process of gathering footage followed an approach of collecting moments of encounter and connection along the way. Occasions of visiting provincial centres, small villages, town markets and the tourist magnet of Angkor Wat offered opportunities to meet with local people as I travelled by public transport and on foot. The combination of a few basic English phrases (on the part of locals), my fairly sketchy grasp of Khmer and the process of filming prompted many exchanges and the gift of time in halting conversation. Using a standard definition prosumer video camera, filming took place with the small in-built LCD screen most often turned towards the subjects. This enabled me to capture the looking back of subjects as they are both watching themselves and returning the unblinking stare of the camera. However, this wasn't a longitudinal filming process associated with an ethnographic methodology. These are brief glimpses and fragments accumulated over a three and a half week period of independent travel through Cambodia. So while the material may have an observational appearance, the container or structure of the work reflects the fragmentary nature of the experience. These are snapshots rather than detailed studies. Nonetheless they are moments of significance, instances of impact drawn out from their quotidian context for contemplation.

The camera became a point of conversation and interaction with people, as those standing with me at the camera would tell those in front that they were on camera and what they could see. In this respect subtitling of the material became an important tool by which to reveal the content of conversations and responses to the process of filming and to shift impressions of passive, compliant subjects. In the sections *koan aing*, *nieung*, *borng* and *loak yiey* there are clear references by people off camera to the fact that they are being photographed.²⁸ The first group of boys dragging branches in the section *koan aing* pause as the others standing with me at the camera inform them that they are being filmed. As the boys draw closer to the camera in the section titled *aing* (friendly address to an equal or younger person, otherwise considered to be insulting) the subtitles reveal their joking and teasing. Clearly emboldened by the apparent cluelessness of the outsider who does not even flinch at the ruckus, their antics escalate until they are literally screaming at the image of themselves in the LCD screen of the camera. The subtitles show the subjects' awareness of the camera and reveal the way that there is a speaking back and discussion of the videoing process.

²⁸ The Khmer word for the verb to photograph, *roop tort*, can be heard frequently during these sections in particular.

In filming, I have frequently taken a position of watching for moments of interaction and absorbing the scenes on which I have trained the camera. While filming can have the effect of taking one out of the current, physical moment, in this instance, the camera actually facilitated a way of looking that was more akin to accretion than analysis. It became a way to approach understanding rather than an attempt to subdue, preserve and pin down the world in front of the lens. The section *khluen* (a friendly address to an equal or younger person) is a montage of people passing by in the street. As I observed their movements, following them with my camera, I would also fall into step with them or keep their pace as I panned with them. For example, in the footage at the start of *khluen* a young man is herding cattle back from grazing by the river. He approaches, draws level, acknowledges me and the camera with a *soo-a s'day* (hello) while discussing the event of being filmed with people in nearby houses and then continues on. All this while I hold him in the frame by turning the camera with his movements and then following behind as he moves on. This kind of physical matching provides an additional active dimension to perceiving the scene that goes beyond passive reception. The camera movement follows a practice of noticing and attending to events that aims to draw out details and particularities. By the same token it was also important to acknowledge moments where I needed to put the camera aside and be present, letting my memory be the record rather than have a recorded image become my memory.

The footage gathered is strongly focused on scenes from everyday life in rural Cambodia – a young girl combing her hair and chatting with friends, a woman selling fruit and vegetables at the markets, a brother and sister collecting water from the well, a group of boys playing by the river. This focus on quotidian activities assists in establishing links with an observational mode as the camera frequently occupies the position of outsider observer. In some instances this application of an observational mode occurs at a level of quite faithful interpretation with long takes, fidelity to location sound and a sense of watching and waiting for life to unfold. For example, the section titled *borng* consists of a single shot covering the action as the two subjects load up the water they have collected and carry it across open ground before disappearing behind a building. Playing out in real time, we get a sense of their familiarity with the task as they adjust the level of the water in the buckets, attach their loads to the shoulder poles and briskly make their way via the most direct route possible. The single uncut shot allows us to take time and gives us some experience of the duration of the event. Through the effect of photogénie it also catches at the spark of encounter between filmed and filmer through the panning movement of the camera, covert glances at the camera and the final brief return to wave goodbye.

On another level, while all the material in the film results from an observational approach to capturing sound and image, in some sections the footage has been reworked during post-production in a way that recalls the expressive editing style of Dziga Vertov in *Man with a movie camera*. For example in the section titled *barang* (used when referring to foreigners) a much more fragmented approach has been taken to editing the material to create a sense of patterns and intersections. With all the footage having been gathered from around the temples in the region of Angkor Wat a somewhat whimsical impression is created of the place being consumed by foreigners moving across the landscape. Pairing this kind of thematic approach to editing with the realist observational style of most of the footage invokes notions of authenticity and ingrained expectations of truthfulness that are based upon the appearance of eyewitness and direct capture of the pro-filmic scene.

Interestingly though, not all examples of what may appear to be expressive editing are the result of combinations created in post-production. In one particular case the chance synchronisation between location sound and image worked unaided to augment the expressive power of the scene. In the final shot of the *koan aing* section a boy runs at full speed from the road, up the side of a bank and along in front of a house. Accompanying this section of the shot is the sound of a motorbike revving its engine and travelling a small distance. The sound becomes an expression of the energy displayed by the boy as he puts on a burst of speed and then slows to a halt. Although it might seem like a juxtaposition that was created in post-production, this moment of metaphoric serendipity is actually sound that was recorded on location synchronously with the images. The combination is an example of Yu's observation that "everything in the world is poetry" and lineation has ordered the "raw materials of life to make them into art" (Crespi 2009). In this instance it was the lineation created through the framing of the camera (following the trajectory of the running boy) in combination with the response pattern of the microphone that allowed it to simultaneously pick up the sound of an unseen motorbike nearby. Out of a field of many possible combinations, chance resulted in this particular linkage; observation and a practice of noticing and sifting has seen it selected and included in the final edit.

In other instances poetic lineation has been a way to bridge the openness of the observational material and the essayistic intentions "to know / that thing you must know" (Carson 2000) so that the work approaches Trinh's ideal of not speaking about but speaking nearby (1982). Similar to the way that Koppel described *sleep furiously, How many ways to say you?* is an evocation of place rather than being about it. Through the experience of the work, and the

significance placed on the duration of shots and sequences to produce a sense of time unfolding, there are opportunities to linger on moments of quotidian beauty. As time is spent watching and listening to people, situations and otherwise passing instances, there is space to explore how each new encounter might connect with the title word of each section and the ideas behind the film overall. The use of slowed motion in sections such as *neak sreay*, *preah teic kun*, *loak minh*, *loak yiey* and *aing* literally become a way to unfold time, extending and sitting with moments that would otherwise pass quickly by. In *loak yiey* the technique approaches a stillness that enables passage into an alternate way of understanding so that an older woman, water, butterflies and a carved face are brought into relation to find different pathways of meaning. In *aing* the slowed motion of the boys practicing their flying martial arts kicks takes us for a moment into the reality where they are fearless fighters lying to waste all opponents in their path. As these moments combine with long dissolves, blurred intervals between sections and an underlying feeling of nothing (and yet everything) happening, a languid flow develops that mimics a sense of time that for me is connected to that time and that place.

Through using a frame within the frame, motion effected video (slow motion and time-lapse), filters to create different visual textures, long dissolves and text on-screen the constructed nature of the work is made apparent. The aesthetic treatment is part of a conceptual approach that seeks to address what has yet to be thought through images, their appearance and combination. In embracing a Deleuzian notion of the “cinematic thought machine”(Huygens 2007), I am working to draw out aspects of intuitive and perceptual knowledge through the very particular aesthetic approach of this film. This is not an attempt to duplicate reality but to create an experience of the film in itself.

Meaning is not immediately apparent in *How many ways to say you?* and there are occasions where subtle effects have been used to create unease or questioning. In the section *mit aing* (meaning comrade) the background footage of moving backwards through a corridor of pillars creates an impression of the receding walls pressing in on the inset image, forcing it to become very gradually smaller within the overall frame. Combined with the flight of birds as a symbol of the upheaval and loss of life during the time of the Khmer Rouge, the intended effect is to create an imperceptible disturbance in the overall order prompting a shift that may draw the viewer closer as they struggle “toward that thing [they] should know”(Carson 2000). Dwelling on the quotidian is in tension with the fragmentary structure of the film and ultimately the effect is to reinvigorate the act of looking through a process of defamiliarisation.

In contrast to a stricter interpretation of an observational mode of production, the sense of an authorial voice is strongly foregrounded in *How many ways to say you?* through use of aesthetic techniques that undercut the realist style of the footage. Technique has been emphasised rather than made to seem invisible across the whole film, from the opening sequence that starts in abstraction and then continues to lay text over the realist depiction of the passing riverside landscape through to the final stuttering time-lapse of a town waking up. The section titled *preah teic kun* (a lay person addressing a monk) has been constructed without directly depicting monks. Instead their presence is implied through shadows, overlaid images, movement through spaces and objects associated with religious practice. In the section titled *loak yiey* (address to a woman of your grandparents' generation) footage of an older woman is combined with images of a deep, dark pool of water, a kaleidoscope of butterflies and an ancient, serene face carved in the stone of a river bed. The combination is enigmatic with many interpretations possible. The intention is to open up a space for contemplation rather than determine a set way of seeing.

This highlighting of formal choices is part of a reflexive strategy that attempts to negotiate some of the previously discussed ethical problems of an observational visual style. Another aspect of my response to ethical concerns has been to use direct address by the on-screen subjects. While there are sections where the subjects appear unaware of the camera, I have worked to balance this by emphasising the moments where the subjects look back and engage with my presence. In the section titled *loak* (between close but polite male friends) some of the men in the orchestra look directly at the camera with a gaze that is as unflinching as that of the camera. In the section titled *loak minh* (address to an older woman on friendly terms), after looking at the camera for some time the main subject appears to tire of the camera's presence and turns away, only to return in the next shot in a more active and performative way. In some of these direct looks there is a challenge, in others a recognition but in addressing the camera the fiction of filming as if not there is shattered.²⁹

In this chapter I explored the effect of combining poetic and observational approaches in documentary across four examples. In line with the thirst for knowledge associated with the documentary project, the poem, *First Chaldaic Oracle* provides a description of a poetic methodology for coming to know "that thing you should know" (Carson 2000). With that in mind I have considered how the examples of *Jade green station*, *The 3 rooms of melancholia*, *sleep furiously* and *How many ways to say you?* approach their subjects from multiple

²⁹ Further effects of direct address will be discussed in chapter 4.

perspectives, presenting lateral and often oblique views, offering impressions that accumulate into a point-of-view over the course of each film. These films draw the audience into connection with the material of the film using a wide range of aesthetic techniques that frequently defamiliarise the everyday and stimulate perceptual responses. A durational approach raises an awareness of time and creates a sense of spaciousness that permits moments of intensity and contemplation. There is also a process of accretion occurring as through each return of subject, character and motif the work gathers depth and complexity. Meaning is often occluded, encouraging the audience to be more active in coming to grasp the underlying concepts. Without the clear markers of narrative structure, these are works that reward patience and close engagement. There is an intention to create the film as an experience in itself, running counter to a more traditional observational approach that seeks to film as if not present, in an attempt to duplicate reality.

In the next chapter I discuss how this idea of the work as an experience in itself is taken further through non-realist experimental technique and multi-screen installation. Through a series of examples that have been produced within an art practice context I examine the implications of extending documentary beyond broadcast forms, considering the shifts that occur and the possibilities that might be created.

Chapter 3

The poetic work of documentary in artistic spaces

Where the study of documentary has mostly been concerned with single channel works screened in cinema, on television or online, this chapter analyses the impact of the gallery space and an artistic context on poetic explorations of the real. By including creative works exhibited within an art practice context, my intention is to extend the range of work that can be considered and imagined through the framework of a poetic approach to documentary. A unifying feature within the works presented for discussion in this chapter is a cinematic approach to exhibition. Using and foregrounding a range of audio, visual and spatial techniques, they are able to draw affective connections that can aid an expansion of understanding and feeling. Employing the aesthetics of defamiliarisation, the manner in which these works are presented offers insights into different ways to activate spectator response. In this chapter I explore how art practice can engage with aspects of a poetic approach to documentary, bringing with it an already well-established practice of considering the impact of materials and technique.

This is liminal and largely under theorised territory for documentary. In considering an expanded field that extends beyond traditional broadcast and cinematic forms, the discussion needs to accommodate the staging and scripting of elements as can be seen in the work of artists such as Isaac Julien (who will be discussed later in this chapter) and Fiona Tan (who will be discussed in chapter 4). These and other artists are addressing social issues through the multiple modes of expression employed in their moving image works in ways that are undeniably aligned with conceptions of documentary as established within the framework of Renov's "four fundamental tendencies of documentary" (1993, p. 21)³⁰ that was discussed in the first chapter of this thesis.

In many ways it is an essayistic style of exploration that occurs within a gallery context as connections are made across time, representational modes and subjects. The essay film is a

³⁰ 1) to record, reveal or preserve;
2) to persuade or promote;
3) to analyse or interrogate; and
4) to express

Renov later added "documentary's fifth function, the ethical function" (2007, p. 23) which will be discussed later in this chapter.

hybrid form that has been discussed in terms of its overlap with documentary practice by theorists such as Renov (2004), Alter (2007), Rascaroli (2009), Nichols (2010) and Corrigan (2011). As a formal approach it can be observed in the single channel work of filmmakers such as Chris Marker, Agnes Varda, Harun Farocki, Wim Wenders, Jill Godmilow, Trinh T Minh Ha, Kidlat Tahimik, Alexander Kluge, Chantal Ackerman, Ross McElwee, Su Friedrich, Werner Herzog, Patrick Keiller, Michael Moore and Errol Morris. Further, as Norah Alter has pointed out in her discussion of the work of Harun Farocki, “the essay has now been translated into the context of a three-dimensional installation” (2007, p. 54). With its remit of considering ‘what do I know’, the essay (based on the literary practice of Montaigne) is able to draw in diverse elements that don’t necessarily discriminate on the basis of the fictive versus the non-fictive. It is a practice that makes it possible to draw upon the potential of material to elucidate concepts and communicate complex processes of thought. Explorations can be liberated from the demands of three act narrative structures and can follow the non-linear paths of thought, memory and thematic interconnection.

Within this essayistic style, the work of documentary as it is displayed in a gallery has a permit to extend poetic investigations further into conceptual territory, engaging with technique and aesthetic experience as elements of an overall rhetorical strategy. As Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl describe it: “[a]rt compensates for the blind spots of journalism” (2008, p. 22) in its ability to transcend concerns for what might be newsworthy and examine areas of history and experience that might otherwise be overlooked. Operating at an intersection between art and documentary practice, the works discussed in this chapter engage with aspects of complexity, doubt and questioning. There is potential to explore affective, visceral and other personally impacting dimensions beneath the surface of ideas as the context frees the makers from overriding expectations for singular truths, incontestable representations of reality and expert testimony.

For the purposes of this chapter I have restricted the examples for discussion to non-interactive, screen based artistic works. As early steps in a theoretical process attempting to bridge the realms of art and documentary process, it is helpful to establish a tentative boundary around the area of discussion that is founded on similarities of screen practice with the addition, in two of the examples, of the experience of the work in the architectural space of a gallery exhibition environment. It is important to acknowledge though, that there is great potential to incorporate further elements of installation practice into gallery based documentary work. There are multiple examples of projects that go beyond the use of

multiple screen installations. Such works incorporate the display of objects and elements of interactivity while simultaneously exhibiting documentary tendencies and intentions. Indeed this combination of screen based material with the display of artefacts is a key aspect of museum practice, an area that may be considered to have a clearer affinity with documentary practice than does an artistic approach. However, examples from artistic practice that explore the poetic possibilities of documentary material provide more striking examples of how form can align with conceptual consideration for this study, with its strongly foregrounded concern for the operation of an aesthetic, screen based experience.

Over the last decade there has been a growing level of discussion about the so called “documentary turn” in contemporary art” (Nash 2008). Artists are increasingly engaging with non-fiction media forms such as “the document, the archive, the report and the documentary style” (Cramerotti 2009, p. 84) as a way to interrogate, subvert and “partly extend the media news process” (Cramerotti 2009, p. 83). As Renov argues:

[t]hese artists are drawn to the world ‘out there’ as documentarists have since the Lumière’s but shaped and informed by the world ‘in here,’ by their personal experience, cultural and sexual identities, their political and aesthetic engagements. There is a new balance being struck between subject and object and the result is a reinvention of documentary practice.
(2007, p. 14)

However, not all manifestations of the “documentary turn” in contemporary art” (Nash 2008) are engaging with poetic forms. It is in the examples where a poetic approach is applied to documentary material within an artistic context that I see potential to expand the possibilities for audience engagement. Accordingly it will be works that reflect this approach that will be the focus of this chapter. Strategies of aesthetic experience, defamiliarisation and context will be explored through four exemplary projects created within a framework of moving image art for what they might bring to a consideration of documentary practice. This will be followed up with discussion of the application of related concepts in my creative practice research work, *How many ways to say you?*. The first example I will discuss uses techniques of abstraction and the manipulation of time to extend the real into an arena of different perception.

Static no.12

The work *Static no. 12 (seek stillness in movement)* by Daniel Crooks (2010) manipulates vision of a moving meditation practice and uses it as a vehicle to force a rethinking of representations of chronology. The work is a single channel, high definition video that runs for 5 minutes 28

seconds. The video uses footage that Crooks shot using a RED camera³¹ of a man practicing tai chi in a Shanghai park. *Static no. 12* results from a creative practice involving the manipulation of small vertical slivers of pixels and is part of a collection of works by Crooks known as the *TimeSlice* series. The piece starts with the vision of the tai chi practitioner filmed in slow motion but otherwise untreated. It is a single, locked off shot emphasising the frontal nature of the composition and the space of the movements. Not long into the work, the screen divides into three parts as slices of stilled pixels are copied and added to a train of stilled movement. The section of pixel replication grows at different speeds throughout the work. The beginning of the change is quite swift and the smear of pixels extends quickly. This appears to reach a point of near stasis when the stretched pixels occupy approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of the screen.



Figure 138 Still representation from *Static no.12 (seek stillness in movement)*

As each vertical column of pixels is captured, that small section of time is held and then shifts to the left. These echoes of movement are frozen, passing across the screen as a smear of instants in time and space. Movement recommences when the slivers reconnect with pixels on the far left of the screen that were contiguous before they were sliced and frozen. It is a mind bending manipulation of both time and space, producing an extraordinary effect where we can examine the sequence of movements passing through a very narrow window.

There is a complete and very satisfying connection between the aesthetic techniques that Crooks is exploring and the subject being filmed. The choice to film a moving meditative practice that remains in a fairly contained area provides raw footage that is well suited to the time-slice technique. Although stretched and in some ways abstracted, the movements still retain coherence. The work becomes about a shifting of time and the linking of two pasts through the echoes of the movements. There is a sense of transcending quotidian time as we enter into the twofold time of the meditation – that of the subject’s absorption in his martial arts practice and our contemplation of the actions before us.

³¹ The RED Digital Cinema Company produces cameras able to capture moving images at very high resolutions that aim to replicate the image quality of 35mm film within a digital framework.

The sound plays a significant role in creating the feeling of yearning and reaching out to connect with this work. An enveloping aural landscape is created that uses sustained tones in a sound equivalent of the visual time slice technique. The sound track builds in harmonic complexity as the work develops, with bass notes introduced as the slices of pixels begin being stretched and smeared across the screen.

There is also something about the unique combination of aesthetic and intellectual approaches that makes *Static no.12* highly engaging. It is like a puzzle to be solved but at the same time it is giving us a highly privileged view of time and movement through space. The man's movements are already quite elastic and lithe. As a result, the stretching of pixels seems to occur like an extension of his movements. Indeed, the moment where the pixel stretch commences coincides with the action of the man stretching forward, out toward the plane of the viewer, in a gesture that could be warding us off or pulling us in.

As the work progresses, the sections of movement gradually spread further and further apart, connected in the middle by a growing smear of frozen but progressing pixels. Eventually it reaches the point where the smear is stretched out to full screen so that the man is eventually erased leaving a single column of replicated pixels, now transformed into horizontal lines of colour that fill the screen.

Within this quite formal exploration, Crooks has still managed to create a deeply affecting work. Despite the detached reserve of the locked off frame the spectator is absorbed into the act of watching as the subject of this work is transformed, laid out across time only to be reconstituted and then eventually erased. This is akin to the Bergsonian concept of *attention* which O'Sullivan describes as "a suspension of normal motor activity which in itself allows other 'planes' of reality to be perceivable (an opening up of the world beyond utilitarian interests)" (2001, p. 127). This kind of shift in intensity is central to the aesthetic experience and mesmerising effect of *Static no.12*.

Viewing the work as part of the Biennale of Sydney in 2010 was a highly engrossing experience. Installed in the Industrial Precinct on Cockatoo Island, Crooks' video sat in stark relief to the work- and age-worn surrounds of the ship builders' tool room in which it was shown. *Static no.12* was projected on a screen on the wall opposite the entry to this small cement box of a room. There was a black curtain to exclude light and a large box in the middle of the room, the sole purpose of which seemed to be to offer something to lean against or sit on while watching the work. In July it was cold out on the island and the room smelled of

damp. It was like a small, private screening room without the appointments that one might associate with such spaces. The sharp clarity and digital dissection of *Static no.12* in retrospect seem an odd choice for this location on some levels but at the time, the work was so powerfully entralling that awareness of the physical location was not the focus of attention. Separated from the stimulus of public spaces by the black curtain there was a feeling of transcending the bodily as absorption in the piece concentrated perception on the sound and images. As a relatively short work with looping playback it was possible to watch the video through from start to finish a couple of times. On emerging from the space the exquisite strangeness of the reworking of time and movement remained in mind, playing against the industrial echoes of the physical location of Cockatoo Island. In its reworking and rethinking of ways to conceive time and movement, *Static no.12* departs from an understanding of images as documentation of an event and creates a new experience that is made possible through the altered realm of the work. The next example, *Stati d'Animo* (Fairskye 2006), employs a lyrical and powerfully affecting approach in its rendering of the real to create an otherworldly, in-between space.

Stati d'Animo

Created by Sydney-based artist Merilyn Fairskye, *Stati d'Animo* (2006) was exhibited in multiple forms between 2004 and 2007, including as a stills series, a multi-screen installation and a single channel, short film. For the purpose of this discussion I will concentrate on the short film version of the work released in 2006 as greater access to this version allows me to discuss this iteration of *Stati d'Animo* in more detail.

The title of the work is a direct reference to three paintings of the same name by the Italian Futurist artist Umberto Boccioni. Boccioni's trio of paintings is set in a train station and explores "the psychological dimension of modern life's transitory nature" (The Museum of Modern Art 2010), hence the title *Stati d'Animo* which translates into English as *States of mind*. Through overlapping scenes, a density of line and shading, Boccioni captures a sense of the chaos of space, time and speed that is associated with modernity. This is overlaid with the multitude of emotions connected with the scenes of saying good bye (*Stati d'Animo I: the farewells*), leaving (*Stati d'Animo II: those who go*) and being left behind (*Stati d'Animo III: those who stay*). Human figures are not distinct from the surroundings but are caught up in the flurry of events, feeling and the built environment. In Fairskye's 2006 work, the setting has shifted to the airport and the medium is digital video art. Nonetheless it shares with Boccioni's

work a concern for the polarities of delight and unease associated with increasing mobility and the accelerating pace of life, updated from the machine age to the information age.

This account of the art historical context of *Stati d'Animo* (Fairskye 2006) may seem counter to an exploration of the poetic experience of the work, particularly in light of the approach by curators such as Dominique de Menil who sought to create a space where “poetry would be allowed to prevail over pedagogy” (Smart 2010, p. 13). In particular, de Menil’s curatorial approach accentuates the creation of aesthetic experiences as a means to promoting deeper audience connection to the material of the work. However, knowing the genealogy of Fairskye’s work is not to diminish the impact of her work as experience in itself but provides a starting point for furthering contemplation. There is undoubtedly value, even on a purely aesthetic level, in viewing *Stati d'Animo* (Fairskye 2006) as a work on its own merits. The ethereal quality of the images creates a yearning to reach out and grasp the pleasure of the visual representation, establishing a strong sense of connection through perceptual experience. However, knowledge of the allusions present in the work has the potential to deepen the experience as the viewer is equipped with a more robust set of access points to the material of the piece. I am suggesting an approach that considers form and context as co-creators of meaning.

Structured into five sections – *l'arrivo ARRIVAL*; *l'incrocio CROSSING*; *l'attesa WAITING*; *la partenza DEPARTURE*; and *l'addio FAREWELL* – *Stati d'Animo* evokes a sense of time in suspension, of lingering in an in-between place which many pass through on their way elsewhere. There is a sense of *dwelling* in the views of the airport offered to us even as the actual bodies in the space are made to seem transparent. Counter to the often frantic mood we might associate with going to the airport, here, there is a tone of calm observation. It is the airport environment but rendered as a zone of sublimation where bodies are transformed into spirits and where the character of time is radically altered.

Fairskye has stated that this is “not a work of investigative or ethnographic documentary” (2009), but that is not to say that this is not a documentary work of another kind. In its examination of movements through airports it is offering an evocation of experience as a context for us to contemplate stories of terrorist attacks, deportation, flight from conflict, the ill treatment of migrants and being stuck in between arrival and departure. It is an intersectional work between art and documentary that employs poetic methodologies to explore historical events and personal experiences relating to movements in and between international airports.

Footage was gathered between 2004 and 2005 while in transit at seventeen different local and international airport locations using “a Sony HDV camera hand-held, mostly at waist level” (Gallasch 2007). Permitting a discrete way of filming, this camera position also shifts our perspective from the usual eye level to a less familiar view. The effect is to focus our attention as much on the sensation of moving through a space as on what we might see on that journey.

In post-production, most of the interior footage showing people moving through the terminals was duplicated and re-laid over itself in up to 50 layers of video with ever decreasing opacity. Each layer was then offset in time by 1 frame (1/25 of a second) so that “by the time you got to layer fifty there was still a visible trace of all the preceding layers, including layer one, but from two seconds earlier” (Fairskye quoted in Gallasch 2007). As a result, movement and people in motion appear as traces while the slow or the still are more solid. Fairskye interprets it as “a visualisation of a temporal depth that is quite different from linear duration” (Gallasch 2007). This technique strongly references the pictorial style in the works by Boccioni. Fairskye presents sequences that capture the dynamism and sense of simultaneity shown in Boccioni’s *Stati* series. Her work is a depiction of stillness enfolded with movement, conveying an impression of people caught outside of time in a liminal *nowhere/anywhere* space. This technique of overlaying the same footage at a slight offset is the dominant visual feature of the work with around 46 out of the 74 separate shots in the work receiving this treatment.³²

There is a sharp sense of spatial dimensionality created when the hand held, layered footage captures movement through the airport spaces.³³ Although the figures in these shots seem flat and two dimensional they reveal the different planes³⁴ of space as their trace cuts through the foreground, middle ground and background of the composition. This sudden, shock perception of depth in the shot is particularly notable where the compositions are largely frontal so that planes in the distance receding away from the viewer are more clearly revealed. It is a shift that, rather than displaying a more realistic depiction of the space, makes us even more aware of the flatness of the projection or viewing screen. The effect is a product of the moving image in time, an illusion resulting from changes in camera perspective in a space that is perceived as continuous. It is the relationship between the layers in reference to each other that creates this sense of parallax distortion as our distance from figures closer to the camera apparently changes at a different rate to figures further away. Relieved of their solidity,

³² 24 of the shots are played at normal speed (including 5 shots with titles superimposed to signal a new section) with 3 shots slowed. The remaining shot – the final image in the film – is a split screen image with half displaying an image subjected to the layering effect and the other half showing untreated footage playing at normal speed.

³³ This is in comparison to the stationary camera footage and the overhead, high angle views looking down where the effect isn’t as marked.

³⁴ The term *plane* is used here in its geometrical sense as a slice of space along a dimensional axis.

moving figures become as paper phantoms, reduced to shadow puppets by the imbrication of offset time. While the image below gives some sense of the effect, it lacks the perspective change that results from image movement in time and so does not adequately reproduce the shock that is generated by the projected video.³⁵



Figure 139 Still from *Stati d'Animo*

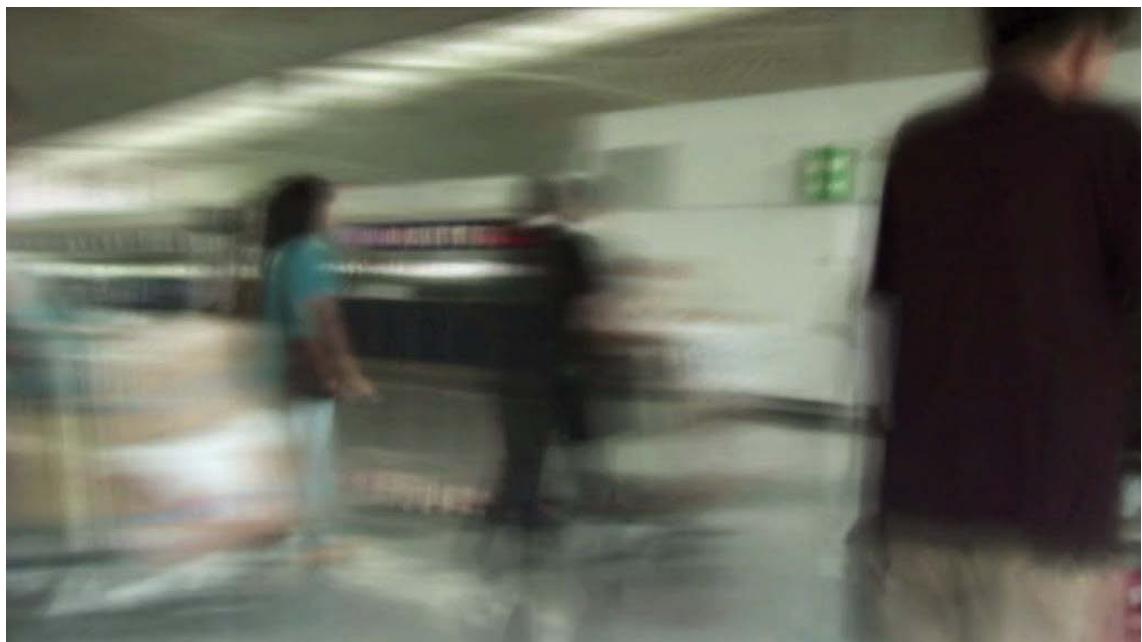


Figure 140 Still from *Stati d'Animo*.

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate how parallax distortion is used to emphasise dimensionality as the camera moves through the space.

³⁵ The parallax distortion effect is most noticeable in a shot that starts at 6 minutes 26 seconds into the work. Figures 2 and 3 are still images from this shot.

It is ironic that this hyper-intense approach to editing is the very technique that aids the work to achieve a disembodied sense of flow. The layering of the same footage back over itself but at a slight time offset creates a sense of the space that, while referring to a concrete perception, is more evocative of a state of mind and a state of being. This visual technique has the effect of drawing the viewer into the point of view of the camera through a rendering that is highly subjective and yet originates from documentary style footage. In its transformation of perceptions of time and the solidity of objects and people in space this visual approach creates a possibility for different looking. When I look at these images I too feel loosened from bodily limitations and experience. There is a lifting up and out of the everyday. The sensation is of floating – a ghostlike experience of being there but not solidly so. We can move through the more concrete space with the other phantoms, freed from physical restrictions, and opened to the possibilities of looking anew at this strangely familiar, transitional space.

Another visual technique employed in the work is the use of split screens to combine four views of graphically similar footage. Coming before the titles and situated as a prelude to the other sections, the very first image in the work shows four views out of an aeroplane window at a high altitude. The presentation becomes a formal exercise that shifts us from passively looking at a view of the clouds to a more active process of comparing the different views. It creates a feeling of ambivalence as we look at the four views but are not immersed in the views. This kind of formal treatment seems to hold us back from a first person observation and creates a detached way of looking that is more focused on the split screen juxtaposition. The display of competing elements in a split screen composition opens up possibilities for viewers to choose a particular quadrant on which to focus their attention. Combined with the voiceover of a sky marshal discussing the use of deadly force, the four views within the one compositional frame produces a dissociative effect that makes what he is saying seem abstracted and unreal. It is an effect similar to flying itself in that when you are in the air you do not have a clear sense of the speed at which you are travelling. The vision on the four parts of the split screen shows movement in the landscape that is more associated with slow progress – the landscape below just seems to inch slowly past. The high speeds at which the plane is actually travelling are not evoked and this is compounded by the multiple views of a similar scene. In effect, the split screen draws attention to the limits of each component view and we can compare the relative changes across all four screens.



Figure 141 Still of opening image from *Stati d'Animo*

Sound is also a key component in creating the aesthetic experience of the work. Aside from one eight second stretch of silence at the end of section three, *l'attesa* WAITING, there is a continuous backdrop of sound combining music, airport terminal atmosphere recordings, radio communications, recreations of interview accounts, an interview with a sky marshal and general airport announcements. In the context of the otherwise continuous sound, the short period of silence – and it is complete silence – creates a strange moment of tension between audio and images. On one level it serves to underline the gravity and tone of fear that is present in the preceding statement by the sky marshal that, “Prior to 9/11, you know this country had never experienced anything like that before. And you know now that we’ve experienced a lot of well, this country has experienced that, um this country is going to be more on guard for that. But that’s not to say that they won’t try [ends with reverb]”. On another level, juxtaposed with the image of a man asleep while seated on a chair in a terminal lounge, the silence has a questioning aspect that prompts us to wonder over issues of readiness and the appropriateness of responses by security officials.

The different sound elements are layered over each other to create a weave of audio that foregrounds strands at various points in an evocation of flows of consciousness and attention. Some sound elements return throughout the work, with the repetitions gathering new meanings through each different context. In the first section, *l'arrivo* ARRIVAL, a four bar guitar phrase from the song that reoccurs throughout the film is looped and repeated. The circularity of the guitar line raises issues of repetition of processes. The phrase seems inescapable. Even in its melodic flow it evokes a relentless impression of schedules and

procedures that must be followed. Tied to the layered and motion effected images it also reinforces an idea of people cycling through the space, repeating motions and following well-worn pathways through the space.

Although not at first recognisable as such, one of the audio streams is a close to verbatim reconstruction of audio recorded during the final moments of American Airlines flight 11, the first of two passenger flights deliberately flown into the twin towers of the World Trade centre on September 11, 2001. The first time we hear the audio from the flight 11 communications our attention is only partial as a result of the way it is mixed in with other elements. There is a reverb delay and the sound is layered with location atmosphere sound from inside an airport terminal and the repeated guitar phrase as musical accompaniment. The flight 11 recreation is sound at the edge of our perception, heard for its texture, for the communication process it represents, for the quality of the exchange rather than for the specific details. Attention is only drawn closely to the events unfolding in sound toward the end of the first section, *I'arrivo ARRIVING*, as the guitar loop is stripped away, laying bare the phrase "I think we've lost her". In paring back the other sound elements these words become foregrounded in the mix and are juxtaposed with the sight of an American Airlines plane taxiing down a runway and disappearing via a dissolve that recalls Méliès' magical editing illusions. When the flight 11 audio returns again in the final section, *I'addio FAREWELL*, we are drawn in to listen more closely as we stretch out to understand what we only partially heard before. In this reaching there is a more focused and active degree of engagement with the sound. Consequently, as we strive to process the shifting audiovisual material there lies the possibility of greater connection that goes beyond intellectual processing. As I choose where to concentrate my attention I filter out other distractions and am present in the act of coming to know. There is a more active participation in decoding the material and the engagement is intensified as a result.

On the return of the flight 11 audio in the final section we are able to listen more attentively as it is foregrounded in the mix and we are already somewhat familiar with its style from hearing it before. Consequently, the paring back of sound in this final section is profoundly affecting, indeed chilling. The music stops and there is a sudden cut in the exchange between flight attendant Betty Ong and the ground crew. As an audio echo of the disappearing plane at the end of the first section, the significance of what we are hearing is revealed. Suddenly this woman who has been trying to make herself understood over the last 5 minutes just ceases to exist. After the final repeated phrase, "I think we've lost her", the vision cuts to a black screen.

A split screen fades up from black with one side showing the interior of an airport express train and the other showing the view out the window as the train goes past a dense wall of high rise apartments. These images resonate with the just finished audio creating a vision of a mass of humanity and one life lost amongst many.

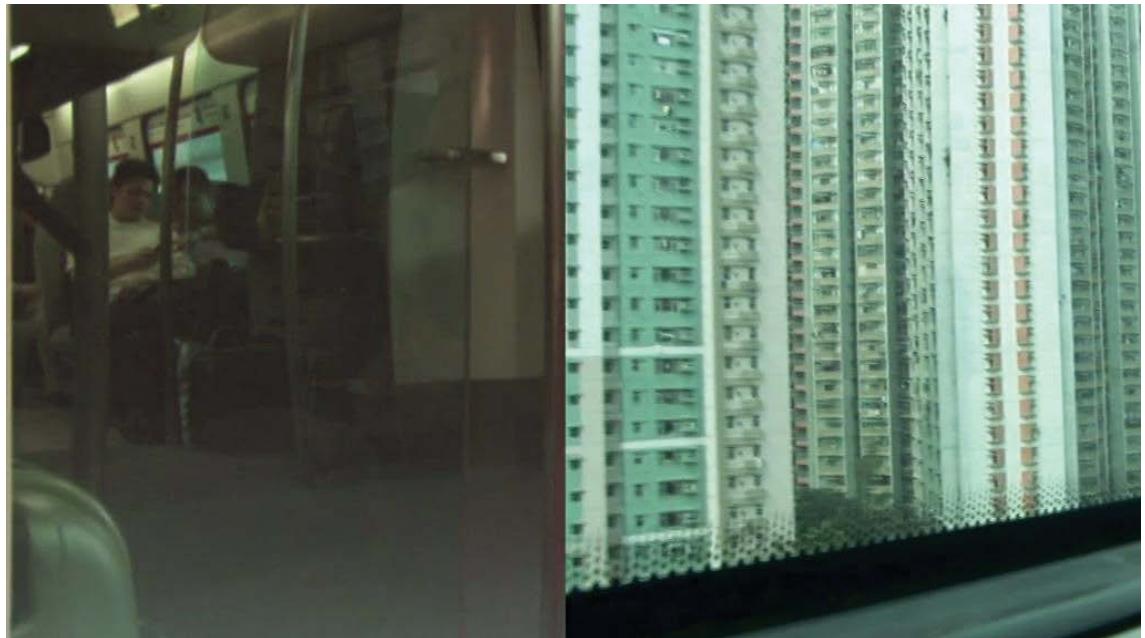


Figure 142 Still of final image from *Stati d'Animo*

The combination of music, location sound and audio recreations in *Stati d'Animo* creates an aesthetic experience as a metaphorical in-between space recalling the in-between-ness of the airport. This is an extension of the real into a realm of different perception. Shifted from contemplations of the real, concrete, reproducible world we move into an experience of place that is individual but shared, personal and simultaneously communal. As Peter de Bolla characterises it: “[a]rt experiences are singular in the sense that they can only occur to the perceiving subject—they are subjective in the way Kant describes—but they do not belong to that subject, nor are they made by the subject” (2002, p. 34). It is in this shared but singular experience that a potential for connection may lie.

The work as an experience in itself

The realisation of the work as an experience in itself perhaps originates in a choice to express ideas poetically rather than via logical statements. By focusing on constructing an aesthetic experience, the maker is anticipating a responsive, active and engaged audience with “an openness to the unexpected with its dangers and obstacles, not as a safe haven from history, but a reminder of the encounters with otherness and the new that await those who, despite everything, are willing and able to embark on that voyage” (Jay 2004, p. 360). This choice is a

move away from didacticism but not necessarily away from rhetorical strategies that are aimed at opening conversation and provoking consideration. Where pedagogical framing may dampen the affective force of the work, a poetic experience may enable a more intuitive approach to knowing. Works such as *Static no. 12* and *Stati d'Animo* are undeniably aesthetic in character and as such employ a range of audiovisual methods of evocation.

Rather than solely indicating the originating event, the works become metaphorical representations pointing to ideas and experiences beyond the immediate range of the subject. Direct reference may be de-emphasised and the sign may become more abstracted and expressionistic. These works take a deliberately figurative approach to their subject material, through allusion, visual abstraction, fragmented editing, unexpected juxtaposition, awareness of duration and experimental sound. The experience of the work becomes a way of knowing and thinking, with attendant forms of truth and authenticity. As Hans Georg Gadamer explains:

[i]n the experience of art we see a genuine experience induced by the work, which does not leave him who has it unchanged, and we enquire into the mode of being of that which is experienced in this way. So we hope to understand better what kind of truth it is that encounters us there. (quoted in de Bolla 2002, p. 32)

These works embrace evocation as a guiding principle instead of acting as documents that serve to provide proof or evidence. Freed from requirements for objective representations, the artist has licence to draw upon the full range of aesthetic tools at their disposal. Consequently the sensory dimension is called upon, memories are triggered and critical engagement is created anew through experiences that stimulate imagination and require an active response. A strategy of evocation then can be viewed as a clear statement that "the maker is less concerned with 'accurate' representation (a notion called into question by the powerful critiques of ethnography since the mid-1980s) and more with outlining the contours of experience, memory or sensation" (Renov 2007, p. 19).

The persuasive and compelling power of the aesthetic experience lies in the way formal elements (such as composition, editing, and soundtrack) make it possible for an audience to bring informal elements (such as their experience, affect, memory, preconceptions and subjectivity) to bear on the work. Occurring within a contemplative space that activates perceptual awareness and using form to focus the quality of attention, the aesthetic practice makes connections that we can feel deeply. This is persuasion achieved by both presence and absence. In the sharing of insights to experience, through the evocation of a shared sensory

dimension or through gaps in representation that inspire an affective yearning for the partial, imagined connection, the aesthetic experience allows for a moment of pause and different attention. In Lauren Berlant's words:

the aesthetic experience gifts the good life with a different pacing than the working life, donating to the worker the privilege of slowness, of time to have a thought/experience whose productivity is subjective, connecting the sensorium to something that *feels* non-instrumental, absorbing and self-affirming. (2004, p. 449)

Although framed within a critique of the sensory turn, Berlant's description does point to a notion of a privileged viewing space that allows us to see things in ways that are not always possible through direct experience, recalling notions of photogénie discussed in the previous chapter.

At the same time, this withdrawal into what Joyce terms "the pure act of seeing" (2008) (or hearing or experiencing, for that matter) enables us to deeply engage with the "bundle of affects" that is art "waiting to be reactivated by a spectator or participant" (O'Sullivan 2001, p. 126). This creation of an affective proximity through an aesthetic experience is where I see potential for audience connection – a moment of recognition that is prior to the assignment of meaning. It becomes a strategy of mutual interrogation as the audience reaches out to ask "what are you showing me" while the work may retort "what do you see?". In attempting to grasp the knowledge that is embedded in the representation (that may be incomplete, opaque, lateral or intertextual) the viewer has a personal encounter with the work that activates multiple modes of perceiving. As de Menil makes plain, this is a strategy where "the work of art 'invades' one's territory so strongly that it 'demands a response'" (quoted in Smart 2010, p. 170).

The offer of that which is other than what may be directly perceivable in everyday (and thereby often unexamined) existence is a key point of differentiation from a version of the documentary project that claims direct linkages to the real. The work as an experience in itself creates combinations, choreographies and heightened states that encourage the audience to look anew at things with which they are familiar or to spend time with things as yet unknown. In setting aside attempts to replicate the world outside as we routinely perceive it, sound and image are permitted to "do far more than merely copy the eye" (Renov 2007, p. 15), or ear for that matter.

These poetic translations of reality are acts of defamiliarisation and in them lie the ethical and political possibilities for the audience to be personally changed by their contact with the work. This is surely the hope and motivation behind many artworks that seek to impact visitors and provoke critical responses rather than passive consumption. As Anne Ring Petersen argues, “the discourses on art have never centred so much on the viewer’s reception and participation as today; the heyday of ‘the performative viewer,’ ‘interactive art,’ ‘relational aesthetics’ and various kinds of reception studies” (Ring Petersen 2010). Indeed it is a focus that is encouraged through institutional calls for projects and funding that ask questions such as: “How do you envisage people engaging with your work? What sort of experiences do you hope to inspire? What do you want audiences to leave the artwork feeling?” (Australian Network for Art and Technology).

I am not intending to declare that the choice to create a poetic documentary as an aesthetic experience in its own right is necessarily a proselytizing strategy. However, there is political potential in the very form that a work may take. In refusing a didactic approach the work of art may function to promote active spectatorship. As opposed to the more highly determined form of an evidentiary approach to documentary, the viewer of an artwork needs to shift out of habitual, at times passive, modes of reception and engage with an often multi-layered approach to knowing. Even so, attempts to use techniques of defamiliarisation within an artistic framework are not universally successful. There can be high levels of distraction associated with the gallery exhibition experience and forms of viewer resistance and inattention need to be acknowledged. Nonetheless, there is great potential for new knowledges to be revealed through approaches that privilege aesthetic considerations.

Denigration of art as *only* about aesthetics or beauty denies the way that form and our experience of a work is an aspect of how we come to knowledge. A concern for aesthetics does not erase concern for ideas. As visual, auditory, spatial and kinaesthetic techniques are mobilised, differently impacting levels of experience can shift ways of perceiving and understanding. In responding to Winston’s critique of Grierson and his team as “more interested in ‘prettifying aesthetics’ and the search for the picturesque” (2007, p. 17) Renov asserts that:

[t]he formal construction of a work is far from an add-on or surface feature that the ‘prettifying’ label would suggest (aesthetics as the icing on the cake). Rather the formal domain is about the work of construction, the play of the signifier, the vehicle of meaning for every instance of human communication. The formal regime is the very portal of sense-making; it

determines the viewer's access to the expression of ideas, its power to move and transform an audience. (2007, p. 17)

As visual, auditory, spatial and kinaesthetic techniques are mobilised, differently impacting levels of experience can shift ways of perceiving and understanding. These are knowledges that, while perhaps not based in logical processes, are nonetheless deeply experienced and can accrete considerable force.

The next example sets the viewer off balance through an initial lack of clarity so that they must reach out to discern what they are perceiving. This opacity is a key element in the work's strategy for facilitating audience engagement.

Cows

Cows is a short experimental video by Argentinean artist Gabriela Golder (2002). Originally viewed in competition as part of the single channel screening program of *Videobrasil 2003*, the work creates a confronting and disturbing vision of which the spectator must struggle to make sense. Ostensibly, the piece is about an incident that occurred in March 2002 when a truck transporting cattle overturned. However, in her reworking of the broadcast television news footage captured at the scene, Golder creates a piece that goes far beyond the original, presumably straightforward reporting of the event.

The incident occurred in the city of Rosario Argentina, the third largest city in the country with a population of around 1.1 million people at the time. There is footage of men and boys gathered around in small groups, watching, skinning carcasses and carrying away large sides of beef. It is a strange scene of confusion and opportunism but also focussed, deprivation-induced cooperation as people work together to get their share of *carne*. We only come to know something of what is actually going on through a single title that comes at the end of the work. The title reads "March 25th. 2002. Rosario, Argentina. About 400 people slaughtered cows that some minutes before had spread on the asphalt when the truck transporting them fell down." In its bald simplicity, the title evokes the kind of matter-of-fact truth telling we might expect of a brief television news item. However, with the explanation coming at the very end of the work we are able to contrast the objective disinterest of words that tells us nothing of the experience, with the "version of hell"³⁶ that Golder has created through the sulphurous hue of the reworked footage.

³⁶ This is how a student described the work after an in-class screening.

With a duration of 4 minutes 15 seconds and constructed of just 13 shots, the video is in the tradition of a formal experiment that uses techniques of repetition, extreme slow motion, image degradation and abstraction to explore the visual textures and qualities of the found footage. Golder treats the video image like raw material to be manipulated, sculpted and shaped. She extracts moments of pause and stilled frames from an imagined frenzy of activity for our consideration. The soundtrack is powerfully atmospheric but at a significant remove from the likely synchronous sound.

There is something funereal about the work. The images, in their flickering incompleteness, are fleeting at the same time as they are extending and freezing the passage of this incident. The dirge-like tones of the opening strains of music sustain this mood, as they plod and pulse in time with the flicker of the image. The sound of static mixes with and then overtakes the music. The crackles of white noise become something of a metaphor as we try to *tune* in the images to make things clearer. However, the sound is also a break with the aesthetic of the sweeping, minor key instrumentation. It signifies something else, a level of representation and distance, of mediation, with the message not quite getting through.



Figure 143 Still from Cows

As the original news footage has been reworked the images have taken on a yellow, hellish hue.

The images are textural before they are comprehensible and so produce a haptic visuality. As Marks defines it, “[i]n haptic *visuality*, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch” (2000, p. 162 [original emphasis]). In the case of *Cows*, this allows us to stay with the aesthetics of the image for a moment longer before the impact of the event overwhelms us. The opaque quality of the images produces a feeling of reaching in through the surface of the screen as we try to make sense of what we are seeing. Sections of black and silence punctuate the vivid yellowish tones of the news footage. These provide small moments of respite from the assault of the images and noise, offering spaces for pause as we grasp for understanding.

This aesthetic treatment allows Golder to explore social concerns such as alienation, globalisation and poverty. Significantly, through its metonymic evocation of the spirit of the times the work acknowledges the impact on the local population of the economic crisis experienced in Argentina from the late 1990s to the early 2000s.



Figure 144 Still from *Cows*

Focusing in on parts of the frame and using visual filters abstracts the original material creating a haptic visuality.

While the meaning we derive from a work such as *Cows* fundamentally derives from world events, in its use of aesthetic technique as metaphor and formal exploration it is also open to individual interpretation. This complexity inspires repeated returns for consideration as we work to unpack and explain the video to ourselves. The piece also exists at multiple levels of

experience. There is the initial purely affective, aesthetic experience that sees us responding to the sensory elements that impact on us – tempo, colour, haptic imagery, and level of intelligibility – but then in each return we make our own series of connections that accrete layers of meaning and complexity.



Figure 145 Still from Cows

The mundane journalistic approach to composition has been rendered in an abstract aesthetic that obscures direct access to meaning.

There is a sense of trying to reach beyond the surface into something more. The obscure representation, the striking use of form, the space that is opened up through the aesthetic approach stays on, as we turn over in our mind this wonderfully, horribly strange work of art. This process allows a non-linear experience of the work, drawing on the power of our memory to make connections backwards and forwards and perhaps to remake the work in the context of our subjectivity. It is a work that forcefully confronts us through its particular, harshly degraded digital aesthetic.

Aesthetics of defamiliarisation

The poetic form of works such as *Cows* draws attention to the effect of the audiovisual combinations in operation. As viewers we must interrogate the sound and images for what they may reveal. This gives what might otherwise be considered mundane images a potency

as we search them thoroughly for significance and intent. For the projects under consideration in this chapter, their context as works of art leads us to expect greater depth alongside an awareness that we will perhaps need to put greater effort into coming to know “that thing we should know” (Carson 2000). The technique of defamiliarisation is at play here, forcing us to look harder at the world in order to discern what might be interesting about what we are seeing. As Shklovsky outlines in his 1917 essay, *Art as Technique*:³⁷

art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important* (1998, p. 18 [original emphasis]).

There are multiple, interlocking dimensions to this delaying of comprehension. In prolonging the process of perception there is a desire to intensify the intersubjective connection. For the spectator, the amount of time spent engaging with an aesthetic experience may be a measure of how they value the encounter and the pleasure that can be derived from it. Simultaneously the sustained encounter also allows for the philosophies behind the approach to seep into ways of perceiving the world and potentially changing the criteria for how the work is valued and the frameworks of understanding.

The act of filming in itself is a process that marks events, people, animals and objects out for special attention. As a reflection of subjective creative choices, the frame draws our focus to a particular part of the image from a particular point of view and thereby influences our perception of the material. Camera angles, spatial relations, composition and other aspects of mise en scène serve to load an image with possible meaning that can be read, resisted or overlooked. Sound also plays a significant role in this process as it enables the work to impact viscerally on the perceiver and creates environments that surround and envelop the audience.

By stepping out of a realistic representational mode this act of focussing attention can also become a technique for renewal. The clash of signifiers in resonant juxtapositions between sound and image, image and image and sound and sound can prompt a reappraisal of received knowledge. Abstractions stretch associations with the real to the point of breaking so that viewers must first encounter the work as experience. In treating video footage and sound

³⁷ The anthology that these and subsequent quotes from Shklovsky have been sourced from provides the following bibliographic information for the original essay: Shklovsky, V. 1965, 'Art as Technique (1917)', in L.T. Lemon & M.J. Reis (eds), *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.

recordings as material and manipulating them to emphasise textures, colours and form the creator transforms the work from indexical reference to something that significantly differs from the originating source. This difference prompts a pause, as the transition from perception to understanding is interrupted, perhaps denied – and perception does indeed become “an aesthetic end in itself” (Shklovsky 1998, p. 18).

The centrality of time to the medium of cinematic screen work adds a temporal dimension in which an aesthetics of defamiliarisation can play out. It is possible to bring about a greater awareness of the experience of time through techniques that speed up, stretch and virtually freeze time. Perceptually, the use of rhythm and pace in editing can create the sense of time going faster or slowing down. On a more literal level, high speed cameras able to capture movement at 20,000 frames per second create astonishing slow motion footage that can extend an instant and virtually freeze moments for detailed contemplation. Equally, the more familiar techniques of time-lapse cinematography give a view of time not ordinarily possible. By compressing long stretches into shorter durations, time-lapse is able to make the fluid seem spasmodic, give the erratic an appearance of pattern and flow, and make incremental transformations more clearly visible.

Through the denial of immediately apparent meaning and an emphasis on the experience and perception, defamiliarisation arrests habitual patterns of knowing and holds the encounter at a point of near stasis. In order to resist becoming automatic (and consequently invisible) art making tends to arise from an ongoing process of innovation in representation. As a process of invention there is a continuing renewal of how we look at objects and the world when they are presented in unfamiliar but aesthetically considered ways. Art and the aesthetics of defamiliarisation are a means to transform perception so that it “is less involved in making sense of the world and more involved in exploring the possibilities of being, of becoming, in the world” (O’Sullivan 2001, p. 130).

By refreshing the senses through which we perceive the world there is potential to create openness of engagement in audiences. As the audience reaches out to know the works under consideration there is a chance to impact their view of the world and their manner of critical engagement with the everyday. For this to occur, however, the audience needs to be moved out of habitual, automatic and unconscious ways of perceiving in order to be fully aware and responsive. On a purely physical level, the art gallery or exhibition space is usually a context that is at a remove from commonplace sites and as result comes loaded with differing sets of expectations. This is not the everyday; this is a space for considering things in new ways.

Whether set up in a black box, white cube or as a site specific installation, the setting may allow the projected image as a work of art to refresh perception and reveal un-thought possibilities. A new perspective can create a nimbleness of the mind that can then be applied beyond the gallery space.

The practice of defamiliarisation shows how innovations in representation can refresh the way we perceive and conceive of the world around us. This can promote a more engaged way of encountering the world that embraces greater consciousness and questioning over acceptance and drudgery. In gifting the good life through a non-instrumental experience (Berlant 2004) the possibility of a different way of doing things can be entertained. Even in the confusion and uncertainty that some works may arouse, there is potential for a very visceral level of engagement with what we perceive.

Issues of audience engagement are always set in the context of the different frameworks used for understanding media texts. With skills gathered from past experiences of media use, spectatorship is, as David Bordwell specifies, “a complicated, even skilled, activity” (1985, p. 33). While Bordwell was developing the concept in relation to narrative fiction film it is possible to see that the processes employed by spectators in reading all media constructions are similarly skilful. Viewers develop complex, internalised processes that permit them to read and make sense of a work based on a range of specific elements including content, structure, aesthetics and mode of exhibition as well as the broader context of social, political, economic and historical circumstances. As a result material can be experienced differently, have varying impacts and have alternate aspects emphasised depending upon the form and circumstance of its presentation. An interesting example of this effect can be observed in two projects produced by Miyarrka Media.

Miyarrka Media and a Yolngu Christmas

Although both were produced using the same source material, *Christmas Birrimbirr*, a multimedia installation (Gurrumuruwuy et al. 2011) and *Manapanmirr, in Christmas spirit*, a narrated single channel documentary film (Gurrumuruwuy et al. 2012), differ significantly in their modes of audience engagement. Going beyond the purely technical considerations of single channel versus multi-screen installation, each version creates a different space of expectation and understanding. Both projects explore, as Yolngu director Paul Gurrumuruwuy explains it, “Christmas feelings. How at Christmas you think about your relatives, brothers, sisters and old people already gone. Those people who still live in our hearts. Our relatives

who still live with us in spirit" (Gurrumuruwuy et al. 2012). *Manapanmirr, in Christmas spirit* is a 60 minute documentary video that "grew out of the larger *Christmas Birrimbirr* project and the artists' explorations of Yolngu³⁸ image-making and aesthetics" (Miyarrka Media 2012b). It is presented as an observational documentary with subtitles and narration by Paul Gurrumuruwuy. On-screen events are explained and made accessible to a broad audience through these familiar documentary conventions that function to establish meaning and intention. *Christmas Birrimbirr*, on the other hand, works to involve spectators in an experience. As the directors describe the project: "it offers what its Yolngu directors call 'a gift of grief'. It has been made for art gallery audiences precisely so that people living lives far removed from Gapuwiyak might have their own relationships, families and culture enriched by the resonant, sometimes difficult, images and feelings on offer" (Miyarrka Media 2012a). While this discussion is based on viewing *Christmas Birrimbirr* as a screen work (without the sculptural elements and spatialised projections) where the three channels were combined to be viewed side by side on a single screen, it was nonetheless a profoundly affecting experience.³⁹ At some level the audience was primed for this impact by the artist introduction prior to the screening. However, the difference can also be attributed to the different processes that the spectator had to adopt in order to make sense of each work. Where *Manapanmirr, in Christmas spirit* explained the on-screen events and gave an intellectual context for understanding, *Christmas Birrimbirr* created more of a sense of reaching out to the screen emotionally, sensorially, even physically to pick up on the feeling of the work in order to understand and process the experience. It was a feeling of participating in and being absorbed by the work. The "gift of grief" was surprising in its intensity and was profoundly affecting for some time after the screening.

It is perhaps the case that the sequence of viewing, where I saw *Christmas Birrimbirr* before seeing *Manapanmirr, in Christmas spirit*, meant that the first was preparation for what was to come in the second and as a result the subsequent screening did not reach the same level of emotional intensity. Equally though it could be argued that emotions were brought close to the surface by *Christmas Birrimbirr* so that the affective space was prepared thereby making it easier to provoke a similar reaction with *Manapanmirr, in Christmas spirit*. The different formal approaches, however, seem significant in understanding the different spectatorial experiences. When the narration in *Manapanmirr, in Christmas spirit* explained the rituals,

³⁸ The Yolngu are indigenous Australians from the north east of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

³⁹ This screening and artist talk took place at the XIX Visible Evidence conference in Canberra, December 2012.



Figure 146 Still from *Christmas Birrimbirr*
View of a decorated grave site at Yalakun

relationships and situations that were shown the spectator did not need to engage other perceptual abilities in order to connect with the work. The audience could know it as it was being presented by Gurrumuruwuy and need go no further. Alternatively it was the physicality of movement and actions, the images of feeling and sensory clues that guided the viewer through the experience of *Christmas Birrimbirr*. Processing of the work exceeded the intellectual and the factual and the spectator became absorbed into the exchange of feeling.



Figure 147 Still from *Christmas Birrimbirr*
Candles are lit on Christmas Eve as the Gapuwiyak community prepare to remember the dead and renew and revitalize relationships amongst the living.

The differing effects produced by essentially the same source material in *Christmas Birrimbirr* and *Manapanmirr, in Christmas spirit* provides compelling evidence of just how crucial choices around form and exhibition circumstances are in structuring possible spectatorial experiences. If reception is in some ways shaped by expectation and mode of address then the manner in which work is presented – formal, structural, social, physical, economic, historical etc. – will have a big influence on what is possible in the spaces of engagement with the material. Audiences are attracted and expectations are created based on the differing circumstance of form and exhibition context. Formal choices and exhibition strategies need to be formulated in the context of underlying intentions and an understanding of the limitations of each possible permutation of a project. The experience of Miyarrka Media was that the work did not have a significant reach as a multimedia gallery installation. While the emotional impact upon many (but not all) gallery visitors was substantial, the work was not getting widely seen beyond the Darwin gallery in which it was installed. Upon reworking the material in a more traditional observational documentary format, as co-director Jennifer Deger described, suddenly they began receiving invitations for film festival screenings and the like (pers. comm., 19/12/2012). However, one must weigh the broadening of reach against a deeper impact on a smaller audience. In the case of Miyarrka Media, this was their first work intended for a non-Yolngu audience. The emphasis was on cultural exchange with audiences beyond the Yolngu community and the two versions of the work facilitate this exchange in different ways. The explanatory format of *Manapanmirr, in Christmas spirit* revealed an aspect of Yolngu culture and philosophy that many people outside of that community would not have been previously

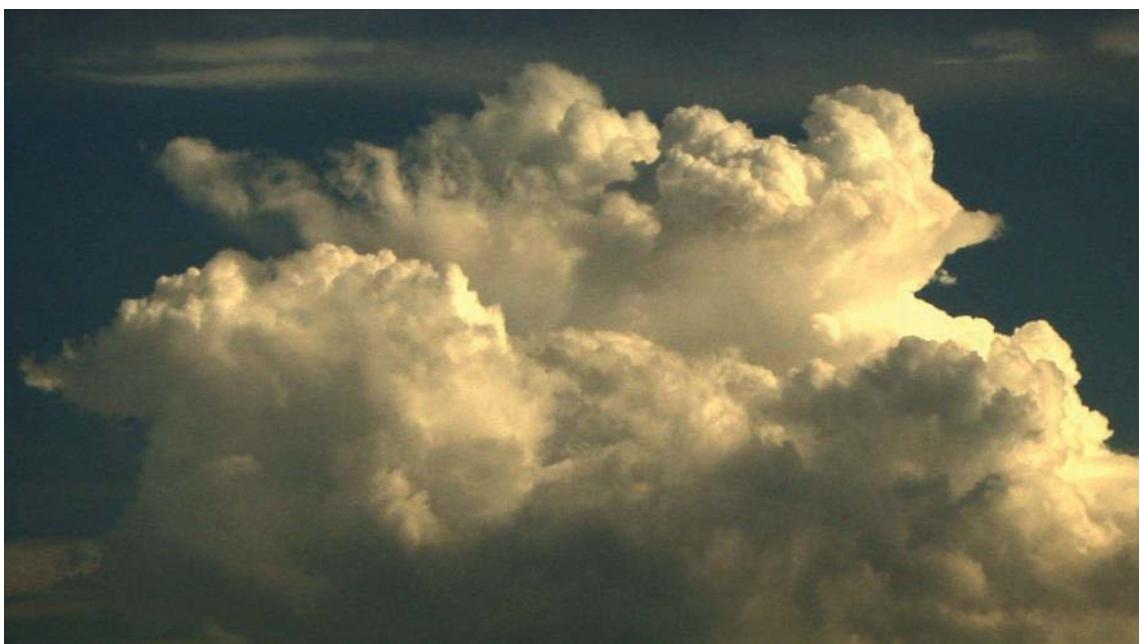


Figure 148 Still from *Christmas Birrimbirr*
The seasonal wulma clouds; brooding formations that signal the coming of both Christmas and the wet season.

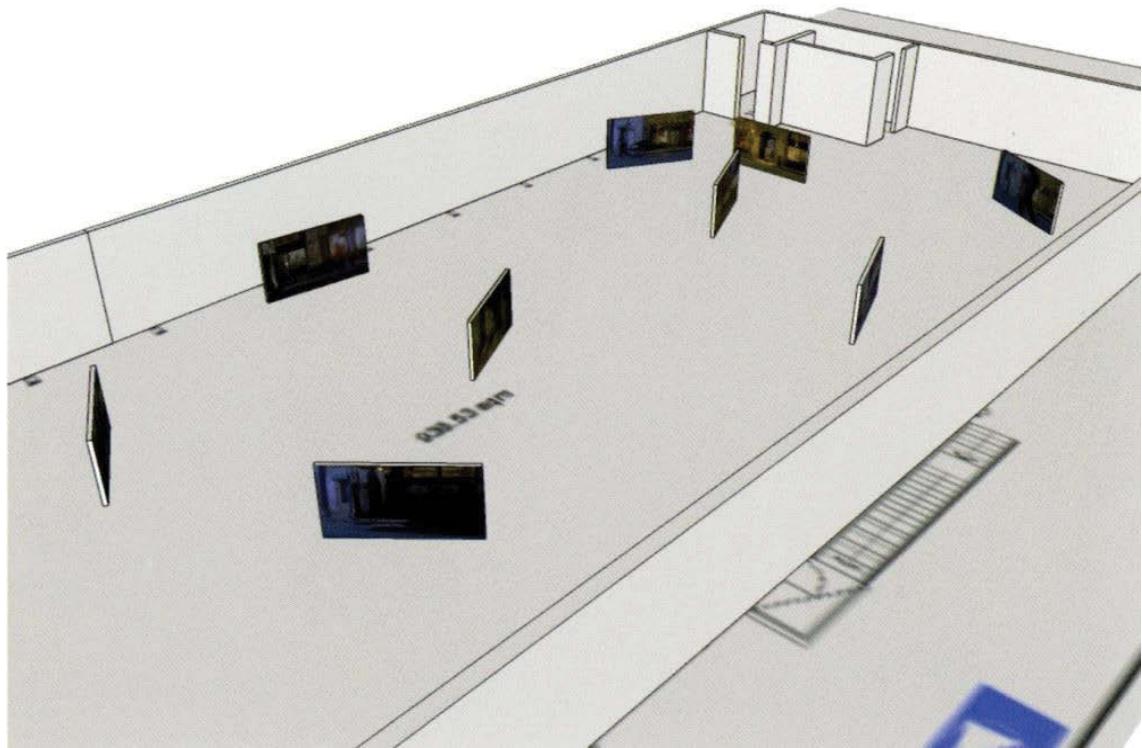
aware. The more open, poetic rendering in *Christmas Birrimbirr* offered the chance to connect through feeling, aesthetic experience and the generosity of the Gapuwiyak community. As a Balandia (non-aboriginal) outsider, I become deeply conscious of the gift that was being shared through the experience of this work.

The next example has similarly been exhibited in different versions, however, in this instance the changes have been in response to the particularities of changing exhibition circumstance. Where *Christmas Birrimbirr* and *Manapanmirr, in Christmas spirit* drew on the realism of observational footage, *Ten thousand waves* is more deliberately stylised, embracing many techniques associated with the staging of a big budget drama motion picture.

Ten thousand waves

Isaac Julien's *Ten thousand waves* (2010) had its world premiere at the 17th Biennale of Sydney. Inspired by a tragic incident in 2004 when 23 Chinese workers drowned while harvesting cockles from Morecambe Bay in the northwest of England, the work threads together rescue surveillance video from the originating incident; archival footage from the time of the Chinese cultural revolution; recreations depicting the legend of Yishan Island goddess Mazu as protector of lost fishermen; homage to the heyday of Shanghai cinema in the 1930s; visions of contemporary Shanghai; Chinese calligraphic practice; computer generated images of waves; and reflexive, behind-the-scenes material revealing the practicalities of a range of production processes. Originally titled *Better life*,⁴⁰ *Ten thousand waves* explores the lengths to which people are prepared to go and the dangers they will face in the pursuit of dreams of a better life. Stepping off from the originating incident and the nationality of the dead workers, Julien has chosen to explore the particularity of this experience through the metaphorical use of Chinese cultural icons and the parodic subversion of Western stereotypes of China. When challenged in an interview with Stuart Jeffries of *The Guardian* newspaper, that he was falling "prey to depicting China through western eyes, making it unedifyingly exotic", Julien replied "No! They're parodic of those stereotypes. They're representations of representations, subversions of a western exotic" (2010).

⁴⁰ The title was changed relatively late in the production process when it was revealed that the motto of 2010 Shanghai Expo was to be "Better City, Better Life". *Ten thousand waves* had its Chinese premiere in Shanghai during the six month run of the 2010 Expo.



**Figure 149 Installation floor plan for *Ten thousand waves*
Exhibited at the 17th Biennale of Sydney, Australia: 12 May - 1 August 2010**

In a process that Julien refers to as “versioning” (Fowler & Voci 2011) *Ten thousand waves* takes multiple forms depending upon the exhibition circumstances. It has been presented as a series of large scale photographs, a single screen film titled *Better life (Ten thousand waves)* that premiered at the 2010 Venice Film Festival, a three screen gallery film in exhibition at Atelier Hermès, Seoul, South Korea and at the Linda Pace Foundation, San Antonio, Texas, U.S.A., and the nine screen installation that was shown in Sydney. Catherine Fowler and Paola Voci interpret this varied approach to form as “an acknowledgement on Julien’s part of how spatial locations shape temporal formations, since the rule for *Ten thousand waves* seems to be: the larger the space for exhibition, the higher the number of screens” (2011). Without having seen all three moving image versions of the work it is difficult to properly assess the differing impacts of the various spatial configurations. However, Julien’s use of versioning does seem to indicate a flexibility of practice, a deep engagement with the audience’s experience of the work, an attention to the detail of that experience and a concern for how to maximise it in individual locations. For the purpose of this chapter the discussion will refer to the nine screen version of the work as it was installed on Cockatoo Island as part of the 17th Sydney Biennale.

Playing out over several different but thematically linked sections during the 49 minutes 41 seconds running time, the work takes a highly structured but non-narrative and diverse

approach to the underlying themes. Julien employs a range of visual styles and colour palettes to delineate the different sections. The material of each section is choreographed across the multiple screens and arranged in a predetermined sequence seguing from one segment to the next. The visual spectacle of the work is augmented by the immersive 9.2 surround sound audio mix. This soundtrack combines atonal works by Maria de Alvear; music that is a fusion of eastern and western forms by Jah Wobble and the Chinese Dub Orchestra; abstract sound elements by sound artists Mukul Patel and ChoP (Zen Lu and Grzegorz Bojanek); location sound; as well as male and female voiceovers reciting poetry commissioned by Julien for *Ten thousand waves* from U.S. based bilingual Chinese-English language poet Wang Ping.

The combination of myth, actuality, homage and reflexivity creates a rich bricolage that is familiar from an essayistic documentary approach. While not driven by a highly determining voiceover, the work nonetheless takes a strongly rhetorical stance as it teases out the threads of ideas that lead to (and away from) the Morecambe Bay tragedy. So much more than a chronicling of an awful historical incident, *Ten thousand waves* is a finely detailed exploration of interconnected and resonating moments that link up across time and place. With poetic, experimental and narrative documentary credentials already established through works such as *Looking for Langston* (1989); *Frantz Fanon, black skin white mask* (1996); *BaadAsssss Cinema* (2002); and *Derek* (2008), as well as an extensive body of moving image installation work, Julien is a practitioner who consistently operates across forms, combining documentary, avant garde cinema and fine art techniques. In *Ten thousand waves* he takes a wide ranging, at times elliptic, but always thematically significant approach to the subjects of migration, distance, separation, loss, sacrifice and the landscape of dreams. As Julien explains:

I'm involved in a certain aesthetics that is connected to translating ideas and politics in a way that is not connected to realism. My work is connected to a poetic rendition or meditation on politically charged questions through a recourse to the sublime. (2010, p. 103)

In this "recourse to the sublime" lies Julien's license to create what Mark Nash describes as "an excess, one might call it beauty, that always outstrips the narrative or conceptual function of image and sound" (Nash in Julien et al. 2010, p. 40). Where some have seen this as cause to criticise *Ten thousand waves* as "gorgeously bad art" (Smee 2011), this exceeding of narrative and/or conceptual functionality unmistakably declares the work as an experience in itself with Julien embracing the rhetorical possibilities of aesthetic technique and formal realisation. However, that is not to say that the work is ahistorical. Even from his perspective as an outsider to Chinese culture, Julien has sought to acknowledge the cultural references at play

around the themes of the work as well as around visual arts practices more generally. Indeed there is a constellation of references operating in a clash of representation that combines to create a quite dazzling effect. Through this combination of references, Julien has sought to address tensions between his outsider status and a very particular, local experience by creating “what the Vietnamese filmmaker and critic Trinh T Minh-Ha calls a ‘near by’ relation to those locations and perspectives” (Julien et al. 2010, p. 101). This is reflected in his research strategy, his efforts to engage with pertinent Chinese cultural figures and his reliance on the Chinese production crew to help negotiate the location and studio filming in China.



Figure 150 *Ten thousand waves* - Installation view Cockatoo Island, Sydney, Australia.
Sequences referencing the 1934 Chinese film *The Goddess* with Zhao Tao recreating the role of the central character

At the same time that the work is immersive and highly engaging, there is a strong force of defamiliarisation operating in the staging of the work, the combination of materials and the visual treatment that does not permit the audience to rest easy. Julien’s goal is to have a significant impact, presenting what are essentially political statements in remarkable forms. Using parody, shock and audiovisual pleasures, the audience is strongly drawn into this strange but appealing creation. This is not a work where the audience is encouraged to tune out and be guided by the strong hand of narrative. The piece is evocative but its allusions and meanings are not easily surrendered. With an impressionistic quality, clear storylines are denied from the work itself and so the audience is left wondering over character relationships, the order of events and the significance of situations. This quality can have the effect of dividing the audience with reactions varying between the polarities of tuning out and moving on or remaining to grapple with the ideas in the work. It is a work that places high demands on the audience, wavering between highly directed spectatorship and openness to differing interpretations.

An intention to create unease in the audience is deeply embedded in the content with the work structured to create juxtapositions that collide and create unexpected combinations. For

example, footage of the goddess Mazu (played by Maggie Cheung) flying through the forest is cut in with the surveillance footage from the Morecambe Bay incident. The grainy black and white video shows the sole surviving Chinese worker from the perspective of the police helicopter. Intercutting transforms this view into that of the failed goddess protector, Mazu. Suddenly footage to which we may have become inured through repetitive display on television news coverage is made strange again through this juxtaposition. We are encouraged to reconsider the material and the individual tragedy of people dying so far from their home. Our gaze becomes aligned with that of Mazu, and we may come to feel something of her sense of failure that these deaths occurred.

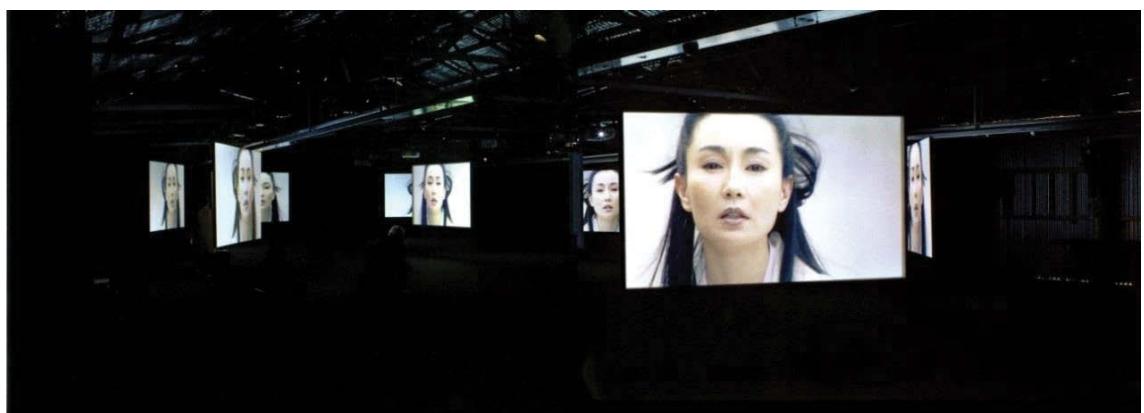


Figure 151 *Ten Thousand waves* - Installation view Cockatoo Island, Sydney, Australia.
Maggie Cheung as the goddess Mazu

In a physical manifestation of the refusal of straightforward understanding, the layout of the installation space is such that there is no one vantage point from where all the nine screens are visible. This is part of a strategy on Julien's part to shift the audience out of a passive mode of watching that is associated with single channel works for the cinema. While it is a strategy that is open to subversion it is nonetheless a motivating force behind the spatial arrangement of the screens. As Julien outlines:

[s]ome people come in and just sit down—maybe they're tired. But let's just say that when we're looking at moving images we fall into certain habits, and I'm trying to break down those habits in a gallery context. (2010, p. 104)

There is an immediate sense of disorientation upon entering the space with nine translucent screens arrayed throughout the large, blacked out, first floor space of the Mould Loft on Cockatoo Island. Up a flight of stairs from the open plan and natural lighting of the Mould Loft Studio, it takes a few moments for your eyes to adjust to the darkness. In a perceptual shift that recalls the previous discussion of *Static no.12*, there is a sense of entering a space not wholly anchored to the geographic location in which it sits. The awkwardness of finding your

way through the dark to a place where you won't obscure someone else's view is similar to arriving in the cinema after the main feature has already started. However, here the sensation is amplified by the multiplicity of screens, their unexpected angles and arrangement and uncertainty about the location of others in the space. The effect is to produce a labyrinth of moving images in which to get lost. Multiple perspectives are possible and according to Julien's intention, "[i]n the gallery, you won't be able to see the whole work at once, so any narrative you establish is necessarily fragmented" (Jeffries 2010).

Across the multiple screens, the work is structured at times like rounds singing as one after another, different screens play the same piece of footage in a staggered, sequential start. It is a technique that evokes a metaphor of harmonies being created through reiterations of the same melody, as the devices of music are reinterpreted through the play of the visual across architectural space. The multiple screens also play with the audience's sense of chronology. Although there are moments of synchronisation, in general the images are not in unison across all the screens. At the same point in time there can be instances of flash forward and flash back appearing across the array of screens, offering the chance to immediately return and re-examine moments in changing juxtapositions. The action is passed from one screen to another and our attention is drawn along with it. Sometimes this attention is diffused as there are many, equally strong images at which to look; at other times this attention is clearly directed so that a clear point of focus emerges. It is an alternating feeling of being swept along in the force of the work and being left to once more get your bearings.

The choreography of the screens and the play of images is coordinated so that projections go on and off in synchronisation with beats and other musical cues on the audio track. Similarly there is a strong interplay between the synchronised sound and the musical elements with key moments echoed and reiterated across the soundtrack components. The multiple speakers delivering the 9.2 surround sound design of *Ten thousand waves* make it possible to place sound in particular parts of the space creating new spatial relationships between sound and image. As the sound is moved around the space our eyes are simultaneously drawn to the screens in the corresponding area. The sound of a helicopter is moved around the exhibition space accompanying the footage that seems to correspond with the viewpoint of the rescue helicopter. This has the effect of translating the depiction of a shifting, questing search for survivors into actual spectator movement in the gallery space through the visceral impact of the helicopter sound, pulling our eyes along, looking from screen to screen.

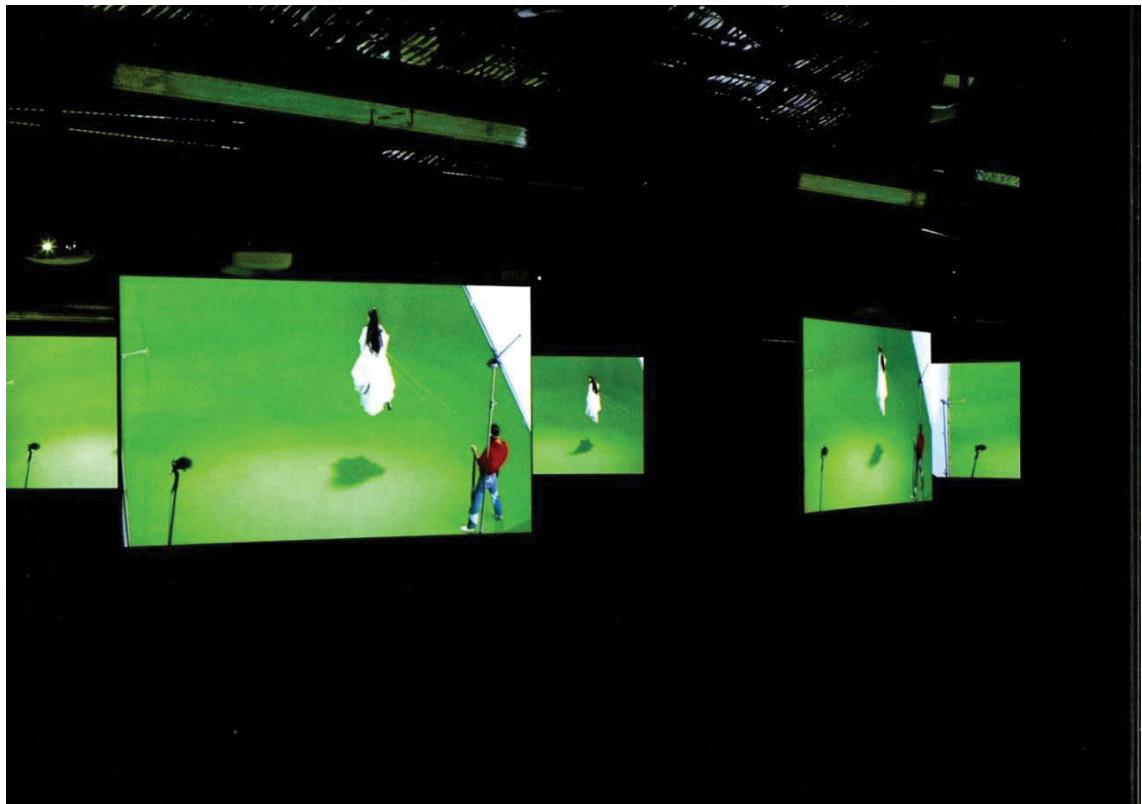


Figure 152 *Ten thousand waves* - Installation view Cockatoo Island, Sydney, Australia.
Green screen plates of Maggie Cheung as the goddess Mazu

As previously mentioned there is a strong reflexive element to the work. For example, a whole section of *Ten Thousand Waves* is comprised of component green screen plates in their raw state, not composed with their intended landscapes. The component parts are displayed as echoes of the composited images as we recall our first sighting of the goddess in this pose and the location she *seemed* to occupy at that time. Suspension of disbelief transforms into behind-the-scenes knowledge as mythical narratives and landscapes are set up then deconstructed by subsequently showing the technical landscapes of their production. In a mirror image reversal of showing us the *before* of the floating goddess Mazu, the section that focuses on the calligraphic painting on glass and on the floor is echoed by footage of workers, seemingly looking straight at us, cleaning the paint off the clear glass and mopping the paint from the floor. These visual reverberations demystify the process of creation and cause us to think back and question our previously gained understandings. In revealing the construction we are encouraged to think through the formation of such representations as markers of cultural history. By extending the time of the event to include the clean-up afterwards, the rarefied act of calligraphic writing is shown to have impacts beyond the expression of concepts through characters and to exist in a world of impermanence.



Figure 153 *Ten thousand waves* - Installation view Cockatoo Island, Sydney, Australia.
Workers cleaning glass after calligraphic painting sequence

In its referencing of Chinese myth, history, and cultural production, its combination of different visual textures and image resolutions, and its creation of an immersive environment through an enveloping sound track and spatial arrangement of multiple screens, *Ten thousand waves* is an example of how aesthetic form can exemplify a way of thinking through issues and events. The collection of materials that Julien has used and the way that the installation is staged are all part of the rhetorical approach of the work. In *Ten thousand waves*, Julien is looking at a cluster of ideas and exploring them through actuality, recreation, fantasy and aesthetic practice. There is an alignment between ideas and techniques so that formal exploration becomes a manifestation of the underlying concepts and the audience is physically and affectively impacted. Synchronicity between concepts and representation is emphasised through interplay and sympathy between thematic motifs and form. The work as an experience in itself creates its own world of references and intertextuality, generating a multi-layered, multi-temporal exploration of the trajectory created by the desire for a better life.

Spaces for engagement

Moving out of the highly determined and didactic spaces associated with mainstream broadcast documentary forms, artistic engagements with a poetic approach to documentary require a more active level of audience participation, even greater perhaps than the observational works discussed in the previous chapter. While a more motivated audience is expected on the basis of their having sought out the work in a gallery setting, there are still issues around levels of attention that vary from absorption to distraction. People may dip in

and out of a screen work in installation depending on what is occurring in the space at the particular moment of their arrival. Contrary to the etiquette associated with screenings in a cinema there is acceptance of the transitory nature of the arts audience that highlights the differences in viewing habits and expectations between television, cinema, online and in gallery spaces. In the gallery, this mobile audience behaviour would have a tendency to shape works so that there are intense moments of interest at short intervals or over the entirety of the work.

The practice of looping video works in gallery installation creates opportunities for visitors to engage repetitively with video art, particularly when it comes to the short works such as *Static no.12* (Crooks 2010) and *Cows* (Golder 2002) that have been discussed in this chapter.

However, in the case of longer works like *Ten thousand waves* (Julien 2010) audiences are less likely to watch repeated screenings. Indeed the almost 50 minute running time of *Ten thousand waves* perhaps reduces the number of people willing to commit to the duration of the work, particular in the context of exhibiting at large scale art events such as a biennale. Spectator time is not infinite and in the particular context of a biennale there are multiple events occurring at once that could occupy their attention. This is not to argue for the superiority of shorter works, but it is important to acknowledge the fragmentation of audience attention and the impact of exhibition circumstances. Conversely, *Disorient* (Tan 2009) (which will be discussed in the next chapter), staged as a one off installation work at the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation gallery in Sydney, is perhaps more likely to attract visitors who are able to spend time with the work and commit to staying for multiple repetitions. It becomes a singular event that is akin to the movie-going experience. Perhaps then, some combination of the exhibition strategies for cinema and artworks aligned with an awareness of the viewing conditions and level of audience engagement can aid us in producing affecting, impacting works that can achieve the goals of crafting “ethical citizenship while also making the ineffable present” (Smart 2010, pp. 222-23). There is going to be audience resistance to works that are overly didactic and at times this resistance will manifest as distracted engagement with work.

Somewhat contrary to Shklovsky’s assertion that “the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself” (1998, p. 18), it is important that the effect of the work extend beyond the experience. In his assessment of Dewey’s ideas of art as experience, Martin Jay raises concerns that aesthetic experience could be “a displacement of ‘real’ politics, a way to gesture towards redemption without a means to realize it through what normally passes for political

practice" and that it may be "more a compensatory simulacrum of political activism than a stimulus to it" (Jay 2004, p. 167). If the work of art only acts to satisfy the audience as to their righteous engagement rather than prompting an ongoing discussion, it is, in effect, working counter to the motivating intentions that prompted the works' creation and the choice of poetic expression over the use of logical statements. In order that the audience be encouraged to stay open to the unexpected, part of our enquiry needs to address how we may promote the conditions that can make this possible. There is an undeniable barrier to engagement particularly when, as Ring Petersen notes, "many visitors stay only briefly in video installations that obviously demand a prolonged viewing for the works to unfold as a meaningful sensory and intellectual experience" (2010).

While reflexive strategies may aim to foster an interrogative engagement between viewer and installation there also needs to be space created that enables the audience to respond to works. Here I am referring to a notion of space that incorporates concepts of license, ability and inclination to metaphorically speak back to and otherwise respond to a work. When a video installation work is comprised of multiple screens and a multi-channel surround sound track, which are typical of many immersive style works, strategies to activate responsiveness in the face of sensory bombardment become key. An aspect of the poetic observational works discussed in the last chapter was the idea that, through a meditative pace and poetic structure the audience was allowed space to contemplate what they perceived and draw their own interpretation.

In the examples under consideration here, there is a strong sense of a cinematic experience at the heart of how the works are exhibited. As video installation works they draw upon a notion of scarcity and exclusivity that is associated with works of art while simultaneously requiring the immersed attention demanded of a cinema audience. This intersection of modes and consequent atmosphere that is at a significant remove from the everyday is a key element in the work as an experience in itself. Even though many of the works have documentation that is available online or in publication there remains a sense that these are incomplete without the experience of the work in situ. It is this sense of being something that is rarefied and singular that continues to prevent the works from becoming banal and from falling into the habitual modes of exhibition that have come to be associated with other works for the screen displayed on television and via the internet.

It is important to acknowledge that the artistic or poetic documentary is not a form that appeals to all. For some, the very logical and expert construction of verbal argument seen in

many journalistic approaches to documentary is a key part of what people appreciate about the form. My interest lies in how an artistic practice can shift away from the didacticism traditionally associated with documentary. While the circumstances of the art work can have the effect of elevating the artist and the work above the ordinary, the openness of expression associated with some artistic practices permits room for the audience to bring their own understandings to bear on the issues under consideration. As a result there are attendant possibilities for greater and more deeply experienced impact. In the admission of uncertainty and the acknowledgement of complexity, the agency of the audience and their ability to "know that thing" (Carson 2000) in multiple ways is mobilised.

A form of embodied aesthetics appears to be operating that, as Anne Rutherford describes it, "recognises the full resonance of embodied affect in the experience of cinema spectatorship" (2003). The sensations of linkage and *affectedness* that occur between the audience and the material on-screen are emphasised so that we experience knowing on multiple levels. This is still then, a rhetorical approach. The evidentiary elements are incorporated and the work continues beyond the building of an evidence based case to create an aesthetic experience. Importantly in this process is an acknowledgment that we do not just come to know the world at a purely intellectual level.

The ubiquity of content for screens (via television, handheld devices and computers) means that the familiarity of this form threatens to place moving image work in "the area of the unconsciously automatic" (Shklovsky 1998, p. 17). As a result, screen based projects may not seem remarkable or worthy of special attention. However, the degree to which an art context is at a remove from the habitual has the potential to work against "unconsciously automatic" (Shklovsky 1998, p. 17) ways of encountering the material. Staging works in the darkness associated with cinematic experiences is one such strategy. The audience is expected to be silent or at least speak in the hushed tones appropriate to sacred spaces. It is a matter of having a private experience in a public, shared space with the rider that our engagement should not impinge on the experience of those others present. The differing physical arrangements of installation spaces means that it is not the same unified experience as a cinematic work and so expectations are shifted. Rather than a synchronous sense of a shared encounter, the experience is more diffuse and individualised across a range of sequential elements.

It is fertile ground with contact between forms resulting in formal and intellectual innovations that are changing how the fields of art and documentary are being conceptualised. For

example, the spatialised practice of the work in a gallery setting can transform aspects of viewer agency and engagement. The mobility of the audience provides a different experience and set of expectations compared to those attached to a traditional cinematic setting.

Perhaps though, in consideration of the trend for most documentary viewing to now take place in the home via broadcast television, DVD, download or online delivery, a more fitting comparison is between the gallery setting and the domestic experience of watching documentary. Both forms can generate fragmented and distracted viewing practices as the audience has easy access to move on to the next thing through either a remote control or a physical movement into another space. The key points of contrast are between private and public viewing and between a mundane, habituated practice of looking and a somewhat rarefied, aesthetic and critical engagement. As Pascal Beausse points out: “[t]he inevitable delay between a given current event and its representation within the sphere of art makes it possible to resist the levelling and deadening effects of the culture industry” (Ardenne, Beausse & Goumarre 1999, p. 92). The work in a gallery space is able to exploit a tension between the air of exclusivity that comes from select exhibition in an art context and a resistant stance to mass representations of the world.

While my creative research project *How many ways to say you?* has yet to be publicly released it has been produced with gallery exhibition in mind. Primarily developed for single channel screening, there is also potential for the work to be displayed in a multi-screen installation and as an online mosaic of elements. These possibilities have impacted on the form as I have imagined a range of possible viewing conditions for the work.⁴¹ However, regardless of future plans for the project, there has been a very deliberate approach to the creation of a sense of time and place that is particular to the viewing space of this single channel iteration of the project.

How many ways to say you?

As part of the research rationale to explore poetic approaches to documentary, the creative component of this thesis has sought to address issues that arise from the conditions of this intersectional practice. Starting with a strong collection of visually appealing raw video footage, the challenge was to create from this material the kind of open, contemplative viewing space that I had observed within other poetic projects. In addition I sought to rise to the challenge implicit in Trinh's words regarding the radical potential of poetic forms when they move beyond “art-for-art’s-sake” (1992, p. 154). I developed a strategy of making use of

⁴¹ The modular structure of the project is discussed in detail in chapter 4.

visual pleasures in the work in order to maintain audience engagement with what could at times be densely layered and opaque sequences.

Pursuing a poetic style involved a process of crafting and paring back sections, making efforts to give enough information to provoke interest while simultaneously allowing room for contemplation and the gathering of personal resources of interpretation. Timing of shots, sections and, transitions was crucial as was the need to establish a sense of flow in the overall work. The creation of a poetic, contemplative mood begins with the opening section where the overall tone and pace of the film is first established. Edited to a gentle, more languid measure, there was a need to bring the audience into synchronisation with the slow tempo of the work. The long continual opening shot that transforms from abstract shapes into a passing riverside landscape draws the spectator into an unhurried sense of time and an alternative way of contemplating space.

As the splotches of colour resolve into hillsides, boats and houses, the intention has been to draw attention to the process of mediation that occurs when reality is *captured* in sound and image. The transformation from abstract to more realistic imagery becomes a metaphor for the ways of seeing that a traveller experiences. Each new place visited starts out as unfamiliar and strange. There can be difficulty in knowing what and how to perceive. Over time and through continued exposure the traveller can develop greater fluency in comprehending the perceptual information of the place. Similar to the development of language literacies, it is a process whereby the once unknown becomes familiar and attachments develop as memories and connections are laid down.

The opening section which features digitally manipulated footage from a journey up the Mekong River is also structured around a process of haptic visualisation that operates like a kind of reverse defamiliarisation. The image presents first as texture and colour, and then is progressively decoded into something more recognisably of the perceivable world. In a parallel strategy the audio for this section consists of music that is composed of sustained tones and phrases that guide the appearance of text and timing of transformations. The long notes are evocative of the droning sound of the boat engine's hum, approaching the timbre of reality without being a precisely faithful rendering. The four count of the time signature provides a rhythm that shapes the animation of the river abstractions. The phrasing created by the introduction and decay of the sustained tones motivates an addition or change in the visual field with the shifts from abstraction toward realism, the appearance of new sections of text and the introduction of the motif of the inset frame all tied to a new musical phrase.



Figure 154 Still from *How many ways to say you?*
The abstraction of the river bank gradually resolves into a more realist form

While at some points I have wished for the smooth beauty of high-definition capture devices, I have found something quite compelling in the partial, lower resolution textures of my standard definition source material. Indeed, I am pushing this even further by taking the standard definition material into a high definition screen space to accentuate the imperfections and representational inadequacies. My aim is to use the pixilation, noise, grain, colour banding and other unashamedly digital qualities as part of an overall poetic and reflexive aesthetic that draws attention to the highly subjective nature of the work. My hope is that these qualities will, as Nicholas Rombes writes, "reveal and flaunt the seams that bind together reality and the representation of that reality" and "assert a human presence in the face of smooth, invisible digital data" (2009, p. 27). As the often unsteady framing of a handheld camera is magnified through zooming into distant details, so too are the poignant human moments and frailties emphasised as they are stretched and scrutinised in a high resolution space that is hungry for more data.

The frailties of representation are particularly highlighted when the lighting is low and the camera attempts to electronically boost the incoming information. In this attempt to enhance an otherwise *weak* signal, noise is introduced to the image that draws attention to the digital qualities of the video. The grainy texture of the video emphasises that this is after all, a collection of pixels and not the actual person whose facsimile we are seeing. Yet somehow, the realisation of this absence increases the sense of affective connection as we reach out with our eyes and ears, attempting to make contact with someone who is now remote in time and

space. This separation is further underscored by the frequent contrast between the unvarnished standard definition footage in the inset frames and the more painterly style of the backgrounds.

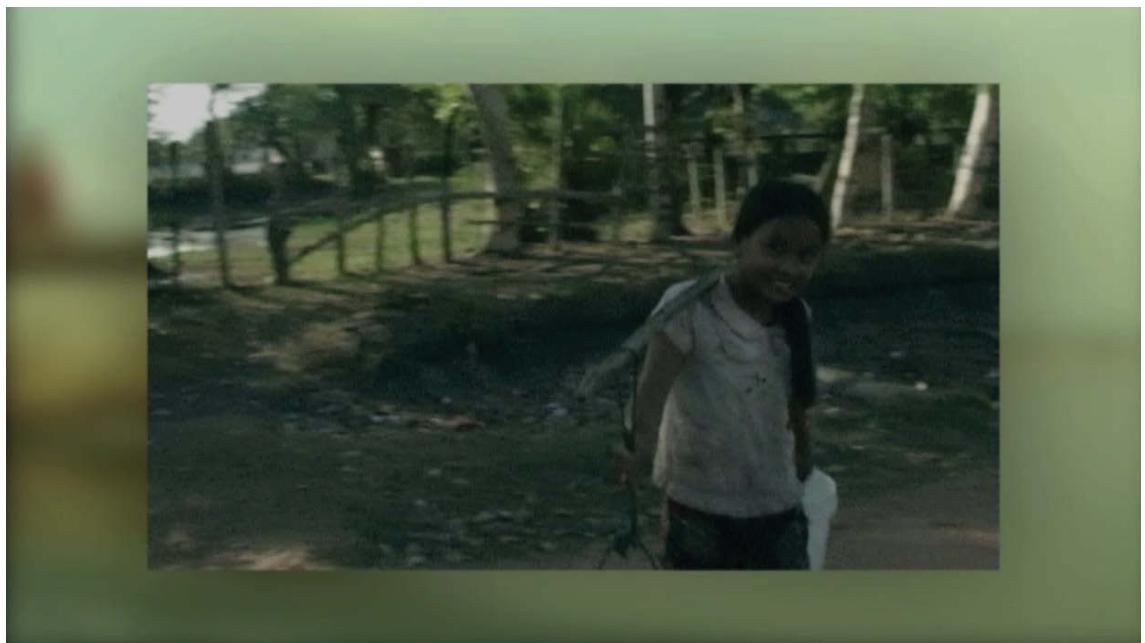


Figure 155 Still from *How many ways to say you?*

The grain of the foreground inset frame contrasts with the fluidity of the blurred background

A sense of remove is also picked up in the choice to have the narration presented in text rather than in a spoken voiceover. Influenced by the use of text to represent the authorial voice and correspondence from the eponymous Ali in the documentary film, *Letters to Ali* (Law 2004), the on-screen text in *How many ways to say you?* creates a detached but not disinterested presence. The placement of the words and timing allows for close synchronisation with image and sound so that the words are closely tied to the audiovisual material while occupying a space that is particular to this documentary. The text is placed in sympathy with the underlying images so that a graphic relationship is established. I also made a very deliberate choice to treat the text with filters and different blending styles so that it appears to be semi-translucent. This technique means that while the words are coming from outside of the observational space of the images, they are nonetheless impacted by the colours, light, contrast and composition of the Cambodian footage.

Carrying through on this impetus to forge relationships between the detached space of the written word and the other audiovisual material, there are multiple tactics at play to establish connections between sound and on-screen text. Audio cues are frequently used to motivate the appearance or disappearance of the words on-screen such as in the already mentioned use of musical phrases in the opening sequence. Another example is at the beginning of the

section titled *loak minh* where a child's playful roar is the prompt for the explanatory text to fade out and the inset frame to come in. Close attention has been paid to the timing of the spoken Khmer words in relation to the appearance of the text on-screen at the beginning of each section. The *you* word is spoken appearing with the Khmer characters first then the phonetic symbols and English definition is presented in text with a repetition of the spoken word. This timing and combination is intended to have the effect of focusing first on the relationship between the sound of the word and its appearance in Khmer script before an attempt at translation is made. In addition to creating connections between the spoken and the written, this placement is an element in the overall ethical strategy underlying the project.

Ethical dimensions

It is useful to restate at this point the idea of intersectional practice as we acknowledge that the flows of influence move in multiple directions between the real, interpretation and the imaginary. Sited in the overlaps between broad groupings of approach and intention, exchanges between art and documentary result in works that engage both with the aesthetics of the representation as well as the social world they explore. It is important to note that as intersectional works they are not fully documentary works. Indeed, as previously mentioned, Merilyn Fairskye goes so far as to actively deny documentary status. In her artist's statement for *Stati d'Animo* she asserts that "[w]hile *Stati d'Animo* contains footage of airports, and records the voices of people found there, it is not a work of investigative or ethnographic documentary" (2009). This works as a caution against a too strict application of a documentary framework to the examples under consideration. Such a framing would perhaps be deadening and ask something of the works that they never intended to provide. Yet there remains something that could be called a documentary impulse emanating from these works. In their essay form they explore interrelationship, social issues, historical events and philosophical concepts. Importantly, these particular works do it in a way that utilises inspiration from the everyday world.

In pushing the form to the extremes of what is recognisable as documentary, these intersectional works can productively disrupt commonsense understandings of documentary practice and draw attention to the ethical dimension of art making. Indeed, a consideration of the interactions between art and documentary practice prompted Renov to revise his four fundamental tendencies of documentary to incorporate a fifth function, "the ethical function, its attentiveness to the mutuality and commensurability of self and other despite the

differences of power, status and access to the means of representation, a ‘you’ and an ‘I’ placed in delicate balance” (2007, p. 23).

However, consensus understandings of ethical documentary practice, grounded in ideals of faithfulness to the real are not so easily transferred to artistic work. For one thing, there isn’t a formal code of practice currently operating that covers all documentary work. It is a concern that contains many grey areas and general documentary practice does not always occupy the moral high ground in this regard. Tensions around informed consent, withdrawal of consent, duty of care, free speech, participants’ rights to privacy, power dynamics and strategies of representation remain contentious. As in all human interactions, ethical considerations are the result of negotiated interactions. In the case of public media works these negotiations are specifically between creator, subjects and audiences.

The Australia Council has established protocols for artists working with children (2010), and for producing Indigenous Australian media arts (2007) to address these highly sensitive aspects of ethical negotiation between creators and subjects. However, there remain the ethical responsibilities between maker and audience. This is an area which is less well defined and not widely discussed, perhaps because there is not the same expectation for truth from projects created under an artistic paradigm and as a result the audience is less likely to feel deceived if an artist plays fast and loose with the truth. Indeed as Gail Pearce points out: “[a]rt has a more playful relationship with truth than documentary” (2007, p. 89). This is likely to change in circumstances where the artwork takes on the appearance (and attendant authority) associated with documentary in its guise as a “discourse of sobriety” (Nichols 2010, p. 250).

In the examples considered in this chapter, however, elements of reflexivity and aesthetic defamiliarisation interrupt expectations of unmediated truth. The question is: does this alter the ethical dimension of the interactions? The works that I have discussed have all used some form of non-naturalistic treatment of sound and image that relax the indexical and iconic bonds between real events and the representations of them to varying degrees. In effect they bring their authority into question through reflexive strategies and highlight the mediated nature of the representation with stylised audiovisual treatments. However, are these strategies sufficient to satisfy the ethical obligations of the artist to their subjects and audiences? While it is not within the purview of this thesis to resolve the issue of ethical practice in the area of overlap between art and documentary, it is nonetheless a consideration I have had to address in my own practice.

In the past I have adopted a collaborative model to address ethical concerns that have arisen in relation to the subjects with whom I have worked.⁴² On the occasion of making *How many ways to say you?*, however, the authorship of the film has been more firmly centralised in my hands and I am working with other methods to meet the ethical demands of the work. This includes economic considerations⁴³ and strategies of contemplation deriving from an impulse that is akin to an essayistic approach. Chief of the strategies is to use aesthetics to foreground the highly subjective nature of the work. The aesthetic approach also has a character of searching, of engaging with the materiality of the sound and image and of reaching for what it might reveal. This is a key element in the operation of a poetic approach and is an important part of how this kind of work may navigate the uncertain territory between art and documentary. In addition to addressing ethical issues these reflexive techniques also shift the task of the work away from reproducing or duplicating the world and manifest as an attempt to create something new. The open declaration of construction shifts the motivation from documenting the real to evoking experiences that may be latent or newly formed. The originating event (if one exists) becomes the stepping off point for imaginative explorations of connected ideas and subjects. The work becomes an experience in itself but no less able to address social issues and other elements of the lived world.

The aim of this chapter has been to consider the ways that a poetic approach to documentary can incorporate techniques from an art practice context. I have proposed that the key element of this approach is a turning away from attempts to replicate the world and that the work becomes an experience in itself. In analysing a series of examples I have been able to closely examine the interaction of ideas with various modes of presentation to explore the potential for alignment between form and content as a means to reinvigorate documentary practice. Through formal choices associated with an aesthetics of defamiliarisation, these intersectional works are able to renew our perception of the everyday, creating the circumstances for more active engagement and critical attention. In the next chapter I will consider the ways that a poetic approach to documentary can apply differing formal strategies to accommodate ambiguity, ambivalence and complexity in the face of generic expectations for clear presentation and straightforward argument.

⁴² See my paper *Making Out of Fear – a collaborative journey* (2004) for a detailed discussion of this.

⁴³ My plan is to channel a portion of any economic benefit received from exhibition of the work through local Cambodian non-government organisations that are working to benefit the people of Cambodia.

Chapter 4

Complexity, flux and webs of connection

In this chapter I examine how the use of structures that effectively de-form familiar story shapes can provide the means for a poetic approach to documentary to respond to conditions of complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity and ambivalence. As already discussed in preceding chapters, the poetic approach is frequently characterised by an openness of form that facilitates moments of pause and contemplation. The experience of time and the effect of stylistic choices work to engage the spectator through the summoning of affective, visceral and sensory phenomena. The poetic work becomes an experience in itself and the aesthetic encounter is the primary means of expression. The intention of the piece moves beyond representation of a direct facsimile into territories of evocation and experiential knowing. Continuing on from these assessments this chapter considers the effects of a more modular approach to structure within a poetic approach to documentary. In particular, I discuss how changefulness and complexity are addressed and the modes of spectator engagement and participation that may be activated in a poetic approach to documentary.

To this end, I am adapting the concept of a relational aesthetic that has been developed by Nicolas Bourriaud (2002). The idea of a relational aesthetic takes into consideration the spaces that a work creates or allows for the spectator. An awareness of the aesthetic of relation or exchange created through a particular formal approach brings the space of connection between spectator and creative work into focus. Conversation becomes the model as the conditions of dialogue are considered and the work is activated by varying levels of spectator interaction. However, it is important to note that Bourriaud's essay was more specifically referring to the work of conceptual artists from the 1990s that produced projects focused on the sphere of human relations, using minimal forms to make political statements that shifted attention from the object-ness of art to the field of social relations it might inspire. In my use of the term *relational aesthetic*, I am departing from a strict application of the concept and broadening it to apply to documentaries where an openness of form is used as the means by which to generate critical interaction and enlist the audience as co-creators of meaning.

Certain documentary projects use non-narrative form as a way to prompt dialogue between the spectator and the work. In the way that this leads to a reconceiving of "the inter-human

relations which they represent, produce or prompt" (Bourriaud 2002, p. 112) a poetic approach to documentary can also be seen to encompass a version of a relational aesthetic. In the context of this thesis discussion the concept of a relational aesthetic is used to describe a formal approach that engages poetically with issues of broad political concern and triggers critical thought about the world. The formal approach prompts spectators to dwell in the space of contemplation, interacting with and responding to the conditions set out by the work.

In this chapter I consider a range of works that utilise fragmented and list-like structures as a way to activate webs of connection between a diversity of material and subjects. By applying an interpretation of the relational aesthetic concept, as it manifests within some poetic approaches to documentary, I examine how these de-formed assemblages break through pre-existing connections and enable new associations to be made. Examples in this chapter have been chosen for the way that the application of a list-like structure has facilitated space for paths of connection to be reimagined thereby creating more complex and nuanced interpretations of the material. The sequence of works discussed charts a progression of increasing complexity of form and interaction, moving from my own single channel, practice based research project, *How many ways to say you?* (2013), to Fiona Tan's two screen audiovisual installation *Disorient* (2009), then the online photo essay *Iraqi Kurdistan* by Ed Kashi (2006) and finally the social media storytelling platform of *Cowbird* (Harris 2011) with its curated, user-generated content.

The potential of a fragmented approach to form is considered in the context of an expanded understanding of montage that includes elements beyond shot-to-shot transitions that may impact on the meaning making, perceptual encounter with documentary works. By increasing the array of material that can be described as connectable or referenced through this expanded understanding of montage, the interactivity and intertextuality of works at varying levels of complexity can be considered. The modular form of the work being discussed enables discrete objects to be connected as constellations of related units. In analysing these examples the intention is to demonstrate how the spectator can activate non-linear relationships across a networked field of elements.

Lists, categories and assemblages of fragments (on notions of structure)

As a strategy to facilitate spaces for engagement and openness of interpretation, the list is an approach that permits a sense of cohesion at the same time as it increases the gap between

project elements. It is a shape that evokes the fragmentation of experience and can potentially accommodate distracted or absorbed modes of spectatorship. The list as a structuring device in creative screen based documentary is a formal approach that also speaks of the infinite possibilities in combining and making connections across a networked field of elements. Components are gathered and assembled according to a logic that may be thematic, topical, place based or conceptual (to name just a few possibilities) but the relationship between parts is kept loose.

Bordwell and Thompson's (2008) idea of categorical structure goes some way to describe the techniques that are at play in these documentary list assemblages. As Kate Nash describes the form, particularly in relation to webdocs: "the temporal ordering of elements is less important than the comparisons and associations the user is invited to make between the documentary's elements" (2012, p. 205). However, in poetic applications there are also aspects of associational form at play. Although applied specifically to experimental films by Bordwell and Thompson, associational form is nonetheless relevant in this crossover territory created through a poetic approach to documentary. For Bordwell and Thompson:

[a]ssociational formal systems suggest ideas and expressive qualities by grouping images that may not have any immediate logical connection. But the very fact that the images and sounds are juxtaposed prods us to look for some connection — an association that binds them together. (2008, p. 363)

The categorical linkages draw relationships between elements according to a taxonomic logic, labelling elements according to their membership of different groupings. In associational form relationships are created through conceptual alignment, emotional impact, visual similarities and territories of gesture. A poetic application of associational form creates relationships between elements that are more often felt than thought.

Something of this experiential effect is similarly evoked in Nichols' idea of mosaic structure. In describing the observational documentary films of Fred Wiseman, Nichols outlines mosaic structure as a form where "[t]he whole thus tends toward poetry (metaphor, synchronicity, paradigmatic relations)—an all-at-once slice through an institutional matrix re-presented in time—rather than narrative" (1981, p. 211). Interestingly he also points to the mosaic as a structure that does not reach finitude. As he observes:

[t]he addition of new facets in Wiseman's films helps complete our picture but also constitutes it in such a way that completion in any absolute sense becomes impossible (each new facet proposes a new lack at the same time as it fills in a previous one). (1981, p. 211)

The mosaic of elements is a configuration that indicates the limits of representation. Each new part is an addition to the overall understanding of the topic at hand but the fragmentary nature of the material and the lack of narrative closure are indications of incompleteness. The facets are glimpses rather than ideal chronicles.

As a conceptualisation of form, Nichols' mosaic structure aligns with some of Umberto Eco's thoughts on lists in his book, *The infinity of lists* (2009). Eco develops an idea of the etcetera of the list whereby the elements included refer outwards to other possible inclusions. It is the incapacity of the list to be definitive that allows it to reference the range of potential elements. It is a situation where:

[f]aced with something that is immensely large, or unknown, of which we still do not know enough or of which we shall never know, the author proposes a list as a specimen, example, or indication, leaving the reader to imagine the rest. (Eco 2009, p. 49)

Here we see indication that in the spaces between and around list elements there is room (perhaps even a requirement) for the audience to augment what is given. There is also an aesthetic, experiential dimension to this kind of listing, what Eco refers to as "being seized by the dizzying sound of the list" (2009, p. 118). The magnitude of a category or collection is conveyed in the listing of multiples. We feel the extent (or even limitlessness) of the assemblage as we scan the inventory.

As a finite set of elements that can also refer to the etcetera of a field beyond the chosen items, the list can motivate individual processes of synthesis and provide the means for documentary to embrace fragmentation, provisionality and complexity. There are thematic and structural relations generally established amongst the parts of the list but narrative links tend not to be strongly formed. Nonetheless, the potential may exist for narrative links to be activated or imagined. That the elements can cohere in some way is important but the closeness of that cohesion can vary significantly. It is in the variance of cohesion that spaces for interpretation can be created. Decisions around the appropriate amount of *glue* required to make the assemblage hang together need to be made with a weather eye on the media literacy of the audience and the experience being created.

A network of interconnecting elements is a form that in many ways is well suited to documentaries developed for online exhibition. Moving beyond a simple repurposing of linear content for networked delivery, the way that the database of material can be variously accessed and combined in some webdocs can be recognised as the formal realisation of an

exploratory intention.⁴⁴ However, it is also important to acknowledge the interactive and non-linear potential of single channel, ostensibly linear documentary projects. Works such as *Berlin: symphony of a great city* (Ruttman 1927), *Regen* (Ivens 1929), *Man with a movie camera* (Vertov 1929), *Koyaanisqatsi* (Reggio 1982), *Sans soleil* (Marker 1983), *Baraka* (Fricke 1992), *Thirty two short films about Glenn Gould* (Girard 1993), *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (Varda 2000), *Dogora* (Leconte 2004) and *Phantom limb* (Rosenblatt 2005) also work with list like structures. These projects present a range of distinct observations that are threaded together creating a logic that, at close range, may appear to solely depend on editing juxtaposition. From a broader, more holistic perspective it is possible to see how the parts work together to create a consideration of concepts through relationship, interconnection and exploration.

Often structured around unifying themes or existing categories and classifications, the list can also inspire thought that follows the structure of memory, impulse and flashes of association. The structure of the list acts as a mnemonic device that helps us to recall what we have already seen in the linear presentation of material. As a result a nonlinear process of interconnection or montage between the *already-seen*, the *now-being-seen* and *as-yet-unseen* is enabled. This method of navigating and making sense of material is a precursor to non-linear structures that allow the user to construct their own pathway, making connections across a range of content.

In this regard it is useful to consider an expanded field of what constitutes montage. This would be a more comprehensive philosophy of montage that takes us beyond a discussion of transitions from shot to shot or sound to sound and can incorporate the range of materials that are combined in the experience of documentary. In this I am drawing on an expanded understanding of montage based on Dyrk Ashton's reading of Deleuze (2008).

This expanded understanding of montage considers a wide range of formal elements that may influence and affect the meaning making, perceptual encounter with documentary works. Building on a Bergsonian idea of the filtering process of human perception, a Deleuzian notion

⁴⁴ It is also important to note that aspects of interactivity in webdocs go beyond multi-pathway, hyperlinked forms and that exploration of content can also include contribution as well as consumption of material. For detailed discussions of forms of interactivity see Nash, K. 2012, 'Modes of interactivity: analysing the webdoc', *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 195-210 and Gaudenzi, S. 2012, 'Interactive Documentary: towards an aesthetic of the multiple', Written dissertation thesis, Goldsmiths University of London, London.

of montage considers how images⁴⁵ are brought into relationship, perhaps emphasising certain aspects and thereby gaining our attention. As Ashton points out, for Deleuze montage:

includes framing (the choice of the image border and what is seen or even heard and what is not), composition (the arrangement of elements within the frame), and camera movement, as well as editing, including sound editing and mixing. Along these lines, lighting, various uses of focus, movement within the frame, movement of the frame, even performance (gestures, expressions, dialogue) can all limit or highlight elements (or images) of a film. (2008 para. 9)

Within this expanded framework it is possible to also consider features associated with exhibition as aspects of montage. This includes the varying exhibition conditions of single channel, multi-channel, projection combined with objects, images, spatialisation, interaction, darkened cinema or gallery location. In addition, particularly in the case of webdocs,⁴⁶ this conception of montage can also reference how the primary work interacts with other sources of information. Nash discusses how “interactivity plays a role not unlike that of editing in the context of the linear text” so that “the webdoc also allows for the possibility of a structure founded on user contributions” (2012, p. 203). It is an emergent structure that is only revealed as users work their way through a site, exploring originating material, user generated content and perhaps adding their own contributions. In addition, the high level of mobility that is possible as a result of internet exhibition creates a montage of images and information with websites beyond the initial site.

Beyond the technical considerations of editing we come to understand montage as a complex system of linking discrete *objects*. Inasmuch as a work is brought into being in the experience of it, montage is simultaneously the practice of collecting, creating and understanding. Similar to a metaphor making process, montage brings elements into contact and thereby gives rise to new meanings out of each combination. In addition to these immediate connections montage is also a more far reaching process of finding pathways through complex banks of information. It is a process of organising complexity, sifting through infinite possible gatherings and sequencings, allowing logics to accrete as we recognise and make sense of the patterns that emerge. As a method for organising complexity that has countless possible pathways, it is also important to keep in mind that an aesthetics of montage operates with differing intentions with regards to outcomes. For example, material can be organised for the sake of clarity, to

⁴⁵ In this instance I am drawing on Christopher Vitale’s interpretation of the image as an active slicing of the world; “a continual action that repeats itself while things stay the same, and modifies when things become different” (2011).

⁴⁶ This term is being used here to refer to documentary delivered online. As Nash defines the term, it refers to “documentaries made for ‘broadcast’ on the internet. Often called webdocs, they consciously position themselves as documentary re-mediated for the internet age. Like traditional documentary, even a cursory glance at the webdoc reveals a diversity of styles and approaches. Interactivity in some form, however, is a constant.” (2012, p. 196).

obfuscate, to emphasise power structures, to challenge established views or to create a particular experience.

Within this way of understanding montage it is possible to see it as a web of connections that flow in multiple directions, along varied pathways that can give rise to a diversity of combinations. Not only is there the network of material presented by the author as part of the originating project but there is also a complex set of linkages that is as much (if not more so) in the perceiver's mind as it is in the structure of the work. It is a formulation that acknowledges that a work can continue to take shape in retrospect of the encounter and arise out of the gap where thought and contemplative processing are permitted. Brogan Bunt describes this aspect of formation as "a kind of afterimage in which the work takes specifically aesthetic shape" (Bunt 2013). This way of framing montage also allows us to consider it as a mode of thinking, evoking all the non-linear potentiality that can be associated with thought.

With its use of montage that already extends beyond purely narrative connection and in light of its potential to grant access to a range of perspectives (from intricate close ups to all-encompassing views) documentary can be regarded, as Ross Gibson notes, as "a process that grants you access to a clearer sense of the governing codes of an emerging actuality" (2012). This is documentary production as a practice of pattern recognition where images, sounds, ideas, examples, feelings, sensations and so on can be networked in a process of *wondering* about how the shifting arrangements may be understood. That work produced under a poetic approach to documentary can also be conceived of as a process of *wondering* (indeterminate as opposed to determining or defining) is central to the ways that the examples discussed in this chapter address complexity and flux.

In a practice that he describes as "vernacular nonfiction", Adrian Miles employs an iterative process of noticing, recording and tagging. As he sees it "multilinear nonfiction work is well suited (naturally oriented) towards affect, which becomes the poetic, associative and indeterminate" (2012). To paraphrase Deleuze, it is a disruptive practice that makes the "major language stutter by using that major language differently" (Miles 2012). Fragments are gathered, assembled, formed, de-formed and rethought with relations that are contextual, contingent and shifting. For Miles it is this networking of elements that makes it "a relational media and [it] becomes about the choreography of the experience of these relations" (2012). As a result, the tightness or looseness of the connections has considerable influence over the spaces for engagement and the potential for multiple interpretations.

These associative, poetic approaches to documentary are necessarily selective in the kind of material that is chosen and the way it is used. However, through appeals to informal affective and aesthetic dimensions it is possible to reflect back out to reference spectator experiences, memories, perceptions and even, perhaps an awe of the infinite. Complexity is addressed through a process of montage that brings the personal into relationship with the material of the work. In holding onto the indeterminate, the range of possible responses resulting from affective appeals becomes an expression of complexity. Just as you may be sacrificing certainty⁴⁷ in embracing the poetic mode of expression you are simultaneously embracing the possibilities of differing interpretations. The potential for a more keenly felt and critical engagement may be enabled by relinquishing absolute control over the way the work is read. The audience is freer to choose and be more active in the process of reading the work. In activating the informal elements of the perceiving audience they are enlisted as respondents and co-creators of understanding. There is a shift from passive to active spectatorship and in echo of an observation made by Ring Petersen regarding distraction,⁴⁸ even the choice not to engage is still a mark of the audiences' agency in the process.

Under the influence of general internet use and a fragmented cultural consciousness, audiences are becoming more accustomed to open forms that either require greater levels of interpretation and participation or that offer further non-sequiturs, adding to the overall experience of fractured daily life. As Bourriaud determines, “[w]hat was yesterday regarded as formless or ‘informal’ is no longer these things today. When the aesthetic discussion evolves, the status of form evolves along with it, and through it” (2002, p. 21). Changing media literacies means that audiences are able to understand shifts in flows of information and develop strategies to deal with gaps. While on some levels this comprehension implies embedded, received understandings that pre-exist the construction of the work, there also seems to be potential for new connections to be implied and invented between previously dissociated signs. While these new pathways might be influenced by established tracks of connection, there are possibilities for new metaphors (and consequently new relationships,

⁴⁷ However, one has to question if it is in fact a sacrifice. Was it ever true certainty that didactic modes offered or more just the illusion of it? A range of viewpoints, ideas, perceptions and experiences have to be excluded for a truth to be universally true. At the same time it is important to acknowledge that “popular opinion could be influenced” (Staiger 2005, p. 38) by misinformation and selective manipulation of facts. Rather than truth being completely up for grabs we need to maintain an awareness that while “there may not be any such thing as truth...there is such a thing as a non-truth” (Peters-Little 2003).

⁴⁸ In Ring Petersen’s discussion of attention and distraction she points out: “In this particular context [of video installation] distraction becomes productive distraction. It turns into a defence mechanism that prevents the viewer from falling prey to the “immersive mode” of reception as well as the information overload of the multi-screen installation. By drawing on the distracted quasi-automatic mode of perception that is essential to much cultural life with information technologies, the viewer can shrewdly avoid being subjected to an experience of being mastered by the technological apparatus instead of mastering the apparatus with the aid of the apparatus itself.” (2010, p. 17)

new understandings, new conceptualisations) of the impact that different datasets might have on each other.

For Philip Rosen it is in the synthesising and sequencing of documents that acts of *documentary* can be said to occur. He sees the key role of the documentarian as transforming the raw artefacts of the world (documents) into meaningful constructions – a position of “synthesizer of reality against the unmediated, unorganized index” (1993, p. 89). In a poetic approach to documentary, the issue becomes one of finding the balance between offering a definitive, unquestionable single pathway at one extreme and presenting a loose collection of raw *documents* at the other. It is a process of centralizing and restricting meaning, making knowledge accessible through the ordering and contextualising of material. In effect it is the organisation of complexity.

While this approach appears to throw out a challenge regarding the documentary status of works that employ looser, more list-like structures we need to be aware that these acts of transformation occur to differing degrees and can manifest via a range of methods. A poetic approach to documentary that uses a mosaic, categorical or associational form may be aimed at the decentralisation of meaning production but that is not to say that these forms have abandoned processes of sequenciation and synthesis. The documents as raw materials are still being processed and still being interpreted but in these instances the actions are occurring through aesthetic means rather than purely being contextualised by narration and overt rhetoric. Sequenciation remains as a key technique but in adopting looser structures, there is also an acceptance of diverse readings and uses of the material by audiences.

A narrative is in effect itself a list but one that adheres to formulations with which we are more familiar. It follows paths well worn by myth and popular story forms with relations between elements clearly established. Characters and situations are linked together in linear structure of cause and effect. With the list, the possibilities for structure are not necessarily occurring in a linear manner. Nonetheless it is possible to conceive of stories or logics that help us to make sense of the items and why they might be collected together and the point that the collection might be trying to make. In a narrative, the gaps between items are firmly bridged so that we string together events into stories. Just as audiences have been trained in the grammar of the screen, we as spectators and users are undergoing training in making broader leaps in connecting together material from disparate places through our use of the internet and in our fragmented daily life. It is this shift that allows the possibilities of the list to emerge.

Just as a narrative may be conceived as a list with relationships between elements clearly established, on the obverse the list can be seen as a deliberate de-forming of such narrative connections. An assemblage can be broken up into its constitutive elements through the device of a list so that new relations, new metaphors and new ways of thinking can emerge.

As Eco describes it:

[t]he list becomes a way of reshuffling the world, almost putting into practice Tesauro's invitation to accumulate properties in order to bring out new relationships between distant things, and in any case to cast doubt on those accepted by commonsense. (2009, p. 327)

In the process of deforming, the list is breaking down the conventions and well-worn pathways of narrative and other structures. New connections become possible in this breaking down of existing form and new insights, rather than predetermined and anticipated outcomes, may be possible. It is a type of deconstructive process that lets us dig down into the component parts of a subject enabling an exploratory process of remaking, rethinking and reconnecting. The list is both a way to remember and a way to organise information. In addition it is a way to conceptualise relationships between the material (item to item) and between the audience and the elements of the work (viewer to viewed).

A shift to more open forms does not fundamentally change what Rosen saw as the task of the documentarian, namely constructing and organising the real. In a variation of the essay form, the creator threads together fragments in response to the Montaigne-esque question of "what do I know?", making conscious use of scepticism and uncertainty in order to explore the world. It is a process of curating, selecting, ordering, sequencing, connecting, providing context and signalling intention. With fragmentation one of the underlying conditions associated both with modernity and online delivery (smaller files are faster to load which in turn trains the user in making sense of fragmentary forms), the disparate elements of the list are montaged through a process of synthesis and the linearity of the spectator's experience. The virtual interactivity of the list permits a range of other forms to subsequently emerge as constellations of elements are combined in multiple ways. While not appearing as an obvious narrative, it could still be through individual narratives that the parts cohere. Even out of something as mundane as a shopping list, a narrative can be brought into existence.

Beyond purely functional uses, the simple structure, iterative style and understated aesthetic of the list creates a kind of minimalist poetry. *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* (1991) is a key example of how the pared back form of the list can be poetic. With lists of rare things, splendid things, worthless things and things that quicken the heart, the book works like an

experiential mnemonic. There is a process of conjuring operating here as the uttering of each item on a list can trigger a sense memory, an imagining, a concurrence or a questioning. The poetry of the images and astuteness of observation means that each list appears to us “not so much as an inventory but as an incantation” (Eco 2009, p. 377). The quality of her world and a glimpse of her mind are evoked through both the items that each list gathers and the topics under which they are assembled. In some ways this is the nature of the poetry of the list: elements are thoughtfully collected and grouped to provide insights through the frisson of the components as they rub against each other in juxtaposition.

The potential of this form is that the openness of structure may allow room for critical engagement and an experiential knowing. There is room for the agency of the self and a *talking back* to the work in the spaces that exist between the elements of the list. The key issue is to provide the constitutive elements in a context that still permits a heuristic, exploratory engagement that may be taken further rather than setting the elements up as an algorithmic recipe that is definitive in the understanding of a topic. The heuristic approach requires a greater investment of time and thought but also has the potential to reward an audience with a deeper, more embodied and experiential grasp of an issue or abstract concept. However, it is important not to overly idealise the possibilities of the form. As Marks notes in relation to the installation of experimental media in a gallery setting, the option of being able to choose how to engage with a work often “results in a kind of cognitive consumerism where an artwork is reduced to a set of ideas to be mastered” (2012, p. 22). While she is arguing for theatrical screenings over gallery installation of experimental moving image work, it seems that there will always be a risk of superficial engagement over a critically engaged experience when the structure of a work permits a quick scanning to grasp its intentions.

How many ways to say you?

In my practice based research, *How many ways to say you?*, I have negotiated this potential for a *cognitive consumption* of the material by attempting to find a balance between the openness of the chosen form and providing sufficient cues to encourage the audience to engage with the journey of the work. Working in the combined roles of cinematographer, director and editor, it was often difficult to separate out the affect created by the film in itself and the affect that was a result of my pre-existing knowledge from having been there at the time of filming. Part of the intention of the open structure for the film has been to allow spaces for the audience to engage with the material in their own way and still describe

something of my particular experience. This has meant paring back narration and textual interjections while offering just enough information to soothe some of the anxieties that might result from a lack of narrative through-line and cause the audience to disengage. Without overlaying my stories from behind each moment of filming, audience connection to the ideas of this project has been facilitated in three main ways. These are: the formal structure of the list; the audiovisual pleasures the film offers; and direct address to the camera by subjects. These three factors are aspects of how a relational aesthetic can be seen to work as they combine to absorb the spectator in the experience (visual pleasures), draw them into a sense of relationship (direct address) and create spaces for contemplation (the formal structure).

Based around a list of some of the ways to say *you* in Khmer, the formal structure of the work draws on audience understanding of dictionaries and the processes of translation and definition. Adherence to the discipline of the structure was important in maintaining the benefits of such formal familiarity. In early edits I experimented with including elements that did not strictly conform to the terms of the list as a way to more clearly draw connections between the parts and augment the content. However, interruptions to the formal structure came to feel like false endings. Once the form was interrupted it could no longer be what it had been. It may have been possible to develop and change the form but a return to the previous state was awkward without clear motivation and stronger authorial indications. As I wanted the images, sounds and their treatment to be the main means by which I spoke to the audience (thus opening up spaces for contemplation and interpretation) it became clear that I needed to closely observe the conditions of the form. This iterative application of structure becomes a point of reference for the audience and a key way to negotiate the dissonance of fragmentation. Where there is no direct narrative offered, the repetitive nature of *How many ways to say you?* permits a sense of familiarity so that feelings of disorientation can be overcome. The shape of the work becomes familiar in the statement of each *you* word that effectively becomes the section title.

The overarching form of *How many ways to say you?* is a way to think through the underlying concepts. Operating to a logic of associational form, connections between shots are kept deliberately loose, but by being included in the assemblage the elements accumulate “properties in order to bring about new relationships between distant things” (Eco 2009, p. 327). Qualities of provisionality are emphasised as I work to negate any impression that this is a definitive account. Much like holiday snapshots, it is only a limited and incomplete glimpse, wholly enclosed by my subjective viewpoint. This is implied through the partial style of each

section that present as fragments rather than complete narratives. The work resists the finitude of narrative structure and seeks to create a conversation. This resistance occurs at both the cellular level of individual sections and at the overall, macro level of the completed work.

The opening text frames the elements of the list, highlighting key points that could influence how the list is understood. It is set up as my personal account from a particular time ("2005 - travelling in Cambodia"). Tragedies of the Khmer Rouge era are alluded to with mentions of killing fields ("so many places where someone would say, 'over there is a killing field where many people died'"). The potential for remnants of history to effect the present is explored ("The presence of the past"). There is a presage of the questioning that comes at the end of the film in poetic fragments that hint at the overriding intentions of the work ("Thoughts take shape in words / fragments of understanding / sensing, remembering"). The organising principle for the film to come is stated ("There are many different ways to address someone as *you* in Khmer. In Khmer alphabetical order, these are some of the ways to say 'you'.") The idea that there can be different ways to say *you* and that Khmer alphabetical order is different to the order prescribed by a Latin-based alphabet is intended to pique interest at the start and provide a way in to making sense of the audiovisual fragments.

The choice to arrange the 'you' words in Khmer alphabetical order may initially appear to introduce a randomness to the sequence of sections. However, in editing the material I have kept the flow of sections in mind so that I could develop supplementary logics to the sequencing of elements. In this I have been influenced by films such as Jay Rosenblatt's *Phantom limb* (2005), Errol Morris' *The fog of war* (2004) and François Girard's *Thirty two short films about Glenn Gould* (1993) which work with elements in list like structures but still create emotionally engaging experiences. Tensions, contrasts, trajectories and developments can be discerned in the linear progress from word to word in *How many ways to say you?* so that the parts speak to what precedes and comes after them.

Occurring straight after direct references to the Khmer Rouge in the section titled, *mit aing*, the section *loak* depicts members of a Khmer musical ensemble playing for tourists on a pathway leading to one of the temples in the vicinity of Angkor Wat. Playing traditional Khmer instruments and music, the men have all suffered injuries as a result of land mines. However, this point isn't directly raised during the sequence but is referenced within a broader frame. The tableau composition of the main shot contains a considerable amount of visual information but it is up to the audience to piece this together. While an observant viewer may

notice missing limbs and other injuries, the shot compositions do not emphasise these afflictions. However, there remains a sense of unease in this section. The background to the scene is a handheld tracking shot past a dark tangle of jungle vines. The men keep looking to the left and right of camera, constantly checking their surroundings. There is the constant sound of cicadas in the background. It is as if a shadow of the past is hanging over the scene.



Figure 156 Still from *How many ways to say you?*

Look - this sequence depicting an orchestra made up of landmine victims comes immediately after the sequence mentioned that refers to the time of the Khmer Rouge

The multiple words in Khmer for saying *you* work as a metaphor in that they express the complexity of speaking the other and the incompleteness of this particular attempt. Each *you* word is simultaneously a description of the subjects on-screen and an implication of the spectatorial relationship to the material. The position of speaker and who is being spoken to are both at play in determining which word should be used. Not only are the words a description of what the people on-screen might be called, they are also the words that the spectator would use to address the on-screen subjects. Each subsequent section shows a new facet of the possible *other*, another glimpse of the experience of people and place that can be conceived of in relationship to these opening statements.

The *you* of the title is an abstract concept but also an address to the subjects and the spectators of the film. The question, *How many ways to say you?* muses on ideas of individual identity and the collection of roles and relationships that comprise our subjectivity. The final intertitle sequence expands upon the query of the film's title question, asking how many ways are there to think you, understand you, remember you – all of which are actions that are

caught up in the seemingly straightforward act of speaking the word *you*. By repeating the question at the end of the film, the point of reference by which the audience may reconsider what they have seen is restated. In addition, combining the questioning sequence with the image of a new day starting is a final avowal of indeterminacy and changefulness in the face of an unknowable future.

The facts of who I am and the circumstances of gathering the material – namely a relatively privileged western, white woman on holiday in a developing nation for a limited period of just less than one month with limited knowledge of the local language – have been significant among the reasons behind the choice to adopt such an open, fragmented structure. Not only was I an outsider to this culture (*a barang* at liberty to travel at will), the relative shortness of my stay also means that I cannot (and will not) speak with any of the authority that an ethnographer might claim. The structure, audiovisual pleasure and direct address of on-screen subjects become interwoven in an attempt to generate echoes of connection and feeling. All that I can relay are the fragments of my experience and share something of the impact that travelling and meeting people had on me. The direct look to camera by the subjects becomes a metaphor for this experience. The gaze develops from distant and shy to sustained, close and eventually bold.



Figure 157 Still from *How many ways to say you?*
The direct look to camera by on-screen participants works to establish a connection with the viewer.

One of the challenges of using a list-like or associational form is to find ways to represent humanness and engage the audience in a relationship with the subjects on-screen. Ordinarily, affective connections might be generated through classic narrative structure that addresses

the audience through familiar story forms. However, in the context of the open, poetic approach another means for connection needed to be established. The direct address by on-screen participants became one of the key methods for drawing the audience in to a sense of relationship with the subjects. As Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen describe it: "When represented participants look at the viewer, vectors, formed by participants' eyelines, connect the participants with the viewer. Contact is established, even if it is only on an imaginary level" (2006, p. 117). Using the looks to camera was a strategy that had twofold benefits. Firstly, the direct gaze by participants down the barrel of the camera implicates the audience in the exchange process of the film. The action of the image is to directly acknowledge the audience and in a way they also become participants. Secondly, it meant that filmed subjects were aware of the camera's presence and were therefore responding to camera and to me.

With its focus on words denoting relationship, the thematic structure of *How many ways to say you?* has made it possible to investigate the unspoken conditions of human interactions that are visible in gesture, facial expression and the arc of a look held for too long. This is mute knowledge that we feel and remember but often do not express through words. While there is an array of visual and audio material presented as evidence, the work accentuates an exploration of experience and subjectivity. At times this has been achieved through the holding of brief moments that otherwise may have only lasted a few frames. In the film *Sans soleil* (1983) Chris Marker extends a brief glance to camera by on-screen subjects through a freeze frame of the look. I have employed a similar device in slowing down, holding and layering similarly brief instants.

In the section titled *neak sreay*, two fleeting glances from the woman selling leafy greens are drawn-out for longer contemplation, permitting an insight or an imagining of this person beyond the immediate conditions of the market. The first glance is surprised, even mildly accusatory. The second look grants a small smile that is swiftly followed by a rapid camera movement as I looked up from the eyepiece to engage personally with the woman I was filming. In the section titled *look yiey*, a similar moment of direct address is drawn out to nearly five times its original length. This slowing transforms the look from a curious consideration of the camera (and me behind it) into an experience that, for me, transcended the everyday circumstances of the occasion into a moment of connection and deep contemplation. I have aimed to augment this sense by using extended dissolves between shots that mix images to the point where it is difficult to determine where one ends and the

next one starts. In addition the shots chosen for this sequence depart from a realist documentary logic and move into the terrain of expressive editing and associational form.



**Figure 158 Still from *How many ways to say you?*
Loak yiey - time is transformed as a moment of direct address is extended far beyond its original length.**

However, the look to camera is a quite complicated construct. In actuality the subjects in this case possibly are not aware of the audience that they will eventually address. While there were occasions when the people did look directly at me through the prosthetic of the camera lens, their looks to camera are frequently illusory as they in fact are looking at themselves on the camera's flip out LCD screen. So a kind of doubling of space is occurring as the subjects create a mirror space in looking at themselves on-screen, but the audience imagine a space of conversation as they feel themselves directly addressed by the on-screen participants. In between all this, as Scott Krzych points out in reference to similar sequences from Kiarostami's *ABC Africa*:

[t]he participants on-screen are no more or less spectators than those who eventually view the documentary on DVD. Here, spatial metaphors (i.e., the camera is too *close* and *invasive*, or the camera is too *detached* or *distant*) find no application. (Krzych 2010, p. 32)

A deliberately performative attitude is evident in sections of *How many ways to say you?*, particularly on the part of the children when they *mug* for the camera. Although at times there may be a sense of awkwardness or dismissal in the looks, there is also an awareness of the profilmic event that is augmented by a simultaneous assessment of their own on-screen presence that results from watching themselves on the LCD screen. In deliberately selecting images that demonstrate this profilmic awareness, the intention is to take the representations

beyond mere ciphers and give the impression of lives that extend beyond the captured moment.



Figure 159 Still from *How many ways to say you?*
Nieung - the young girls gaze directly into the camera, at times using it as a mirror to comb their hair.

Even though the overt structure of the work is based upon translations of a series of terms, expectations that might arise from seeing this as a work of definition are disrupted by the material that exceeds such explanations. In effect, it becomes an example of Deleuze's concept of making the "major language stutter by using that major language differently" (Miles 2012). While translations of each Khmer term are offered, the audiovisual material is not a straightforward attempt to define the words. Just as the words aid in organising the complexity of the filmed fragments, each *you* term also becomes a point of departure for exploring an experience, a relation and a particular point of view. Through qualities of image, pace, sound and combination, the audience is offered more than is required to just understand the meaning of an abstract word. This material becomes a vehicle to create an aesthetic experience that conjures a fleeting glimpse but not a direct reproduction. Where the form of the list might produce an intellectual form of knowing, the potential for a purely cognitive engagement is short circuited by other, more experiential appeals.

There has been a deliberate attempt to emphasise the affective power of audiovisual pleasures in producing this work. Aesthetic qualities and choices around technique have been a central concern as the experience of the work is just as important as the notional content. While considerable effort has been put into ensuring accuracy of translation, definition of language elements and use of Khmer characters, corresponding energy has been devoted to

creating a style that offers beauty as a way to connect with the material. This might seem to be a dubious option in the context of a work that is being called a documentary, especially in light of the suspicions of beauty discussed in the opening chapter. However, the openness of structure and the unfamiliarity of the material have the potential to create a strong feeling of disconnection for some spectators. As an experiential rather than evidentiary work, it was also at the level of feeling that I hoped to engage the audience. In the absence of a narrative framing, my intention has been to attract further contemplation through initial appreciation of the audiovisual style of the piece.

Similar to the effect described in chapter 3 in relation to Miyarrka Media's *Christmas Birrimbirr* (2012a), a pared back narrational presence in *How many ways to say you?* emphasises alternate ways of knowing and understanding. These intuitive forms rely upon the perception and interpretation of emotional, sensory, durational and subjective information. Elements such as gesture, colour, texture, pace, sense of time, juxtaposition of images and sound provide the material for the experience of the work that becomes an aspect of how the spectator comes to know the work. As the spectator reads and works to make sense of what they see and hear, the aesthetic choices have been made with the aim of maintaining an openness of reception to the experience that the film is creating.

A certain sense of discomfort may also result from the combination of beauty with echoes of the tragedies wrought during the time of the Khmer Rouge. This has not been a specific attempt to conjure feelings of exquisite or sublime sadness but rather finding a way to nurture a sense of ambivalence. Tension is created between beauty and tragedy by contextualising the visual pleasures of the work with references to remnants of the war (for example land mines) and changes to the terms of address introduced by the Khmer Rouge (*comrade* replaces other forms of address that indicate the terms of relationship). The intention is to create a productive ambivalence that could in turn trigger critical engagement with the form and content of the work. The unease potentially shifts the experience out of the comfort zone of pure audiovisual pleasure to prompt a deeper level of thought. The poetic form and poetic approach to representation prompt connections of metaphor, simile, antonym and resonance so that there are layers of interpretation that may reward further contemplation.

Conversations in form and content

It is possible to see trajectories continuing on from associational and mosaic structures in linear, single channel documentary forms (with their intentions to create engaging, relational

spaces) that extend into projects with more obvious interactive features. Similar approaches to organising the complexity of material can be observed as the subjective potential for creating networks and webs of connection across elements is actualised in the gallery space and online. This is not to assume, however, that all purportedly interactive works are created according to a relational aesthetic that addresses the questions posed by Bourriaud that he describes as the co-existence criterion: “Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?” (2002, p. 109). In line with this idea of dialogue I am going to explore a model of conversation. This idea of conversation operates as a metaphor for the aesthetic choices made around interaction and how these choices impact on the capacity for a work to engage with complexity, changefulness and indeterminacy.

When the project enters into territories of interaction design, the production methodologies increase and the range of factors that can impact on the overall media experiences expand exponentially. What interests me is to explore how a documentary project can embrace the potential of becoming a conversation in the way that it is structured (it incorporates a level of interactivity) and by including material (potentially user generated) that speaks back or responds to the originating content. These forms of conversation occur along a continuum of interaction that notionally begins with montaging experiences, where users decide what to look at along the way, through to much more open forms.

Alongside exploring the spaces for dialogue that each work might create I will consider how a relational aesthetic might be accommodated by online environments. Bourriaud considered art to be superior to other modes of media production in terms of the ability to encourage discussion. In his assessment, television and literature, “refer each individual person to his or her space of private consumption” and in the theatre and cinema “there is no live comment made about what is seen (the discussion is put off until after the show)” (Bourriaud 2002, p. 16). As he understands it, the process of relational engagement at an exhibition has viewing and processing occurring almost concurrently – “I see and perceive, I comment, and I evolve in a unique space and time” (Bourriaud 2002, p. 16). Without attempting to extend this to the whole online environment, I will examine how relational engagement works across a range of projects that facilitate different forms of dialogue through their means of exhibition.

Disorient

The two screen HD video installation work, *Disorient* (2009) by Fiona Tan was initially devised for exhibition in the Dutch Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale. It was restaged in Sydney at

the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation in early 2010⁴⁹. Originally intended as a location specific artwork, the piece is “inspired by the geo-strategic position Venice once had through its connections to the Middle East and Asia” (Bos et al. 2009, p. 1.23). It is exhibited in a darkened gallery space that feels detached from the urban streetscape outside the door. There are three main media elements to the work – one channel of projected video that shows a gliding passage through rows of museum cases and storage shelves in an archive of assembled objects; a second channel of video, projected slightly smaller on the opposite wall showing contemporary archival footage drawn from news and current affairs television of people and places throughout the Middle East and Asia; and a voiceover reading excerpts from *The Travels*, the 700 year old book by Marco Polo describing his journeys between East and West.

The first projection (screen A) traces movement through an excess of gathered items – dolls, tomatoes, television monitors, cinnamon, taxidermied animals, chillies, tea, star anise, peanuts, incense, furniture, cloves, carpets, books, statues, scrolls, lanterns, figurines, butterflies – all piled together in an eclectic display of memory objects. For all the profusion, this is a quiet place. It is a calm gallery of strange relics with bizarre juxtapositions demonstrating an almost impenetrable system of cataloguing. Everything is in stasis, suspended and extracted from any original context. Low key lighting indicates this as a place secluded from the harsh light of day. It is a cocooned and protected accumulation of eccentric treasures. The colour palette emphasises lush tones of red, gold and brown. We see a person dressed in saffron robes asleep on a couch who may be part of, or keeper of, the collection. There are television monitors that at first seem out of place in this array but then, they too are from another time and place. The camera moves through the space at a slow pace with gentle shifts in focus directing our attention to different objects. The transitions between shots are through cross dissolves so that a constant flowing movement is maintained.

⁴⁹ It is the Sydney version of the work that is being referred to in this section.



Figure 160 Video still from *Disorient Screen A*

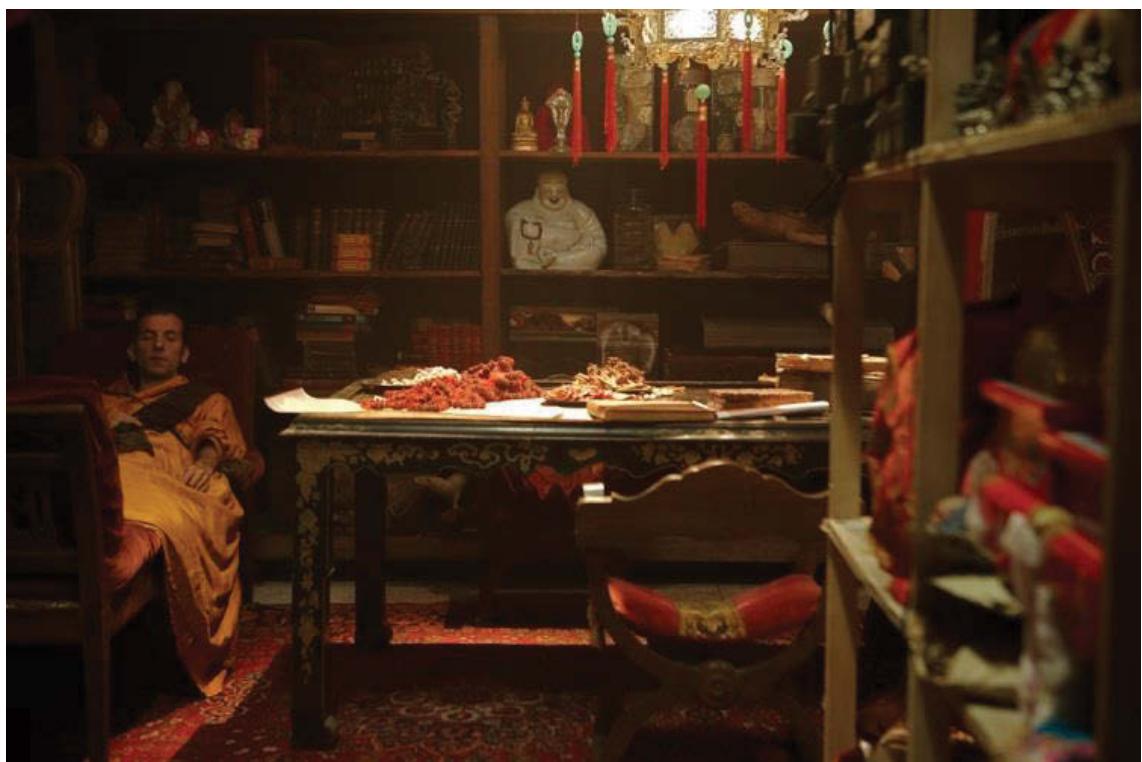


Figure 161 Video still from *Disorient Screen A*

The contemporary images on the other screen (screen B) are of Eastern Europe, the Middle, Central and Far East, often viewed through the lens of hardship. We see workers engaged in difficult, manual labour under conditions that frequently seem deleterious to their health. There are rubbish pickers and people recycling a range of discarded post-consumer waste. The

implication is that much of their labour goes to support the lifestyles of privileged others. There are images of war and troops dealing roughly with civilians. We see explosions in a city night sky. They may be fireworks but in this context, probably aren't. Hands score the swollen seed pods of poppies, presumably as part of the opium harvesting process. People carry heavy loads, some push carts, others haul with the help of beasts of burden. In one instance a fellow walks with an enormous flat screen television strapped to his back. It is one of the only times that we see evidence of modern technology in this version of the world. There is a realist rawness to the images that speaks of utilitarian motivations of news gathering and recording evidence of operations. These are not romanticised images of exotic locations. The footage is often quite confronting and depicts a world where life is a struggle. These are loaded images that call up a range of cultural references in the process of decoding and making sense of the montage. This channel of video also shows reflexive images of the Dutch Biennale Pavilion being setting up as the location for the shoot of the other video stream on screen A.



Figure 162 Video still from *Disorient Screen B*

The voiceover performance is unemotional and somewhat hushed implying an intimacy or interiority. The tone is methodical. It settles in the space and in the images, providing a point of linkage between the two video screens which can only be viewed alternately, not both at the same time. The passages chosen for the voiceover are not the well-known tales of Marco Polo's encounters such as those with Kublai Khan in Xanadu. The spoken words comprise a methodical listing of places along the way. The list expresses a gathering impulse that matches the surplus of objects shown on the first screen. Seeming like a business traveller's guide from the Middle Ages, it is a fairly confronting text that sums up whole civilisations as idolaters and

robbers, Christians or Saracens. There are elements of location audio that draw on iconic sounds such as a call to prayer, noises of the street and chickens. These sounds direct attention from screen to screen as the spectator searches for possible points of synchronisation. There are long pauses between sections that allow for some processing of the text that otherwise seems to come in a constant flow of new places and judgements.



Figure 163 Video still from *Disorient* Screen B
One of a number of shots reflexively showing the Dutch Biennale Pavilion being set up for filming

Disorient embraces the form of the list on multiple levels: in the presentation of the visual catalogue of an imagined archive of objects; through the collection of footage from contemporary events in places through which Marco Polo journeyed 700 years ago; and in the voice over that lists the various places he journeyed through with a short summary of essential information about the local people and culture. The elements do not form up into a traditional narrative. This is an associational approach to structure and the onus is largely on the viewer to make connections in order to make sense of the material. Indeed the images largely resist cohesion and do not submit easily to straight forward explanation. The screen B news footage is clearly drawn from a range of sources and is presented in a stream of consciousness that can be connected to the places being mentioned in the voiceover. A place is named, described and then the text moves on. Terms of description are repeated in reference to other people and places so a strangely homogenous portrayal of locations emerges from the point of view of an outsider merchant. It is a list of observations, judgements and brief notes to travellers. The story of a journey is deemphasised. Assessments of people, places and the opportunities to be had from them come to the foreground.

The agency of the audience in shaping the work through interaction is extended slightly from the intertextual and subjective responses facilitated in single channel works. As both screens cannot be seen at the same time the audience has to choose which screen to pay attention at each moment of the work. This spatial separation means that the decision of where to look is conscious and deliberate. The significant stylistic dissimilarities between the two screens also speak to different experiences of being in the world while the varying combinations of sound and image clearly produce different effects. The choice of which screen to look at becomes a choice between a concept of *now* and a timeless storehouse, between an impression of immediacy and an etherised warehouse of possessions. Both screens show the contents of archives, but one shows us somewhere else through images of people and places shot on location; the other through images of a *Wunderkammer* of assembled souvenir objects. We might read the news and current affairs archival screen as more real (particularly as it *informs* on the opposing screen through its showing of reflexive, behind-the-scenes-footage), but it too is just as much an assemblage of material gathered together, taken out of context and compiled for the purpose of this work. The combination of two opposing video projections presenting contrary views of lived reality and inanimate relics with a common soundscape in effect achieves the disorientation referred to in the work's title. The viewer is put off balance and unsettled as they search for solid ground for understanding the work.

Interestingly, it is perhaps in the work's opacity and resistance to explanation that a relational aesthetic is realised. The two screens of material combined with the voiceover consistently refer the spectator to a questioning of where they are in relation to the materials, peoples and cultures being referenced. In the sometimes confronting language of the voiceover, the privileged position of western outsider is challenged and the model of travel as consumption is brought into consciousness. However, this is a hushed gallery space and the etiquette of the location means Bourriaud's notion of *live comment* is not encouraged. Nonetheless, the pauses in voiceover do allow for some reflection and the looping playback permits multiple, unhindered viewings. While the voiceover track is synchronised to the video for screen B, the two video streams are of differing durations (screen A: 17 minutes, screen B: 21 minutes). Consequently there is time slippage between the two screens and a repeated viewing is not the same as the previous one. As a work that requires considerable unpacking and that yields to detailed consideration, it is in the sticky density of the work that the relational aspects truly come to fruition. While affect can undoubtedly be produced in the space of the exhibition itself, comment and evolution of understanding more realistically occur in the time after the experience of the work in a way that is similar to a cinematic experience. Like the lines of a

poem, whose rhythms and economy of expression enable the text to linger in the mind of the reader, sequences from *Disorient* remain with the spectator to be considered more fully over time. It is a poetic approach that incorporates tone, audiovisual juxtaposition and spatial experience.

The next example operates on a more directly emotive level, using images and music to create affective connections between the representation and the audience. However, the exhibition circumstances for this video permit a different range of interaction possibilities so that a complex network of ways to access information about the subject are instigated from the poetic rendering.

Iraqi Kurdistan

Published via the online storytelling site MediaStorm.com, *Iraqi Kurdistan* (Kashi et al. 2006) presents "...an expansive look into the daily lives of the Kurdish people of northern Iraq" (MediaStorm 2006). During 2005, Ed Kashi spent almost 2 months travelling through Iraqi Kurdistan taking photographs for *National Geographic*. His images covered the scope of everyday existence as the people of the region started to recover their lives in the wake of systematic campaigns of genocide against the Kurds by Saddam Hussein. The resulting stills (all of them captured in continuous shooting mode) were edited together "in a rapid, filmic succession" (MediaStorm 2006) to create a sense of movement and sequence. The shooting style and method of compilation creates a particularly subjective sense of time passing as movement is sped up, slowed down, made to flow, move to a rhythm, hesitate or come to a complete standstill. It is as if we are able to interrupt the stream of time at any point to dwell, even for a beat or two longer, on a single instant. There is a sense of both fluid and arrested time as the work proceeds then lingers on a gesture, a look or a brief and otherwise fleeting instant.

The choices around synchronisation between image and music are not always predictable. The two move together at times and then diverge for periods of looser connection. At times the flow of movement matches the regular beat of the music while at others, although the rhythm of sound has not changed, the beats per minute of the images slow to a fraction so that images are held for a bar or a phrase before returning once again to a closer synchronisation. Music brings with it the rhythmic pleasures that are frequently an integral part of poetry. But in this short documentary the choices in pacing and synchronisation aren't just about exploring rhythm. The decisions are also driven by a rationale of skilful meaning creation that sees

powerful ideas, imagery and feelings conveyed in a way that has pleasures of form as well as of content.

Similar to *How many ways to say you?* direct address by the photographed subjects is frequently used as a point of connection to draw the audience in, challenge and engage them. This effect is further accentuated as these moments of returned gaze are often the still frames that are chosen for extended pause. Varying points of connection emerge – a smile, a tired drop of the shoulders, a relieving stretch after hard physical work, a heartfelt embrace to distract someone from unimaginable pain. These draw our attention to the fact of the subjects as feeling, experiencing individuals whose life we can know something of through the physicality of their gestures. The blurring of movement brings attention to the kinetic energy that is occurring but also alerts us to the stillness of the time slices that are created by a photograph. So it becomes a conversation of stillness, almost movement and subjects that once moved.

The use of moving stills also produces an added awareness of dimensionality in the composition. A sense of depth and the relationships between people and objects in three dimensional space is a quality that we as audience can become inured to with frame rates that give a stronger impression of continuous motion such as in the PAL video standard of 25 frames per second. In these sequences of stills photographed in continuous shooting modes that may only attain a rate of 6 to 15 frames per second, the slight changes in perspective are emphasised and grant us a stronger perception of the relationships between people in the depth of space. In some sequences the movement is happening so fast that it is almost erased. For example in a sequence of a farmer scything grass the frame rate slows so that as the frames progress the scythe appears not to have moved as it has returned to its position on the right of frame in between stills but the farmer has moved forward a step. A gliding, effortless quality is generated and our close attention is required to discern what has changed, because we perceive that something has. This close attention rewards the audience with a stronger sense of the developments occurring in the unfolding stills sequences. Through the direct looks to camera and lingering of slowed images a definite feeling of connection is generated, almost as if the subjects were responding to the presence of the audience.



Figure 164 Still from *Iraqi Kurdistan*
A young man at the carnival draws us into connection with his direct gaze.

The focus of Kashi's photographic assignment has resulted in images that generate a categorical exploration of a time and place. There is not a formal narrative to the piece and the scenes shift across geographical location, social strata, age groups, public and private spaces. The result is a collage-style depiction of the region. This use of categorical form over associational form means that the context of the images is more clearly drawn than it was in the previously discussed work, *Disorient*. In itself, the title of the project implies that all the included images in the piece are of people and places in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. This becomes the framework by which the audience makes sense of the material. However, even within this more straightforward approach to structure and meaning production, the reasoning behind the order of progression from one set of images to another is not always clear. While the broad explanation that 'all these things were occurring within Iraqi Kurdistan at that particular time' goes some way to provide a logic, there is at times a feeling of non-sequitur as we move from a street scene reflected in a gallery of mirrors to young women packaging food in a factory, from children on a merry-go-round to soldiers training on an assault course.

The clash becomes a key device, confronting us with the undercurrent of conflict that accompanies seemingly idyllic scenes. A sense of consequence develops as the scenes of men and women soldiers in training are followed by extremely confronting images from a hospital ward where amputees are being treated. The implication is that these injuries are the result of

war and the simple gesture of a comforting hand on a patient's forehead with some gentle words expresses a sharing of affective space. A sense of emotional progression materialises that takes us through the difficulties, joys, tragedies, celebrations, political machinations and determination of the Kurdish people. This affective journey draws us into the human story of *Iraqi Kurdistan* and ends with a scene at a children's playground set on a high plateau overlooking a town. The sequence and the essay culminate in photographs of people gathered at the cliff edge to watch a lone paraglider in flight. The high vantage point, distant horizons, shafts of light streaming through clouds and actions of play combine to create a sense of hope and liberty on which to end the work. It is a highly affecting combination, largely because of the emotional journey we taken on up to that point.



**Figure 165 Still from *Iraqi Kurdistan*
People gather at a cliff edge to watch a lone paraglider in flight.**

One of 32 works published on the MediaStorm website,⁵⁰ *Iraqi Kurdistan* draws on the aesthetic strengths of powerful photojournalism to create what is described as "cinematic narratives that speak to the heart of the human condition" (MediaStorm 2013). These short photo essays are produced in a style and approach that MediaStorm are now marketing to the broader community through practitioner workshops, commissioned client projects and the licencing of their HTML5 based storytelling platform. While the aesthetic techniques and strong awareness of how to capitalise on emotional involvement are compelling, the

⁵⁰ As at 28/08/2013

publishing platform allows the organisation to capitalise on the possibilities of networked online exhibition. In many ways it provides scope for a more poetic approach to documentary than other journalistically based sources. There is no doubt that *Iraqi Kurdistan* is quite unique, even in the context of this website, for its avoidance of clear narrative and embrace of a very list-like, categorical form. However, the ability to include textual information, links to other relevant sites, space for viewer comments, a related twitter feed, forms for easy sharing of material and photo galleries alongside the project permits a certain licence in creative approach. By embedding the work in an information rich environment, the short film is able to occupy a more poetic territory as the effort of explaining is carried by the surrounding elements. In effect, this exhibition context frees the audience to experience the work emotionally and sensually, providing the opportunity to connect with the material on multiple levels.



Figure 166 The web page of *Iraqi Kurdistan*
The information rich environment enables the moving image work to more fully engage with a poetic approach.

In this instance the film as an experience in itself is augmented by other modes of information and exchange. It is a poetic expression in a categorical form. In the spaces created between the elements of the list there is scope for the viewer to access a range of sources within the web interface in order to delve deeper into the associations that are provoked. The poetic

work becomes a prompt that may goad the viewer into further exploration of the complex and changing circumstances surrounding Iraqi Kurdistan. However, the possibilities for user interaction created by online delivery extend beyond following links and leaving comments. The rise of social media and proliferation of user-generated content, while creating exciting possibilities, can also present particular challenges to a poetic approach to documentary.

Maker as curator/curation as making in *Cowbird*

The growth of user contribution as a form of audience interaction with online documentary projects is causing a shift in the role of maker or author and in the way that documentary is being conceived. Within frameworks that are crowd sourcing content the project instigator seems to fulfil tasks associated with the job description of curator. As with linear, single channel documentaries that are made according to a poetic approach, the remit for the online expression of the same impulse is to create spaces where spectators can engage thoughtfully, deeply, meaningfully and affectively with the material of the work. The difference with online projects is that spectators take on a more active role with greater agency in forming their experience of the work. Consequently their engagements may also take the form of generating and contributing creative responses to the exploration of a subject. Rather than being fixed works with definite beginnings and endings, these might be ongoing gatherings of material; portals that create opportunities for communities of interest to gather and interact around a particular worldview, topic or aesthetic preference. Fragments are produced and then added to collections, united by a logic that is usually established by the maker/curator.

In many ways this is a significant change from traditional author centred models of documentary production. An online documentary structured according to a model of open interaction may have an originator or founder involved in setting up the project and framing the terms of interaction. However, in working with a topic in an open online environment, the attendant possibilities to augment or even wholly source the content from audience contributions are opened up. No longer *just* an audience, they become responders and active collaborators in developing the material of the work. It seems that *the project* needs to become *a community* in order to sustain the promise of the form and successfully realise the potential of open interactivity. *Cowbird* is an example of how open interactivity can function within a poetic approach to documentary.

The site cowbird.com describes itself as “a community of storytellers” (Cowbird 2013a). Essentially it is a social media platform that offers people the chance to share personal stories. The format for a story is simple: usually a single photograph and a short piece of text with the

option to also add audio. The landing page gallery provides links to individual stories that are presented as image tiles or text excerpts in a loose, or at times more uniform, mosaic. It is also possible to view the same material as a scrolling list that shows the image and accompanying text associated with each story. This gallery wall changes with new additions of stories so that the most recent contributions are at the top of the page. You can choose to see stories in constellations of “Featured”, “Beloved”, “Recommended”, “Newcomer” or “Recent” (Harris 2011). Explore and search functions allow you to conduct detailed searches according to a diverse range of quite fine grained data. Alternatively you allow “Serendipity” (or a fairly sophisticated algorithm) to take you to a highly rated story.

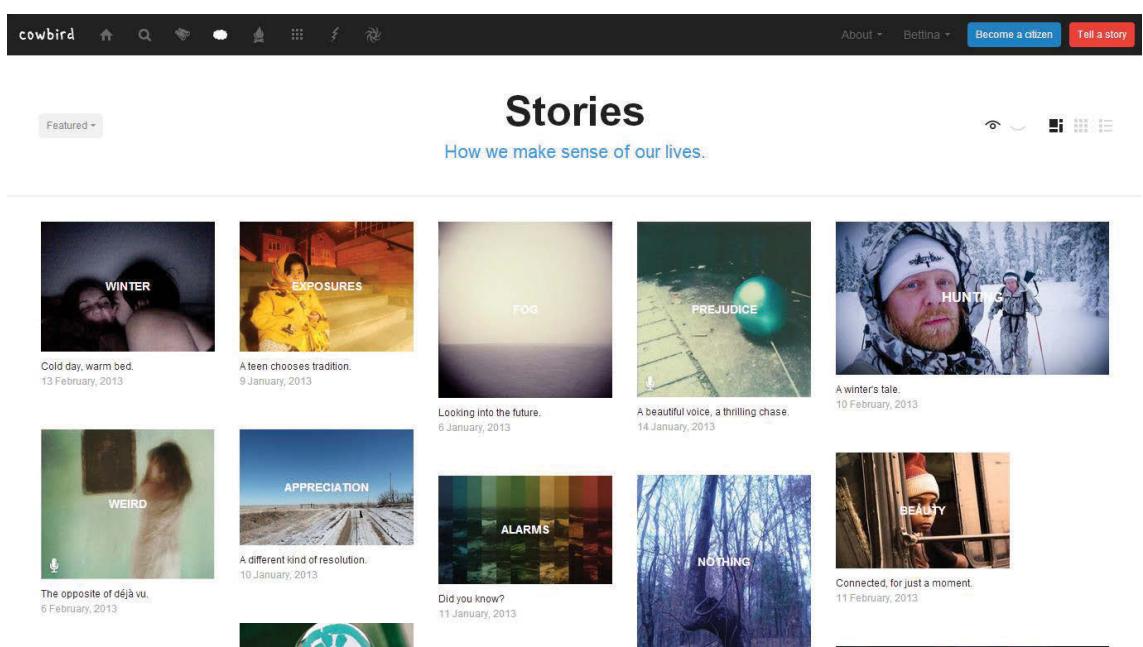


Figure 167 The homepage for *cowbird.com*
An example of the ever changing collection of recommended stories

There is a particular visual style that is evident across the different contributions to the site. This is partly the result of the simple, pared back design strategy that is like a pin board of personal moments. Plenty of white space, sans serif fonts, minimal text aside from the stories and understated navigation icons limit distractions from the story content. It is also about the kind of work that is encouraged through daily featured stories that are sent out to members by email. Looking at the works to which these emails draw attention has the effect of training users in how to tell stories that might get featured on the site. It becomes clear that what is valued is a poetry of the everyday, small observations arising from a moment of pause. This style offers a moment to step outside the flow of life in an attempt to extract some meaning from an otherwise chaotic reality. The images frequently have a subject looking at the camera and make interesting use of light, colour and texture. There can be a quite lush and saturated quality to the photographs. They also evoke subjective and affective responses through a

symbolic and expressive approach to subject choice and overall composition. There is a feeling that users will respond because the image and story topic perhaps speak to something in their own experience. Each image is also accompanied by an enigmatic single word tag in upper case (e.g. GRACE, HOME, RACISM, JUST, DESTINY, FIRST). Part of the lure to click on a story is the chance to unlock the relationship between the image and the tag that the system generates from the title and text of each piece.

Although ostensibly creating a tool for online storytelling, the *Cowbird* group is also producing a system of multilinear engagement. As the work of Lev Manovich has highlighted, software can play a clear role in shaping the kind of work that is possible within its particular framework (2001). However, *Cowbird* goes beyond a level of determining creative output through programming structures. It moves into shaping social structures. The system underlying the site works to form a community of shared values and concerns. As Miles portrays it: “*Cowbird* offers ways of thinking about more open forms of collaborative and communal documentary” (Miles 2012). This concept is expressed in the aspirational and utopic language of the website mission statement that says:

When you tell stories on *Cowbird*, we automatically find connections between your life and the lives of others, forming a vast interconnected ecosystem, in which we all take part. Our goal is to build a public library of human experience, so the knowledge and wisdom we accumulate as individuals may live on as part of the commons, available for this and future generations to look to for guidance. (*Cowbird* 2013a)

While *Cowbird* is not being described as a documentary project by the team behind the site there are elements that do align with documentary intentions. In rethinking what documentary might become in response to complexity and flux, this kind of aggregated approach is one possible model to consider. Although the stories might not always have the same level of critical rigour as other works that have been discussed so far, a sense of contemplative space is nonetheless generated via the interface design and the format of individual contributions. The dominant story format of a single still image and text also creates an effect of slowing down the website experience. While the mosaic of images may at first seem to encourage rapid scanning, there is a stillness to the grid-like format that prompts a moment of pause. Rather than colour and movement, the clean, pared back space facilitates a contemplative tone. For each story users are encouraged to upload images at reasonably high resolutions with a minimum recommended size of 500 pixels square but a preference for pictures that are at least 2000 pixels wide. Even on large screens the user frequently has to

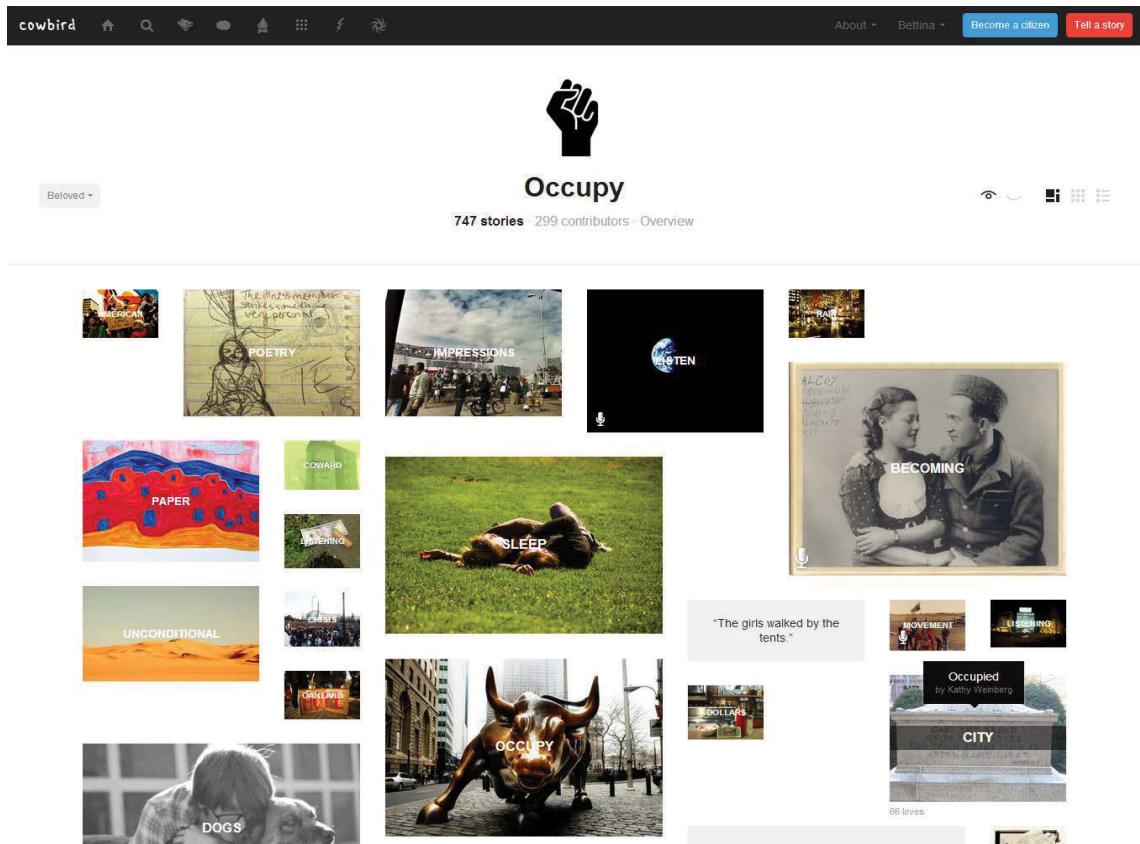
use their mouse in order to scroll across the whole image. This detail of user interaction operates to encourage viewers to spend time and pore over the details of the still.

Even though the stories are offered as self-contained accounts of, and personal insights into, various aspects of life, they appear as fragments of a much larger movement. This is partly a result of the overall design of the interface that uses the metaphor of a mosaic to present the sum of user contributions. The small size of the contributed elements means that they are “easily aggregated into other collections based on theme, location, date, age, and so on” (Miles 2012). This granular quality also means that becoming part of an assemblage has a greater impact on individual contributions with each part comprising a very small portion of the much bigger project.

Many of the individual *Cowbird* fragments are highly affecting and moving, telling of both extraordinary and everyday experiences that show something of the impact on real, human lives. Unfortunately, unfiltered and en masse, these contributions can seem indulgent and at times even trite. The assumption of universalised experience is problematic and at times the works can seem more therapeutic than artful. It is a laudable project to engage with the complexity of life through multiple voices but there is a risk that in trying to find the inspirational, motivational moment or learning experience in every story that the content will become homogenous. It is not until these parts are sifted over, sequenced and curated that interconnection is activated and they are transformed from documents into elements of a networked documentary. For Rosen the documentarian’s task is to restore meaning to documents. In the role of curator the maker gathers together fragments, provides the possibility of connection, development and significance. The manner and degree of processing and sequencing may have changed in online documentaries that incorporate user contributions but the task is no less pertinent and relevant as an act of “...synthesizing reality against the unmediated, unorganized index” (Rosen 1993, p. 89). In its gathering of personal story fragments and in its multiple ways of sequencing this material, *Cowbird* does indeed set in motion a transformative process that honours the complexity of the experience of its contributors.

Processing of stories occurs on two main levels. There is a system of “auto curation” whereby a story is grouped according to the meta data, author generated tags and text associated with a story. There is also the possibility to create specific groupings. This could be: a “collection” which the site describes as “like little mix-tapes or magazines that you assemble by hand” (*Cowbird* 2013b) and is one of the benefits that is offered to paying members of the site; a

“project” which the site describes as “collective storytelling initiatives based around particular topics, usually co-organized with partners”; or a “saga” which is a large, open project that is based around “themes and events that touch millions of lives and shape the human story” (Cowbird 2013a) and which is curated by the *Cowbird* team. It is in these more clearly curated groupings that the networked potential of the platform is more fully realised and we get a better insight into the possibilities of gatherings of first person fragments.



**Figure 168 A Cowbird page showing the saga themed around the Occupy movement
The beginnings and early protests associated with Occupy coincided with the launch of the website.**

As noted previously, context has a considerable impact on how a work is read and this context, as well as the way the system is structured, frames the stories as atoms that go to make up the complex organism of the site itself. Interestingly, even though these fragments are sourced from multiple subjectivities they nonetheless accrete into an aggregated collection that reflects a particular point of view. There is an identifiable philosophy that underpins the approach of cowbird.com with its subtitles that declare “How we make sense of our lives” and “The most beautiful place in the world to tell stories”. This philosophy is reflected in the choice of works, the presentation of material, even in the kinds of contributions that people submit. So in effect this crowd sourced material has a rhetorical effect that is produced through an emergent sense of connection that is generated (daily shifting, mutating, adjusting, adapting to the user population) through the website itself. However, the mosaic doesn’t

resolve into a definitive overall picture. The impression remains of multiples and fragments rather than a determined and totalising whole. A stronger sense of cohesion does come through in the themed collections, particularly the “Sagas” and “Projects”. Here the unifying experience of a particular event – such as the Occupy protests beginning in 2011 – or community experience – such as the Pine Ridge Community Storytelling project – provide a focus for storytelling and a logic according to which the user may process the stories.

The Pine Ridge Community Storytelling project is particularly interesting in the way that it used the *Cowbird* platform as a way to present the stories of community members in parallel to the *official* account published in *National Geographic* magazine in 2012. The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota is the site of a complex history of resistance by the indigenous Sioux people with struggles for self-determination and protest against government action. The reservation has been covered over the years in the media, often with a focus on the negative aspects of life on the “rez”. After photojournalist Aaron Huey received letters from students at the Red Cloud Indian High School challenging him to see a different side to life on the reservation, he worked with *Cowbird* founder, Jonathon Harris, to establish *The Pine Ridge Community Storytelling Project* so that the Oglala Lakota people of Pine Ridge could have the chance to “author their own story” (Huey 2012). The contributions by community members and audio from interviews recorded by Huey are being collected and published, unedited, alongside a feature article in National Geographic Magazine titled *In the Shadow of Wounded Knee* (Fuller 2012). This is described as a work in progress and the modular design of the *Cowbird* system permits ongoing contributions to occur. The design also draws in the multiple threads of individual stories and presents them on equal footing with the polished feature article by Fuller. The diversity of viewpoints of community members is strongly conveyed. The complexity and richness of the Pine Ridge story is being accommodated through this unfiltered, multi-vocal approach. As a work in progress, the mutability of reality can be addressed as stories are added and as relationships between elements shift over time.

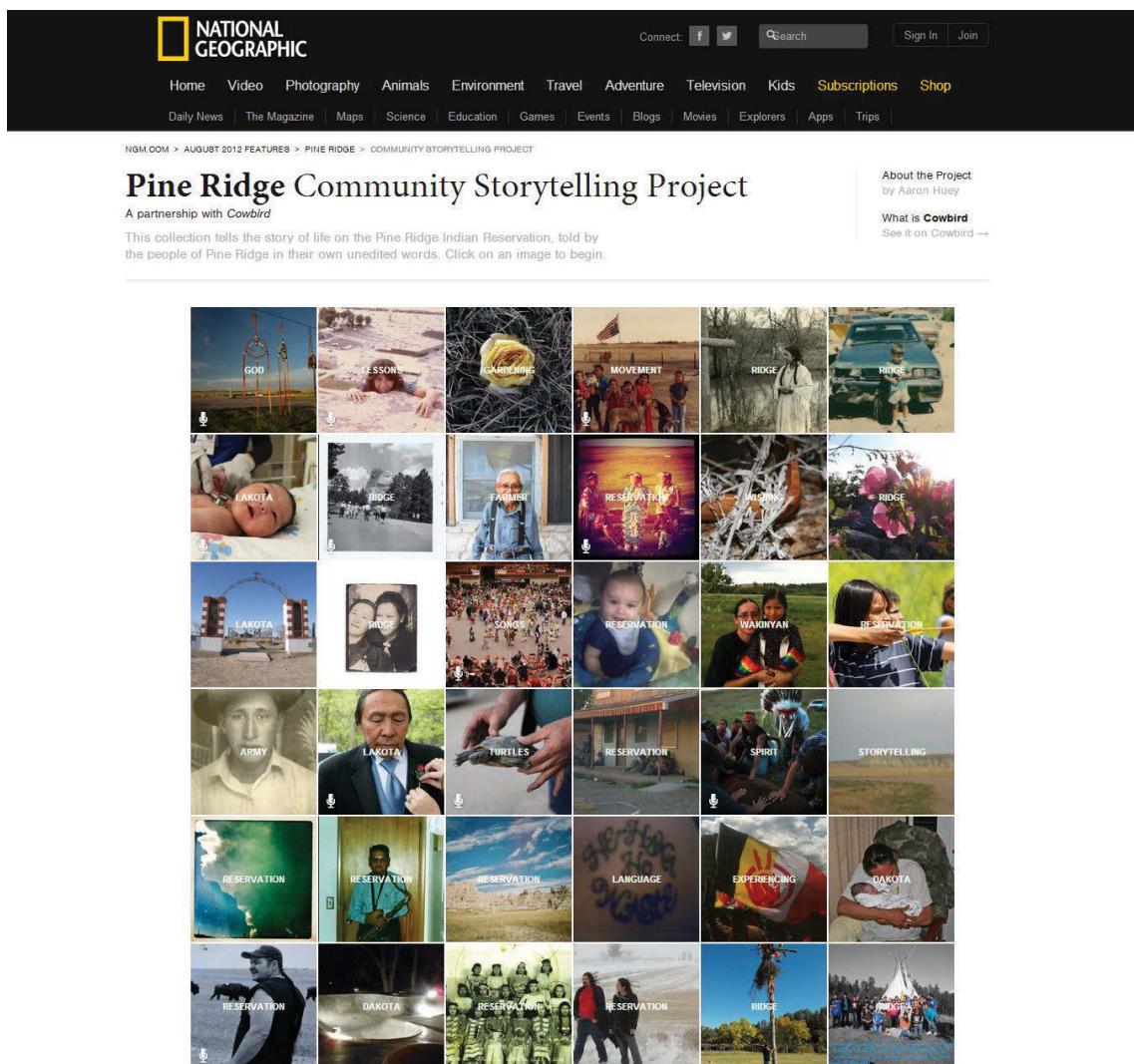


Figure 169 Landing page for the *Pine Ridge community storytelling project*

This was hosted on the *National Geographic Magazine* website

Users of the *Cowbird* website have multiple ways to interact that include: viewing contributions; *loving* stories; joining a particular author's *audience*; sharing other stories with comments (*retelling*); contributing stories; curating their own collections and *sprouting* a story of their own from an existing story on the site. Although restricted to members that are making a financial contribution, this last method of interacting is of particular interest. The potential for responsive conversations to build around sprouting stories is quite rich. The engagement shifts to a sense of shared experience and is potentially more outward looking than unthreaded contributions might be. A story can be kept alive by extending and building on the ideas explored in another author's work. At its best, this kind of riffing on a theme is a deep engagement with the experiences of others, capturing the spirit of the inspiration and building connections through points of commonality. Success of this relational aspect of the

work seems to rely on the willingness of members to listen and consider as well as adding their own voices to the conversation.⁵¹

With this caveat in mind, it may be that the greatest value in a work such as *Cowbird* comes not from just looking at contributions but in the practice of slowing down and noticing that the platform encourages. In the process of making your own contribution and having your attention peculiarly focused on a small chunk of life there is the possibility of self-examination and insight. By looking through featured stories, collections and sagas presented in open, mosaic structures the onus is on the user to find connections across diverse content. Consequently there is a level of critical thinking required that potentially activates users towards more complex understandings. It may be in this engagement with the everyday through looking, commenting and contributing that the relational aspect of the project is realised. In the framework that *Cowbird* provides there is the potential for it “no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist” (Bourriaud 2002, p. 13). As a complex work, operating to principles of emergence and drawing on the materials of everyday individual experience, there is space for consideration and exploration within the *Cowbird* project that can suggest alternative modes of exchange, using the systematic and the computational to enable points of human connection. It is complex, changeable and stimulates extensive webs of connection.

The interstices of the list

As Bruzzi has observed, “in documentary there has been a more consistent realisation that structural fluidity can be liberating and positive” (2000, p. 103). With accelerating innovations occurring in the form and conception of documentary works, modes of address and interaction provide rich new veins for practitioners to mine in searching for ways to engage an audience with nuanced and complex representations.

In the spaces between the items of the list and the tiles of mosaic form there is room to explore possibilities beyond what is currently occurring in established structures. These interstices encourage “an inter-human commerce that differs from the ‘communication zones’ that are imposed upon us” (Bourriaud 2002, p. 16). In the open structure that is poetic rather than assertive, there is space for new thinking to emerge and to hold complex understandings

⁵¹ An art project based around a similar concept is *The Exquisite Forest* (Milk & Koblin 2012a) . Produced by Google and the Tate Modern it is “an online collaborative art project that lets users create short animations that build off one another as they explore a specific theme. The result is a collection of branching narratives resembling trees” (2012b).

that accommodate ambivalence and multiplicity. This embrace of the list is about finding new relationships and re-imagining networks of connection. However, form alone doesn't hold the key to an ethical practice. A commitment to deal ethically with subjects and audiences is central to negotiating the responsibilities of the documentary form.

While emphasis on experience over evidence may seem to limit the scope for in depth examinations, web interfaces open considerable potential to present, in parallel, poetic approaches alongside statistical and other information based accounts. The networking of information that online presentation enables permits the spectator to explore multiple ways of knowing about a topic and to engage critically with the material as they weigh connections between the different modalities of knowledge. The complexity of experience can be explored through different ways of understanding, with knowledge conceived of as a process rather than a destination.

Complex understanding can also be developed through polyvocality with historical accounts, ideas and frameworks that grow through the input of multiple thinkers. While there is a risk that such approaches may be derailed by fixed positions and unspoken agendas, certain poetic approaches can provide a strategy to negotiate these clashes of entrenched position and jealously guarded opinion. In the openness of form, affective connection and absorbing experiences of alternative points of view there appears to be promise for change. Where there is a genuine desire for critical engagement and considered response, the open, poetic approach offers the space where complex understandings may be acknowledged and developed.

It is important to emphasise that despite the potential described in relation to the exhibition of poetic documentary works within online environments, this engagement with the complex and changing is not solely restricted to works structured around modes of interaction, such as in the case of installation and online projects. At the heart of this discussion is a consideration of how a poetic approach to documentary is able to reconceive an audience's engagement with the elements of a modular form. In itself, the poetic experience of the work produces a continuity of tone across the sometimes loosely connected components. In addition the sense of openness and conditions for different attention that are produced under a poetic approach shift the focus onto the space of relation between viewer and content. Within categorical, associational and list-like forms, diverse material is brought together in the authorial and documentary process of sequenciation. It is the modular, poetic approach that disrupts established connections, permits openness of association and prompts new metaphor making

connections to be made. This provocation toward new pathways and networks is something that can occur across single channel, installation and online methods of presentation.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the shifts that occur when a poetic approach is adopted in documentary production. While work that is created within a poetic framework continues to broadly operate within a documentary paradigm, there are noticeable differences in approaches to formal structure, rhetorical strategies, truth claims, indexical status, audience engagement and aesthetic practice that set these projects apart. Despite being acknowledged as recognisable manifestations of documentary practice according to the theoretical frameworks of researchers such as Nichols, Plantinga and Renov, these poetic works have nonetheless been considered as marginal to the main body of documentary film and video. Consequently, works labelled as poetic have been under theorised with relatively little analysis and scholarly consideration focused on the effect generated by poetic techniques in documentary film. While there are some notable exceptions such as in the work of Marks, Rutherford and MacDougall, there is scope for further close study of poetic documentary practice as it ranges across the modes of production as described by Nichols. This thesis has considered in detail a range of techniques and strategies associated with a poetic approach to documentary and has examined the spaces for engagement that are consequently produced.

The consequences of an expanding overlap between aspects of documentary practice and the field of art have been explored with reference to examples that embrace aspects of both disciplines. Documentary makers have been exploring the possibilities of development and exhibition within an art context. This can be seen as an outcome of the interrelated circumstance of the diminution of public funding for experimental and poetic approaches to documentary within popular screen culture and a desire to access affective, aesthetic and contemplative spaces that are more strongly encouraged outside of mass media exhibition. At the same time, screen based artists have been employing documentary methods in both an expansion of their creative palette and as part of an ongoing engagement with the real begun by avant-garde moving image artists at the beginning of cinema.

This thesis responds to gaps resulting from the juncture of creative practices that have, at times, been considered at odds. However, rather than the opposing polarities that some theorists, such as Corner (1996) describe, this thesis demonstrates that there is considerable fertile ground where art and documentary coincide. As Lugon notes: “‘Documentary’ is often taken as the antonym to ‘artistic,’ yet it stems primarily from the artistic field – beyond art, yet very much a part of it” (2008, p. 35). Indeed when we realise that documentary has clear antecedents in experimental art practice as well as in the more evidentiary applications of

photographic and audio recording technology, it is possible to understand this co-incidence as part of an ongoing conversation between artistic and documentary impulses that align closely or more distantly, depending on the circumstances of time and the varying theoretical stances of particular historical moments.

There is clear evidence that there can be productive learning and reshaping arising from the meeting between documentary and visual arts practice. Artist and filmmakers discussed in this thesis, such as Yu Jian, Pirjo Honkasalo, Gideon Koppel, Gabriela Golder, Merilyn Fairskye, Daniel Crooks, Isaac Julien, Miyarrka Media, Fiona Tan, Ed Kashi (with Media Storm) and Jonathon Harris work in the intersectional territories between art and documentary, frequently exploiting the tensions between conceptions of truth and aesthetic experience in their efforts to create striking and engaging projects. Using poetic, experimental techniques, these practitioners foreground the rhetorical possibilities of aesthetic experience in the context of documentary and essayistic explorations so that the form becomes a significant strategy in conveying the argument of the work. In the meeting of art and documentary, different modes, different intentions and different emphases come together and the parties cannot help but emerge changed from the encounter. The changes wrought provoke the clear need to closely examine the consequences of these overlapping fields.

Summary and findings of the research project

Through a creative practice based research project and the close examination of noteworthy documentary examples produced according to a critically engaged poetic approach, this project has considered what is particular about works located in this territory of overlap. Specifically I have considered the distinguishing characteristics of these examples with a focus on how they approach form, rhetoric and the generation of aesthetic experience. The distinctive methodologies applied to these specific aspects work in combination to create a poetic effect in documentary practice that goes beyond both evidentiary intentions and non-instrumental presentations of beauty. While other approaches to documentary production also use elements of the methodologies discussed here, analysis in this thesis has revealed that it is through a particular constellation of intention, form and audience engagement that a critically engaged poetic effect is created. Therefore I contend that the intentions and effects of choices regarding form, rhetorical strategy and aesthetic experience are firmly interlinked and mutually supportive so that the work engages and provokes reflection through the perceptual encounter that is created.

Discomfort of form

In examining how a poetic approach can create discomfort of form I have focused on how this strand of practice disrupts tendencies to receive documentary material as direct and unmediated representations. Along with the witnessing function that representations of the real can suggest, a poetic approach may use camera technique, non-naturalistic sound and image combinations, image juxtaposition, audiovisual stylisation and experimentation to push the form to the extremes of what is recognisable as documentary. Consequently attention is drawn to the constructed nature of what can otherwise be received as transparent depictions of the world. The term *discomfort of form* is not meant to imply that these are displeasing forms but that there is an unexpected foregrounding of the shape of the work that sits strangely with the evidentiary expectations associated with documentary.

In chapter 2 the discomfort of form that arises from a deliberate, poetic approach to observational modes of production was explored. Key observational techniques of durational filming, detached observation and a preference for showing rather than telling were examined for the way they can also emphasise poetic ways of viewing the world. The filmic interpretation of poetic lineation in *Jade green station* illustrated how a heightened awareness of the pauses and flows in chronological time can create a quotidian poetry out of observational material. Discussion of key scenes from *The 3 rooms of melancholia* demonstrated how the pared back, yet intensified formal treatment of shot composition and sound design creates spaces for contemplation and connection by excising peripheral details. Abrupt breaks in the flow of affective moments alongside extended studies of everyday routine were identified in *sleep furiously* as creating sharp contrasts within an overall poetic arrangement as a way to prevent the spectator from slipping into an easy understanding of the lives being shown.

Examples in chapter 3 demonstrated how techniques of defamiliarisation in the context of artistic practice can productively create discomfort of form so that perception is renewed and a more focused exploration of the material may be promoted. A close analysis of *Cows* by Gabriela Golder revealed how the degraded and abstracted images frustrated immediate understanding so that the spectator must first engage with the haptic qualities of the work as echoes of the mood being represented. The multi-layered visual overlapping in *Stati d'Animo* was discussed as an example of how habitual perceptions of time and space can be challenged and remapped. Examination of the hyperbolic manipulation of time in *Static no.12* revealed the possibility of an ambivalent viewing state as the realist footage is slowly, inexorably

transformed through a process that is both affectively and intellectually absorbing. The intricate bricolage and elaborate staging of *Ten thousand waves* was proposed as an example of a multi-faceted realisation of defamiliarisation so that active audience engagement is promoted through unexpected combinations and denial of a static point of view.

The projects in chapter 4 were selected as examples of modular or list-like structures that elude narrative expectations so that new connections and relations between elements may be imagined. The divergent visual styles and oppositional installation architecture of *Disorient* illustrated how formal discomfort and uncertainty can prompt questioning and reflection thereby engaging the audience in the process of making sense. The poetic effect of stepping outside the flow of chronological time and making connections across frequently conflicting parts was exemplified in *Iraqi Kurdistan* as the fragmented glimpses into daily life were held, ellipsed and made to stutter in the varying succession of photographic still images. Discussion of the online storytelling portal, *Cowbird*, demonstrated how the mosaic structure of multiple, potentially contradictory perspectives curated around particular events, places and themes can stimulate emergent and changeful networks of inter-textual referencing.

Rhetorical strategies

In assessing rhetorical strategies for this research project I have concentrated on the non-verbal methods that a filmmaker may use to convince or involve the audience. As a poetic approach to documentary largely emphasises the experiential over the evidentiary, choices around technique, audiovisual style, mode of exhibition and the relational aesthetic must all be acknowledged for the way they impact upon the spaces of engagement. If we concede that most art seeks to have an effect and to present a cohesive world view then decisions about the level of authority asserted or collaboration that a work promotes need to be seen as aspects of a rhetorical strategy. Even without verbal direction these poetic works are observably trying to engage the audience, with degrees of manipulation, respect and collaboration at play in the aesthetic choices. With reference to key examples I have argued that this emphasis on imagery and non-verbal sound as the means to execute rhetorical strategies is most notable in a poetic approach to documentary.

In particular, as we consider the combined effect of techniques within a poetic approach to documentary, it is possible to see how the application of formal discomfort, whether in the shape of techniques of defamiliarisation or the breaking down of traditional narrative structures, can work to keep knowing alive as a practice. This process based conception of

knowledge may be perceived as the predominant rhetorical strategy of the works discussed in this thesis that have been created under a critically engaged poetic approach to documentary.

With the observational mode already established as a documentary approach that emphasises the persuasive power of witnessing, examples in chapter 2 illustrate how knowing can accumulate out of time spent reaching “mind empty // towards that thing you should know” (Carson 2000, pp. 10-11). As a study of the traces that history has left behind, the rhetorical strategy of *Jade green station* used visual composition to focus on village life so that what remains once the grand moments have passed by is emphasised. In *The 3 rooms of melancholia* our attention is drawn to the damage inflicted by the Chechen war through sparse narration and a visual style that highlights the beauty, melancholy and frailty of the children around whom the film is centred. The structure of interruptions in *sleep furiously* manifests as an argument against sentimentalising pastoral life at the same time as it celebrates certain rural craft skills by lavishing them with attention and detail.

Each of the examples explored in chapter 3 establishes a close alignment between the underlying concept and the creative realisation of the work with rhetorical strategies that are advanced by deliberately non-realist audiovisual treatments. The confusion and partiality of imagery in *Cows* leads the audience to feel something of the frenzy of the event being depicted thus opening a space to wonder at the circumstances that created the conditions for what we come to know has happened. *Stati d'Animo* teams the evocation of an in-between place where time is in suspension with a slowly revealed recreation of audio from one of the passenger flights flown into the World Trade centre twin towers. The effect of being jolted out of the flow that the work creates can cause the spectator to rethink all that precedes that moment of realisation within a new framework of understanding. In its dissection and rolling out of a movement held in time across the space of the screen, *Static no.12* challenges any idea that perception might be objective and immutable. *Ten thousand waves* crosses territories of myth, nostalgia, declared artifice, surveillance and the labour of production to explore the threads that lead toward and away from the deaths of migrant workers in Morecambe Bay.

The de-forming action of the list structure used in works discussed in chapter 4 has been shown to emphasise an exploratory approach to spectatorship so that the audience become active participants in developing complex understandings. As clear links between elements are broken down, this approach to rhetorical strategy demands increasing levels of spectator collaboration in uncovering new possibilities. The clash between the visual material of

Disorient accompanied by the cataloguing voiceover, that only partially explains what we see, provokes a searching response in the audience as they must strive to uncover further connections. The sequence of fragments in *Iraqi Kurdistan*, demonstrates how an assemblage can build a powerful emotional force with the final soaring scene of the piece rendered all the more affective as a result of the accumulation of glimpses leading up to this point. As an online work, *Iraqi Kurdistan* is also able to take advantage of the opportunities to link to other sources of information that can follow through on the engagement initiated by the poetic approach. The collections of individual contributions that are curated through *Cowbird* combine to produce an overall worldview that permits certain levels of complexity and disagreement. The fundamental curatorial approach and emergent community engage visitors and citizens in an ongoing process of finding meaning.

Aesthetic experience

In analysing significant examples and through my own creative research project I have demonstrated how the two previous strands of discomfort of form and rhetorical strategy come together in the creation of an aesthetic experience through a poetic approach to the documentary material. Aspects of discomfort of form draw attention to stylistic choices, highlighting them as significant components of how a work conveys its intentions and creates an experience that is unique to the particular configuration of material, creator and perceiver. The rhetorical strategies applied are interrelated with the perceptual experience of the work as both combine to establish the relational aesthetic that describes the terms of exchange between creative work and spectator. In a fully resolved poetic work the look and feel of the piece are manifestations of the ideas with which the maker is engaging. The effect of the encounter with the work as an aesthetic experience in itself is most often the initial point, if not the primary means, through which audience connection can be instigated. With an emphasis on experiential knowing facilitated through the stylistic choices in the work itself, a poetic documentary goes beyond the traditional factual terrain associated with documentary practice and privileges the experience of the audiovisual encounter. The open formal qualities of the work create spaces for contemplation and connection between individual and collective inter-textual references so that multiple truths and multiple perspectives are accessible.

As I have argued, the experience of time is central to the perceptual encounter produced by the examples in chapter 2, as indeed it is with most of the works explored in this thesis. Notably, however, despite the chapter 2 examples nominally adhering to an observational mode of production, the concurrent application of a poetic approach clearly sets these works

out as inflected, constructed, creative products that generate a particular aesthetic experience that is different to a real world experience. There is opportunity to dwell in peripheral moments, using time to create a sense of the worlds being represented. The sense that nothing is happening in *Jade green station*, with its focus on quotidian detail and mundane exchanges, necessitates a patient and open response in order to experience a heightened awareness of duration and the aesthetic quality of the representation. An echo of the melancholy expressed by the on-screen subjects manifests in the pacing and contemplative tone of *The 3 rooms of melancholia* so that the aesthetic experience of the work references the affective states depicted. The application of a highly formal, locked off compositional style within an observational framework that includes extended takes emphasises the aesthetic experience of *sleep furiously* where there is a continuing action of moving toward and then pulling back from the affective, the beautiful and the sublime.

Examples in chapter 3 see the gap widening between the originating circumstance and its representation. Non-realist audiovisual treatments firmly position these works as aesthetic experiences in themselves that are subjective interpretations inspired by actual places, people and events. With its manipulation and reworking of broadcast news footage *Cows* delays knowledge of the filmed incident until the end so that the spectator is compelled to engage with the powerfully atmospheric treatment of the repeating video images and oblique soundtrack. Along with a distinctive visual approach, the sound track of *Stati d'Animo* plays a significant role in establishing the work as an aesthetic experience in itself. Just as the visual layering technique shifts our perceptions of space, time and solidity, the use of music, location sound and voice constructs cycling repetitions that must be rethought on each return. A similarly intense (yet perhaps more concentrated for its brevity) aesthetic experience is created in *Static no.12* as it transforms our perceptions of time and movement spreading them out in space across the screen. The installation space of *Ten thousand waves* extends this construction of aesthetic experience firmly into the physical space as it uses multiple screens and multiple speakers to create elaborate interplays of material and move the spectators' attention around the room.

The unitary structure of works discussed in chapter 4 have the potential to produce more highly individualised aesthetic experiences as the task of forming links between parts heavily relies upon the spectator's exploration of the various elements. The openness of form that is common across all the work discussed here is further extended in these examples so that the space of relation between spectator and creative work is given added significance. In holding

together divergent, yet related material, *Disorient* encourages a dialogic interrogation of the work as the spectatorial experience of the material does not surrender easily to clear understanding. While *Iraqi Kurdistan* is perhaps less opaque than *Disorient*, the use of stills and fragmented elements generates a particularly affective engagement with the material that is not dependent on factual details in the first instance. The curation of first person accounts presented through the *Cowbird* site creates highly detailed, complex and emergent depictions that may be formed and adjusted according to a plethora of different sorting options. In addition, the design of the website interface creates an impression of moments extracted from the flow of existence that may be considered in both their specificity and in their relation to other assembled glimpses.

How many ways to say you?

The creative practice based research component of this project has resulted in the production of the 28 minute video, *How many ways to say you?* that accompanies this thesis. The production process has been guided by the same principles I have used to assess other documentary examples, namely discomfort of form, rhetorical strategies and aesthetic experience as manifestations of a poetic approach. Evaluations of the work of other filmmakers allowed me to consider the effects of and responses generated by poetic documentary techniques. Equally, in creating an audiovisual work in dialogue with the results of close analysis and theoretical research, I have been able to bring relevant technical insights to the theoretical considerations of this study.

As a project that is quite deliberately situated at the intersection of documentary and artistic practice, *How many ways to say you?* provides an important and practical demonstration of the impact of formal discomfort. While it is *documentary* in its fidelity to experience and attention to the accuracy of the information conveyed, it is also essayistic in its exploration of networks of connection, and artistic in its foregrounding of medium and technique. From the outset, techniques of defamiliarisation are applied to disrupt any expectations of a direct and unmediated representation of reality. The visual approach mixes realist observational material with sequences that have been motion effected, layered and abstracted with the intention of evoking an experience of the material over the transmission of straightforward facts. Even as the title card for each section offers a translation of the particular *you* word, the video and sound that follows exceeds the task of translation.

Using techniques of defamiliarisation, the rhetorical strategy has been to interrupt the authority of the documentary voice and draw the spectator into affective relation with the

material. While the video engages with explicitly documentary activities such as exploring the particularities of a language and observing aspects of Cambodian village life, there are further layers at play that are perhaps not so apparent at the surface levels of the work. Direct to camera address by the on-screen subjects and the development of an aesthetically pleasing audiovisual style have been employed as methods to engage the audience with the work through the sensory, emotional and relational. As the audience engages with the work from these perspectives, the conceptual basis for the project may gradually emerge.

How many ways to say you? is also an examination of how the past can impact on the present as an underlying background to everyday life and how this might shape the way we relate to and engage with each other. These questions, while underwriting the logic of the whole work are not expressed until the very end of the piece and then in a way that is still somewhat oblique and indirect. The work emphasises the aesthetic experience as the primary means for exploring these questions. However, the full character of this experience only emerges from spending time with the work, by dwelling in the spaces it creates and contemplating the shape of relation that is revealed and altered by time and the circumstances of history. Considerable time and effort has been expended in the development and production of this video to create a flowing and cohesive aesthetic experience with a consistency of tone, space and approach. In order to negotiate the twin demands of an open structure that permits a greater space for dialogue and the need to engage the audience with the material, this emphasis upon the pleasures of the audiovisual experience has emerged as a method that may accommodate both requirements.

Limitations of the research project

This research project has not been encyclopaedic or exhaustive in its selection and examination of documentaries made under a poetic approach. Selection of examples has been influenced by access to material, with geographical distance and the limited distribution of some newly released documentaries and artistic projects effectively excluding them as subjects of study. In addition, I concentrated on work that was relevant to issues I explored in my creative practice based research so that there was a sense of dialogue between the analysis of examples and the realisation of the creative work.

The focus of the thesis has largely been on-screen based, non-interactive poetic documentary work.⁵² There is scope for future projects to explore the potential for a poetic approach to documentary practice using non-linear forms and user generated, curated assemblages that

⁵² with the notable exception of discussion of the *Cowbird* storytelling portal in the last chapter

focus on documentary as a process of approaching, thinking through and engaging with a broad understanding of knowledge. In addition there is potential to extend this examination of a poetic approach into the new relational spaces that developing technology is making possible. From online projects where spectator engagement can include the authoring of material in response to another work, to interactive installation, locative media and augmented reality that take documentary poetics into spatialised experiences, a detailed analysis of the implications of these new forms for documentary theory and practice holds great promise. In addition there are opportunities for research into the establishment of communities of poetic audiovisual practice in the growing field of a curated approach to documentary.

While issues of audience engagement are considered as an element of aesthetic experience, discussion of the effects of a poetic approach upon spectatorship has been based upon theoretical material in combination with my own observations and anecdotal feedback rather than on quantitative evaluation of audience experiences. As such audience reception has been considered through a framework of film theory specifically following on from the phenomenological approach of theorists such as Sobchack, Stern, Deleuze and Marks, to name but a few.

Contribution

My work contributes to the literature on documentary theory and practice by offering a focused study of a poetic approach to screen based documentary. In addition, by bringing together aspects of art theory and documentary theory and applying them to intersectional manifestations of a poetic approach to documentary I have demonstrated an expanded conception of what the poetic in documentary can be and the way that it can engage spectators with ideas through aesthetic experience. In this expansion of the terrain of a poetic approach to documentary there has been affirmation of the different forms that knowledge can take and consequently the different ways that knowledge can be realised through audiovisual presentations. Additionally, this study has suggested that the foregrounding of aesthetic practice fulfils the task of sequenciation so that the form of the work represents the processing and thinking through of real world material. As the aesthetic experience of a poetic approach to documentary is frequently the foregrounded method by which these works produce an experiential knowledge, this study has suggested that there is increased scope for the exploration of complexity, uncertainty and multiple subjective truths within this mode of production where the form may operate as an actualisation of the conceptual material.

Through my analysis of indicative examples of a critically engaged, poetic approach to documentary I have suggested that the interactions between the key elements of formal discomfort, rhetorical strategy and aesthetic experience are highly significant in understanding how these works may be recognised and how they create poetic effects. In conceiving a networked understanding of a poetic approach and its effects, it is possible to consider a more diverse range of material and the variable degrees to which the matrix of characteristics are applied. This framework for analysis challenges conceptions of poetic documentary, such as in the taxonomies proposed by Nichols and Plantinga, that concentrate more specifically on form and that consider the rhetorical aspects of poetic documentary to be underdeveloped. By consistently using the term a poetic *approach* to documentary (instead of just *poetic* documentary) I have sought to highlight the role that intention, context and reception can all play in generating poetic effects in documentary. In examining work drawn from modes of documentary production beyond the poetic mode, as described by Nichols, I have highlighted the diversity of poetic approaches to documentary practice that echoes the diversity of literary poetry.

My research has built on the work of Seremetakis (1996) regarding sensory ethnography in connection with ideas around the embodied reception of media developed by Marks (2000) in relation to intercultural cinema and by MacDougall (1998) and (2006) in relation to ethnographic filmmaking. My contribution has been to examine the intersectional examples of a poetic approach to documentary discussed in this thesis in the context of these theoretical approaches, and extrapolate on how issues of embodiment and affect are at play in the creation of poetic effects in documentary practice. In this regard I have added to work done by Hawkins (2002) in her consideration of the *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* by Agnes Varda and Rutherford (2006) in her examination of the documentary work of co-directors, Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar.

By marrying my own practice based creative research with detailed consideration of pertinent examples and an interdisciplinary approach to theoretical frameworks I have been able to examine different manifestations of a poetic approach and investigate how specific techniques and contexts may promote different forms of audience engagement. The video project *How many ways to say you?* has contributed valuable perspectives to the research, such as exploring ways to imply the complexity and particularity of on-screen subjects outside of narrative structures, and the foregrounding of audiovisual technique as an ethical strategy. In

addition there has been valuable dialogue between the analysis of the work of other filmmakers and my own production process.

Implications of the research

Ethical implications

Beyond a clearer understanding of the poetic approach itself, this research project also has implications for the conception of documentary practice more generally as it prompts a rethinking of the rhetorical impact of aesthetic choices. It needs to be acknowledged that the aesthetic experience of a work can be just as powerful, manipulative or insightful as other modes of more traditional verbal rhetoric. While openness is a key formal aspect of poetic work, it is not, in itself, sufficient to guarantee a practice that respects the agency of subjects and spectators. The selective process involved in representing and interpreting reality necessitates a range of strategies to address the demands of what Renov has described as the ethical function, as discussed in chapter 3.

One of the key motivations behind commencing this research project was to investigate poetic methods as potential ways to encourage audience connection and engagement with representations of strange or unfamiliar experiences and situations. Over the course of the research I have come to place a higher value on audience agency in the meaning production process of audiovisual projects. This has resulted in a preference for methods that respect this agency and adopt an open, less didactic approach or at least make some attempt at reflexively declaring their intention. The goal in my own work has shifted from developing the means of persuasion to finding ways to encourage thoughtful, critical engagement as part of an ongoing conversation about the world, ideas and issues of societal concern.

In highly manipulative works, the pleasures associated with the form of the text become part of a rhetorical strategy to conscript the audience to the underlying cause through the seductive power of beautiful images and affect. While such manipulations are at the extreme end of the scale and perhaps not representative of the majority of documentary work, they do highlight the power that aesthetically appealing work can wield. To negotiate the negative aspects of aesthetic experience as a rhetorical strategy the documentary maker needs to consider how they can be faithful to their subjects and the intentions of the project while conveying information in a way that is conducive to understanding, facilitates connections between the subject of the work and the audience while respecting viewer agency in the process. The maintenance of ambivalence can be productive in promoting this critical

perspective as a totalising view is never reached and engagement remains an ongoing process. As a result, the documentary object may be reconceived as a process where understanding and thinking are ongoing and without a final destination.

Funding implications

In affirming different modes of knowledge production and knowledge reception, as discussed in the *Contributions* section of this conclusion, there are also implications for the development of these alternative modes. Discussions in the public sphere can lack dimension and exclude some voices if knowledges, beyond those that can be expressed verbally, are excluded. Such exclusions risk a failure to address the true complexity of circumstance, perception and modes of engagement. For documentary to properly address knowing in all its complexity then a wider range of conceptual approaches to knowing need to be considered and supported.

While experimental form is one aspect that can count against the public funding of poetic documentary, the linking of funding to television broadcast as the primary exhibition outlet is another factor that limits the financial support available for such projects in Australia. Public funding decisions need to take into consideration the possibilities for documentary exhibition beyond broadcast platforms associated with, and extending from television networks. If a greater diversity of exhibition format and scale of audience could be considered as relevant to documentary practice, funding models could be developed that support documentary projects across a range of platforms and a range of formal approaches. As we consider the variations between impact and reach that can be achieved across different forms of media there needs to be realisation that not all publicly funded projects need to have mass appeal.

Even though there is some support for artist development in areas that may relate to aspects of a poetic approach to documentary practice, the intersectionality of such works can also make them an awkward fit for art based sources of funding. While university environments have become de facto sources of public support for experimental forms of documentary, this too can be tenuous as Australian tertiary funding is increasingly tied to research with more direct links to commercial outcomes. There is a need therefore, for funding sources to be made available to support work that sits across documentary and artistic practice.

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