

DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital
Humanists

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1. The Humanist Auteur



Fig. 1 An open access, ten-part video series is included as a part of this text. To watch the first video lesson, readers of the online edition of this text should click on the link reported below. Readers of the print book can access the video by scanning the above QR code. Users can do this by opening the camera application on their phone and taking a photograph of the QR code.
<http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/0322725a>



Humanities scholars are frequently wary of documentaries — often with good reason. Countless documentaries produced by a range of corporate and public bodies have prioritised entertainment over factual accuracy, shock value over critical thinking, and newsworthy soundbites over a sound interpretative foundation. Over-simplification is a common problem. Academic inquiry is frequently manipulated to provide a sense of undeserved credibility. Unqualified presenters leaf through old documents and ruminate on their brilliance, claiming credit for ‘new’ discoveries.

Too many documentaries prioritise the desire to entertain over the need to enlighten. Their research might well be out-of-date and the conclusions they draw (often depicted as shocking or paradigm-shifting) tend to be nothing of the sort. Acts of blatant plagiarism are reframed as brilliant innovations. Dashing presenters speak with such authority that their audience can hardly begin to doubt them. Old rooms are opened for the ‘first’ time. Discoveries are made. Television journalists ask ‘hard-hitting’ questions of the qualified and unqualified alike. Fantasy is presented as reality. The humanist scholar is undermined.

These issues reflect the dangers associated with producing poor-quality or intellectually limited films — but they are not problems inherent to the medium.¹ Indeed, the democratisation of the filmmaking process, brought about by rapid and substantial changes in affordable technologies combined with the ability to achieve near instantaneous access to a global audience, presents humanist scholars with an array of new opportunities.² Unlike in decades past, when documentary filmmaking was, effectively, a walled garden, scholars are now in a position to take control of the medium — should they choose to do so.

If documentaries have previously served as a medium in which non-experts have held disproportionate sway, the coming of the digital documentary has the potential to reshape that paradigm.³ For such a disruptive wave to be realised, however, humanist scholars must first proactively work towards taking control of the medium. The emphasis

1 Rolf Schuurmsma ‘The Historian as Filmmaker I’ and John Greenville ‘The Historian and Filmmaker II’ in Paul Smith (ed.), *The Historian and Film* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 121–31 and 132–41.

2 Mike Figgis, *Digital Filmmaking. Revised Edition* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014).

3 There are many examples of documentaries that empower non-experts over experts. In the UK, one of the most prominent beneficiaries of these is Dan Snow, a broadcaster whose work as a presenter of history documentaries has allowed him — and others who follow his example — to brand themselves as historians, gaining significant sway in the public sphere, talking about a broad range of topics, regardless of their specific qualifications. For an example see Faisal J. Abbas, “‘A History of Syria,’ Distorted by the BBC!”, *Huffington Post UK*, 19 March 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/faisal-abbas/a-history-of-syria-distor_b_2900053.html, and ‘BBC Documentary, “A History of Syria with Dan Snow”, was “Biased and Inaccurate” Say Critics’, *Huffington Post UK*, 17 March 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/03/17/bbc-documentary-history-snow_n_2896575.html. For an example of Snow’s broader public profile, see Adam Sherwin, ‘Dan Snow: The Historian Who’s Not Attached to the Past’, *The Independent*, 23 October 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/dan-snow-historian-who-s-not-attached-past-2277687.html>

has now shifted — the academy is longer victim of a filmmaking process over which it has little control. With the production of digital documentaries, the onus is now on the scholar to help reshape the media landscape to better suit their goals and ideals. Passivity will accomplish nothing.⁴

The Digital Wave (and the Power It Gives Us)

Several years ago, we were lucky enough to take part in a debate on the subject of ‘public history’. The resulting discussion was telling. David Starkey, a discredited British broadcaster and onetime academic historian, was mentioned several times, and, in particular the apparent sway his problematic interpretations of the past appeared to have over the general public. In the eyes of some participants, the medium as a whole seemed to be tarnished by its association with such broadcasters.⁵ Others spoke of the vast power imbalances faced by scholars who agreed to participate in professional productions. The demands of a preconceived script or belligerent producers, more interested in creating entertainment than in educating their audience, were common themes. Specialised knowledge is vital, but it is not always respected or used appropriately. Scholars could hope to exert a limited degree of positive influence, but their efforts, it appeared, were

4 Whether or not academics use mediums such as film to shape the discourse on the past, others are willing to do so. For a sample of the rich literature dealing with the relationship between the film industry, cinema, and the past, see Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), and Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film, Film on History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

5 A large part of the discourse surrounding Starkey was concerned with his recent complaint about the ‘feminised’ nature of history. In particular he was critical of the way in which Henry VIII ‘has been absorbed by his wives’, something which he linked to ‘the fact that so many of the writers who write about this are women and so much of their audience is a female audience. Unhappy marriages are big box office’. Whilst Starkey possesses academic credentials, his prominent role as a television presenter provided him with high visibility to the general public. See June Purvis, ‘David Starkey’s History Boys’, *The Guardian*, 2 April 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/apr/02/david-starkey-henry-viii>, and Stephen Adams, ‘History has been “Feminised” Says David Starkey as he Launches Henry VIII Series’, *The Telegraph*, 30 March 2009, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/5077505/History-has-been-feminised-says-David-Starkey-as-he-launches-Henry-VIII-series.html>

frequently in vain. The documentary medium was utterly beyond their ability to control.⁶

That is no longer the case. Film, in its varied and evolving guises, has proven itself to be a remarkably effective way of communicating complex ideas to a broad range of audiences.⁷ The technology required to produce cheap and effective documentaries is now nearly ubiquitous. All that remains is to close the skill gap and to widen discussions about the ways in which visual grammars can specifically benefit humanist discourse.⁸

Scholars are not necessarily filmmakers — and vice versa. Indeed, the two skillsets, each of which requires substantial investments of time and passion, are often startlingly different. A badly written monograph can be forgiven, but a poorly researched one, which lacks the depth of inquiry demanded by the academy, no matter how well written, cannot.⁹

6 Despite the seemingly alien nature of this discussion, there is actually a long tradition of academic exploration of the relationship between historians and film. The introduction to the pioneering work *The Historian and Film* by Paul Smith is the logical place to begin any such investigation. See Paul Smith (ed.), *The Historian and Film* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 1–14.

7 There is a vast literature dealing with the intellectual complexities and potential of film. As a starting point, see Robert Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkley and London: University of California Press, 1957), pp. 8–34. Looking beyond this, the following represent a short sample of works to be considered: Eric Rhode, *A History of Cinema from Its Origins to 1970* (London: Penguin, 1972), Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film* (London: Pavilion, 2011), Adrian Martin, *Mise En Scene and Film Style* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), and V.F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (London: Viking, 1972).

8 Whilst it is not the purpose of this volume to be prescriptive by suggesting which subjects or themes are or are not best suited to a visual exploration, by way of an example, studies of cinema and performing art may well be an obvious beneficiary of exploration using a medium that does not require their translation into another form — writing — into which they can be made to fit imperfectly. As an example, an article by Reid about Marceline Orbes, an important comedic performer on the stage from the early twentieth century, who influenced the likes of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, had to deal with such an issue of translation: describing movement and the body without a precise visual representation to which readers could be directed. Whilst the overall discussion in the paper achieved its ultimate goal, writing was not necessarily the most elegant fit for an analysis of the power of performing arts, even if it was an adequate medium for discussion its historical (rather than its artistic) merits. See Darren R. Reid, ‘Silent Film Killed the Clown: Recovering the Lost Life and Silent Film of Marceline Orbes, the Suicidal Clown of the New York Hippodrome’, *The Appendix* 2:4 (2014), <http://theappendix.net/issues/2014/10/silent-film-killed-the-clown>

9 For an example, see Francis Paul Prucha’s review of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* by Dee Brown, in *The American Historical*

Conversely, a documentary that entertains, but which is marred by problematic intellectual elements, can nonetheless achieve widespread acclaim. Countless popular productions attest to the importance of entertainment, even as they underline much of the mainstream industry's casual disregard for accuracy or reason.¹⁰

This reality helps to explain the tension between humanist scholars and the film industry. One pursues a reasonable exploration of the truth based upon an in-depth and transparent engagement with the evidence. The other pursues narrative and visual beauty, or, more likely, profit or large audience numbers; the metrics of success between the academy and the film industry are vastly different. That is, of course, an over simplification but, for the purposes of this brief discussion, it at least highlights the paradigm that new technologies (and online spaces) have made obsolete. Prior to the advent of very high-quality consumer cameras, there was no realistic way for a scholar to easily produce a documentary film without making a significant financial investment in equipment, skills, crew, and supplies. Distribution was perhaps an even greater challenge — significant investment would not guarantee that one's work would, or could, be consumed by the desired audience.¹¹

The digital wave has broken down those barriers. Cameras are now comparatively affordable and highly capable, whilst the maturation of the internet has opened up an array of new ways to distribute and disseminate one's work.¹² To put it bluntly, the scholar no longer has to interact with the traditional gatekeepers of the film or television industry

Review 77:2 (1972), 589–90. For an example of a non-academic writer retorting to such an academic critique, see Hampton Sides' Foreword to *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (1972) by Dee Brown (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), pp. xv–xx.

10 A case in point is D.W. Griffith's much discussed *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) — a huge technical and artistic achievement, 'The Birth of a Nation' was a startling racist interpretation of life in the southern United States during the post-Civil-War era of Reconstruction. Despite its deeply problematic racial themes, the film is a triumph of sentimental nostalgia, an expert demonstration of cinema's persuasive potential. As critic Roger Ebert once put it, "'The Birth of a Nation' is not a bad film because it argues for evil. Like [Leni] Riefenstahl's 'The Triumph of the Will,' it is a great film that argues for evil.' See Roger Ebert, 'The Birth of a Nation Movie Review (1915)' *RogerEbert.com*, 30 March 2013, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-birth-of-a-nation-1915>

11 Genevieve Jolliffe and Andrew Zinnes, *The Documentary Filmmakers Handbook* (New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 344–82.

12 Figgis, *Digital Filmmaking*.

should they wish to create a documentary film. Profit and audience size (i.e., broad and inclusive appeal) need not play a role in the production of scholarly films — nor should technical hurdles. The technological shift away from celluloid and the rapid spread of extremely high-fidelity digital cameras has reshaped the relationship (or at least the potential relationship) between the scholar and the documentary film.

When we gathered in 2009 to discuss a Master's degree in public history (and to debate the merits and weaknesses of our taking part in documentaries) that technological shift was not yet evident, even though there were early signs pointing to the disruptive potential of the coming digital wave. George Lucas's *Star Wars: Episode II — Attack of the Clones* heralded the industrial transition from celluloid to digital as early as 2002.¹³ In 2008 the Canon 5D Mark II hit the market, a DSLR (digital single lens reflex — cameras with interchangeable lenses) whose video recording quality was so high that it was used to film some episodes of the wildly popular American sitcom, *House* (2004–2012).¹⁴ The 5D Mark II brought professional quality video recording to the market for less than \$3,000. Its successor, the 5D Mark III, released in 2012, continued this trend, allowing for incredibly detailed and cinematic footage to be captured by professionals and non-professionals alike. The 5D series (one of several product ranges to bring cinematic quality to consumers) exemplified the filmic empowerment of the masses. Aside from being widely lauded and utilised by independent filmmakers, Canon 5Ds have been employed in numerous top-tier productions, including Marvel/Disney's multi-billion-dollar *Avengers* franchise.¹⁵ For consumers, this was a stunning development. Whatever the implications for the future of camera technology in Hollywood, it was a very clear indication that

13 Cousins, *The Story of Film*, p. 457.

14 Vlad Savov, 'Canon 5D Mark II Used to Shoot Entire House Season Finale, Director Says "It's the Future"', *Engadget*, 13 April 2010, <https://www.engadget.com/2010/04/13/canon-5d-mark-ii-used-to-shoot-entire-house-season-finale-direct>

15 The Canon 5D Mark II has been used to shoot sequences, not only in independent film but in large-scale Hollywood blockbusters and big-budget serialised television. In 2010, for example, the entire finale of the Hugh Laurie series *House* was shot using the camera. In 2011, Canon announced that the 5D Mark II was used to capture footage in Marvel's *The Avengers*. 'Canon Press Release: *House*', April 2010, http://cpn.canon-europe.com/content/news/EOS_5D_mark_II_shoots_house.do and 'Canon Press Release: *The Avengers*', 9 May 2012, https://www.usa.canon.com/internet/portal/us/home/about/newsroom/press-releases/press-release-details/2012/20120509_avengers_pressrelease

cinematic image quality would no longer be the domain of well-funded, professional organisations alone.

For those working with even smaller budgets, non-specialised equipment has reached a quality that can, with care, allow professional-style productions to be shot by practically anybody. Virtually everyone carries a device in their pocket capable of capturing footage in at least 1080p or 4K resolution.¹⁶ Moreover, that very same device connects its owner to the greatest global distribution model in human history.¹⁷ Scholars are thus facing a world in which they are empowered to make films and to disseminate them to a trans-national audience, with equipment most of them already own. From a technological standpoint, at least, there is nothing to stop a determined scholar from using the equipment that is probably within six feet of them right now, in order to challenge traditional academic outputs. Whilst traditional modes of academic writing have proven themselves versatile and adept, documentaries provide new scholarly opportunities. Technology is now a facilitator, rather than a barrier.

Film as Scholarly Tool

Film is not directly comparable to academic articles or monographs. The two mediums can be used to produce work of equal weight — but they are not analogous.¹⁸ Rather, film provides scholars with a visual language and grammar, distinct and functionally different from the written techniques and forms in which most humanist scholars are trained. It is this distinction that allows film to offer a genuine alternative to traditional academic writing. When the written word provides the most appropriate medium through which an intellectual process can be explored, it should be utilised. Equally, when a filmic visual

16 Tony Myers, 'Lights, Camera...iPhone? Film-Makers Turn to Smartphones', *The Guardian*, 9 February 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/blog/2012/feb/09/filmmakers-turn-to-smartphones>

17 For a discussion on this see director/producer Don Boyd's commentary from 2011 in which he recognised the fundamental shift that occurred around the turn of the twenty-first century's second decade (at least as far as mass participation in digital filmmaking was concerned). Don Boyd, 'We are all Filmmakers Now — and the Smith Review Must Recognise That', *The Guardian*, 25 September 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/25/all-film-makers-smith-review>

18 Rosenstone, *History on Film, Film on History*, pp. 125–50.

language offers clear advantages to scholars, they should be prepared to engage with that medium. Failure to do so would necessarily reduce the effectiveness of the resultant work as it attempts — but ultimately fails — to surpass the limitations of the written form.

Roland Barthes framed the mechanisms of this opportunity in 1980. According to Barthes, a photographed image is composed of two distinct elements, the studium and the punctum. The former represents the way in which the subject of a photograph can be interpreted in a cultural or political framework — through what we might consider a scholastic lens, in other words.¹⁹ The latter, however, is the part of the image that touches the viewer on a personal level — the subjective discourse generated by the interaction between photographer (or the filmmaker, in the context of this discussion) and their audience.²⁰ Understanding these two components of the photographed image allows the photographer — or critic — to understand its successes and failures, to explore the depths of the discourse, both academic and emotional, generated by the image. Something similar is true of scholars who use film. They must understand the medium's emotional, as well as its scholarly, potential.

As a medium that juxtaposes complicated visual and audio elements, often in a very controlled and time-specific manner, film offers new opportunities for scholars to explore the relationship between their work and their audience; to invite (or disinvite) emotional resonance which complements or problematises the intellectual basis of their study. A historian exploring the emotional or subjective realities of a post-war society, for instance, might well find that documentary, with its potential to simultaneously contrast different elements (and thus ideas), provides

19 In all likelihood, Barthes did not identify the studium as a scholarly filter. Rather, he saw the studium as the way in which a photographic image was understood by the collective — the imposed framework of the collective understanding as opposed to the more subjective understanding (punctum) each individual creates in a relation to the image. Barthes's idea, however, is adaptable and, as Michael Fried has shown, it is in need of careful deconstruction. In the context of scholarly filmmaking, the collective understanding can reasonably be re-orientated to account for a specific collective — the academy — whilst the contrasting principle of the punctum serves to account for the relationship of the work to the individual outside of a strictly academic context. See Michael Fried, 'Barthes' *Punctum*', *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2005), 539–74.

20 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

a distinctly satisfying method of exploring their topic. Scholars of film, music, and other performing arts might, in perhaps more obvious ways, benefit from the use of film, as it provides them with a medium that allows for the seamless integration (and reproduction) of their sources. In contrast, written works based upon the performing arts require the scholar to translate the performance into a distinctly non-native form; melody and motion can be described, but never accurately captured in this manner.²¹ Film offers new opportunities for scholars to simultaneously present — and contrast — ideas, performance, and abstract interpretation.

David Mamet, the Pulitzer-prize-winning playwright and director of film, argues that the power of movies is to be found in their ability to juxtaposition one image, or set of images, against another. According to Mamet, whose ideas are rooted in those of Soviet cinematic master Sergei Eisenstein, the power of a film is not to be found in any individual image; rather it is to be found in the contrast created when one shot is placed next to another.²² The difference, contrast, shock, or comfort of different shots, he argues, provides the emotional — even intellectual — resonance of the moment.²³ For the filmmaker-scholar, emotional or intellectual substance may be attained through the contrast between voice-over (deadpan and emotionless) versus the actual text being read (a personal self-reflection); or between the imagery on screen and the intellectual conclusion being drawn by the narrator; or, in a more directly Eisensteinian fashion, the contrast between different shots — filmic elements not running in parallel but sequentially.

Alternatively, the humanist scholar may well reject the emphasis placed by Mamet upon the juxtaposition. Instead, they might find, particularly as they gain experience with the camera, that an individual shot, not cut or otherwise substantially edited, can contain all of the necessary and desired intellectual and emotional resonance. Indeed, there is much to be said for the unflinching eye that the camera can provide. In the opening of his 2009 film, *Capitalism: A Love Story*, Michael Moore demonstrates this by showing his audience a home movie,

21 This was something I experienced first-hand in a analysing performing arts (see note 8).

22 Anne Nesbet, *Savage Juncture: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2003), pp. 1–20.

23 David Mamet, *On Directing* (New York: Penguin, 1992), pp. 1–7, 26–47.

filmed by a family as they are evicted after failing to keep up with their mortgage payments.²⁴ When taken as a whole, *Capitalism: A Love Story* is practically defined by contrast and juxtaposition. Its opening sequence, however, stands apart from the larger production, a short film within a film. Moore's commentary, which arrives after several pained minutes, does little to meaningfully deepen the power of the sequence; emotional resonance was already thoroughly accomplished with only minimal external interference. Indeed, it was the consistency of the moment, the steady perspective (if not emotional state) enabled by the footage, which mires the viewer in the family's plight. Juxtaposition would likely have served only to distract from the emotional resonance present in the original footage.

By rejecting or embracing Eisenstein and Mamet (by experimenting with and critically reading the conventions of documentary and narrative films), the humanist scholar may well find a specific filmic grammar which will allow them to explore their intellectual ideas in new ways. Such an approach does not necessitate the abandonment of traditional academic publications. Instead, it is an opportunity to broaden the tools at the scholar's disposal, to approach their subject with a new set of visual conventions (filmic grammar) that will allow them to complement a more traditional body of written work. The digital shift in the industry has now opened up the medium of film and documentary to humanist scholars — the grammar of film is now fully within their grasp.²⁵

The Filmmaker-Scholar

As with any means of presenting research, using film requires the author to develop and hone a wide array of skills. This, more than anything else in the age of digital film production, is the primary barrier that separates

24 *Capitalism: A Love Story*. Directed by Michael Moore. Los Angeles: The Weinstein Company, 2009.

25 For discussions on the potential, and early limitations, of this technological shift see Ana Vicente, 'Documentary Viewing Platforms'; Danny Birchall, 'Online Documentary'; Patricia R. Zimmermann, 'Public Domains: Engaging Iraq through Experimental Documentary Digitalities'; and Alexandra Juhasz, 'Documentary on YouTube: The Failure of the Direct Cinema of the Slogan', in Thomas Austin and Wilma de Jong (eds), *Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2008), pp. 271–77; 278–84; 285–311.

the scholar from the filmmaking process. As filmmaker Michael Rabiger once put it, ‘the insights and skills required to be a minimally competent director are staggering.’²⁶ To produce an intellectually successful documentary is no simple task. Capturing footage is comparatively easy, but capturing *effective* footage poses significant challenges, and, once captured, assembling it into a coherent, larger piece poses yet another set of hurdles to overcome.

Acquiring the necessary documentary-making skills is a challenge, but the potential benefits are significant. In undertaking this task, the humanist scholar will gain a new vocabulary and grammar through which they can explore their ideas and research.²⁷ Just as learning to write in an academically rigorous and effective manner encourages thinking in a highly ordered, logical, and clear manner, the process of becoming a filmmaker provides the scholar with new ways to think through their problems.

For instance: the process of editing is, in practical terms, the art of juxtaposition — the placement of different images in adjacent chronological spaces whose contrast, established as much by the timing of the cut as the content of the individual shots, helps to shape the viewer’s impression of the issue being explored. For Eisenstein and Mamet this process created the intellectual heart of their works. Their precise control over the viewed experience allows the filmmaker to carefully shape their audience’s perception of an issue, not in a way that is superior to the written word but in a way that is functionally distinct.²⁸ In film, the scholar can precisely time images and cuts, showing a specific visual montage rather than having to make an appeal to the imagination, as writers must do of their readers. Writing invites imaginative spaces to be constructed, whereas filmmaking furnishes such spaces with pre-made images and juxtapositions. As a result, new theses, previously difficult to express in a non-visual form, might well become more achievable and more desirable.²⁹

26 Michael Rabiger, *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics. Third Edition* (London and New York: Focal Press, 2003), p. 6.

27 Christopher J. Bowen and Roy Thompson, *The Grammar of the Shot* (London and New York: Focal Press, 2013).

28 Mamet *On Directing Film*, pp. 3–7; 31–33.

29 For an introduction to how film creates these imagined spaces and, specifically, how the filmmaker-scholar can achieve their desired effect, see Greg Keast, *Shot*

In order to realise this potential, it is necessary to commit to a new learning process. Camera operation, shot framing, the psychology of cinematic photography, the theory of editing — all are necessary, but all offer new opportunities to reflect upon the nature of one's research, methodology, and intellectual dissemination.³⁰ As a result, the process of learning these skills enhances the scholar by bringing them into direct contact with artistic creation, bridging a gap between the arts and humanities not typically straddled in modern academia.

At a fundamental level, the arts and humanities are the same thing. Both explore the nature of human experience and our relationship to the broader cosmos; each field endeavours to encourage thought and critical discourse, to use their respective mediums to problematise and explore accepted notions; to provoke responses which, in turn, will require further discussion and analysis. Their modes of expression and their chosen mediums are vastly different but, at the most foundational level, common DNA links Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* to Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Both are meditations on the nature of the self, albeit in very different ways, and of the relationship between the individual being and the wider world they inhabit.³¹

Documentary films produced by humanist scholars embrace, even if only unconsciously so, the link between the humanities and the arts. In that sense, the production of such films is a logical, evolutionary step

Psychology: The Filmmaker's Guide for Enhancing Emotion and Meaning (Honolulu: Kahala Press, 2014); Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling: Creative Nonfiction on Screen* (New York and London: Focal Press, 2014); and James Quinn (ed.), *Adventures in the Lives of Others: Ethical Dilemmas in Factual Filmmaking* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2015).

30 Michael Rabiger, *Directing the Documentary* (Abingdon: Focal Press, 1987).

31 See Joanna Woods-Marsden, 'Portrait of the Lady, 1430–1520', in David Brown Alan (ed.), *Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women* (London: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 64–87; Gustav Kobbé, 'The Smile of the "Mona Lisa"', *The Lotus Magazine* 8 (1916), 67–74; Kenneth Gouwens, 'Perceiving the Past: Renaissance Humanism after the "Cognitive Turn"', *The American Historical Review* 103 (1998), 55–82; Felix Gilbert, 'The Humanist Concept of the Prince and the Prince of Machiavelli', *The Journal of Modern History* 11 (1939), 449–83; Charles D. Tarlton, 'The Symbolism of Redemption and the Exorcism of Fortune in Machiavelli's *The Prince*', *The Review of Politics* 30 (1968), 323–48; Joseph D. Falvo, 'Nature and Art in Machiavelli's *The Prince*', *Italica* 66 (1989), 323–32; Victoria Kahn, 'Virtù and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli's *Prince*' *Representations* 13 (1986), 63–83.

in an increasingly digital, creatively egalitarian world.³² Indeed, the scholarly production of documentaries is a post-digital process in the sense that it marries the digital (new technologies) to the analogue (real world interactions). The relationship between the self and society — and the relationship of both to the wider cosmos — remains the main focus of the humanities, but documentary-making provides an opportunity to explore those issues in a way that transcends disciplines. The humanists' new tool is artistic expression.³³

In that sense, the scholar is enhanced when they embrace new technologies that allow them to step outside the traditional parameters of their subject area. The construction of a film requires not only the fostering of new skills, but a reflection upon the ways in which the discussions typically explored by scholars using written language can be transferred to a medium that is primarily visual in nature. Documentary films are often wildly different from one another, providing scholars

32 Jeremy Harris Lipschultz, *Social Media Communication: Concepts, Practices, Data, Law, and Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

33 Rosi Braidotti, the post-humanist thinker, has argued that the future of the humanities lies in the crossing of disciplinary lines and the exploration of subject areas not traditionally linked to the humanities. According to Braidotti, the changing nature of the human experience will necessitate changes in the humanities which will, according to her, require further trans-disciplinary interaction. This prediction is bold — there is logic to it, but that logic leaves significant room for debate; not the least of which concerns the shape of future trans-disciplinary approaches to studying the human being. Far from radical, the use of new digital technologies to facilitate the creation and dissemination of non-traditional research outputs is, in the context of Braidotti and other post-humanist thinkers, a rather modest innovation. The point being made here is not that historians and humanist scholars should try something that is (in the purest sense of the word) new. Rather, they should instead try something that has its ideological and intellectual precedent in the trans-disciplinary world of the Renaissance. The production of digital documentaries is, in that sense, simultaneously new and old. New for most humanist scholars but, at a base intellectual level, perfectly consistent with the trans-disciplinary spirit of our humanist and Renaissance-era antecedents. The process of scholarly documentary-making, then, is one that is utterly facilitated by the emergence of new digital tech — but is linked to centuries-old ideas in which disciplinary boundaries are seen as malleable. Taken to its natural conclusion, disciplinary boundaries must melt away in the face of scholarly investigations into the nature of the human being and the dissemination of that knowledge. Specialisation in this model is less about specialisation within a traditional field than it is with specialisation in a concern for the broader human experience, and the need to utilise whatever fields or approaches allow for the study (and dissemination) of complex and enlightening potential truths. For a further discussion on these ideas, see Rosi Braidotti, *The Post-Human* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), pp. 143–85.

with a significant degree of freedom to experiment.³⁴ There is no standard template for a scholarly documentary beyond that which their authors are able to define.

The transition from written pieces to cinematic ones can create practical problems, to be sure. References, for instance, are not easily integrated into the documentary medium. There are, however, a number of potential solutions that can be employed to overcome some of the hurdles presented by a new scholarly medium. A written appendix containing references or methodological discussions would be a clumsy, though effective, solution to the referencing dilemma. A more innovative approach might be the addition of interactive elements to the film, such as a small icon that appears whenever a reference or footnote is required, which provides the viewer with the option of bringing up the relevant information.³⁵

More problematic for the filmmaker-scholar may be their belief (likely fuelled by preconceived ideas) that they should strive to create films that entertain as much as they enlighten — but this is only a consideration if the plaudits of traditional film critics and audiences are desired. There is no reason for a scholar to suspect that the production of a documentary film will lead to a vulgar expression of their ideas; it is their medium to (re)define as they see fit. Indeed, scholars should be willing and eager to challenge convention. After more than a century of intensive development and refinement, the mainstream film industry has honed a number of well-realised formulas — a schema that is instantly recognisable as a satisfying or entertaining experience.³⁶

34 Consider, for instance, Robert J. Flaherty's 1922 film *Nanook of the North*, which fictionalised and staged much of its content, but which nonetheless succeeds in creating a narrative that brought Alaskan aboriginal peoples, even if a fictive version of them, into the mainstream culture. Then consider Neil Diamond's 2009 film *Reel Injun* which explores the long-term damage of the so-called 'mainstreamification' of aboriginal cultures. Both are so vividly different as hardly to merit comparisons — and yet they are also similar in both form and content; so much so that, when taken together, a new narrative of aboriginal empowerment in the Americas begins to emerge. See *Nanook of the North*. Directed by Robert J. Flaherty. New York: The Criterion Collection, 1999 and *Reel Injun*. Directed by Neil Diamond. Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 2009.

35 Dayna Galloway, Kenneth B. McAlpine, and Paul Harris, 'From Michael Moore to JFK Reloaded: Towards a Working Model of Interactive Documentary', *Journal of Media Practice* 8 (2007), 325–39.

36 According to Bill Nichols, documentary can exist in one of six forms — the poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, or performance. For a discussion on the forms of documentary films, see Bill Nichols' discussion on his construction

There is, however, nothing to stop humanist scholars from challenging audience expectations by subverting or reimagining this model.

Embracing documentary film as a means of disseminating research does not necessarily require scholars to embrace the mainstream, or even to seek a broad audience. The scholar remains free to challenge existing conceptions and constructs.

The Filmmaker-Scholar as Auteur

If mainstream documentaries fail to offer the type of insights, deep analysis, and discussions that academic scholars find valuable, reliable, or even ethically tolerable, it is the lack of scholarly oversight and control that is to blame. In mainstream documentaries, the scholar is all too often an advisor or spectator. As a result, documentaries are developed to suit the agenda of filmmakers (and their financiers) rather than the academy. Largely absent is the *scholar-auteur* — the filmmaker-scholar with complete creative control over a film, whose influence is felt in every aspect of the production. The coming of the digital wave and its resultant democratisation of the filmmaking and distribution processes offers the opportunity for scholars to empower themselves. Whilst the traditional mainstream documentary, and its associated and problematic relationship with the academy, is unlikely to disappear in the near future, scholars are no longer powerless. They can challenge the mainstream. Indeed, considering the exploitative nature of some documentaries (see The History Channel's *Ancient Aliens* (2010-present)) they may even have a moral obligation to do so.³⁷

At its most fundamental level, auteur theory argues that a film is, effectively, the creative vision of one person (or small group) whose ideas define the finished piece. One vision, one author, in other words.

of the Documentary Mode in Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary Film* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 2001), pp. 99–137.

37 The *Ancient Aliens* example is not a flippant aside. Many problematic productions have been created by and for companies such as the History Channel — they are certainly not unique in that regard. And though the reader of this volume might safely be assumed to pay series such as *Ancient Aliens* little heed, there is an audience who trusts programs such as this and, partly thanks to the professionalism of those productions, consider their arguments and evidence to be a valid candidate for the truth. Such audiences should not be looked down upon by the academy — nor should they be ignored or abandoned.

According to this theory, which de-emphasises the implied collaboration between every member of a production, through active agency or passive endorsement, films must necessarily represent the specific and focused desires of their chief creator, the auteur. Authorship of films is precise and attributable; the creative zeitgeist is thus linked inextricably to a core creative talent.³⁸

Setting aside debates about the universal veracity of the idea, auteur theory provides an excellent framework with which humanist scholars can begin to conceptualise their role in the emerging media landscape of the digital era. As invited participants and advisors, the humanist scholar's influence over documentary production tends to be limited. Well-honed arguments and careful research no doubt impact many productions but, fundamentally, a lack of direct creative control can only serve to disempower the humanist scholar. In the face of a strong-willed producer or director, no matter how ill-informed they may be, the humanist scholar has little power of enforcement and, though it may be loathsome to admit it, a compelling argument does not necessarily win the day. The scholar can, of course, attempt to exert positive change over the productions in which they are involved — but they cannot enforce their beliefs. More problematic still is the far larger body of scholars who are not invited to participate in such productions at all, whose research and perspectives are therefore completely excluded from the conversation. Far from serving as auteurs, scholars tend to be marginalised — used when they are perceived to be of value, but just as likely to be ignored.

The scholar-auteur, then, tends to be conspicuous through their absence. This is the paradigm that the digitisation of the filmmaking process, and the democratisation of distribution channels, allows the academy to challenge. Properly motivated, and willing to develop the necessary skills, there are few reasons why humanist scholars cannot take the place of the director or producer, to develop a creative — or rather, intellectual — vision which is reflected in every part of a finished production. Research, argument, deconstruction, logic, and visual grammar can all be controlled directly by the filmmaker-scholar. In so doing, they will take control of a mode of academic expression that is often

38 Andrew Sarris, *You Ain't Heard Nothing Yet: The American Talking Film, History and Memory, 1927–49* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

controlled by those outside of the academy; through experimentation and imagination, they will be able to realise a visualisation of their intellectual vision rather than aiding the outsider in realising theirs. The filmmaker-scholar will become the scholar-auteur.

A willingness to engage with the medium and to experiment will allow scholars to challenge and exploit it; to create opportunities to present primary evidence in new ways; to juxtapose and explore ideas visually; to reach specific audiences, broad and niche; to generate an audience-based feedback loop through the interactive nature of modern distribution channels, which solicit comment and generate online discussion; to engage in multi-perspective subjective explorations of thesis and concept. A self-conscious decision will need to be made to facilitate this — not a willingness to participate in mainstream documentaries when invited, but a desire to proactively take control of the medium by mastering every aspect of the production process (or forming a team with the required range of skills). Auteur-ism should be recognised — and embraced.

With direct creative and intellectual control of a documentary project the scholar will face challenges, not the least of which will be securing the resources necessary to create a high-quality documentary output. Aside from the intellectual resources in question — the baseline skills, which can and will be learned through study and practice — more material concerns will prove to be an issue. As with the independent film movement, however, the scholar-auteur will overcome these limitations through imagination and the intelligent deployment of the resources available to them. By learning a wide array of skills, from camera operation to sound recording and editing, the need for a crew will be reduced — or even eliminated. Engagement with students and other scholars in new pedagogical and collaborative spaces is one possible avenue to overcoming this deficit if complete self-sufficiency is neither possible nor desired. The careful use and management of existing and available resources — the planning of production around what is easily available to the filmmaker-scholar — will facilitate academic engagement with the documentary medium.

The filmmaker-scholar can benefit from the immense amount of material produced by independent and mainstream filmmakers. A wide corpus on the theory and practice of film production is readily

available — and independent filmmakers, through their writing and work, continually demonstrate how new technologies, techniques, and imagination provide solutions that can facilitate the work of the scholar-auteur. As a result, they demonstrate that the barriers of even the recent past have been demolished. The use of documentary film as a means of disseminating research and engaging in intellectual discourse is now within the hands of the scholar.

The filmmaker-scholar, as imagined in this book, is a scholar who sets aside any negative, preconceived ideas that they might harbour about documentary films. They do not recognise the form as being limited, a way to communicate with a mass audience via twentieth-century staples such as television, but instead celebrate the unique opportunities that a complicated layering of audio-visual elements offers them. They recognise that the documentary is a malleable form, which has been affected by disruptive changes brought about due to the emergence and proliferation of new technologies. They may well aspire to produce films that are projected on large cinema screens, or they may envision their works being consumed primarily on smartphones. Either way, they will recognise, identify, and attempt to exploit the potential of the medium to explore their intellectual ideas and research in new and intriguing ways.

The filmmaker-scholar rejects the idea that the academy cannot be in control of the documentaries that are consumed by broad and niche audiences alike. They do not wait for traditional gatekeepers of the medium to invite their participation, nor do they accept that they cannot possess complete creative control of a production. The filmmaker-scholar may well participate in the projects of others, but they create projects of their own, developing and realising their intellectual and creative vision. Their films reflect these visions, presenting candidates for the truth that are rooted in their research and intellect. The filmmaker-scholar cannot deflect the blame for an unsuccessful project — in a very real sense, they are its author.

Documentary film presents opportunities to expand discourses within and without the academy, a reality the humanist-auteur recognises and celebrates. They embrace academic forms of publication beyond the monograph-article dichotomy, which they may still employ, perhaps even as their principal avenue for publication. The humanist-auteur will be no less dedicated to academic and scholastic excellence

than their peers. Whether through book, film, or journal article, the humanist-auteur's first loyalty will be to the creation of reasoned analysis disseminated through the most appropriate form (written, filmed, or otherwise) which is available to them.

Looking for Charlie



Fig. 2 Watch *Looking for Charlie* by clicking on the link below or scanning the QR code. *Looking for Charlie: Life and Death in the Silent Era*. Digital Stream. Directed by Darren R. Reid and Brett Sanders. Coventry: Studio Académé, 2018.
<http://www.darrenreidhistory.co.uk/stream-looking-for-charlie/>



As an example of what an ambitious documentary *might* look like, we present to you our feature film debut — *Looking for Charlie: Life and Death in the Silent Era* (2018).³⁹ You can stream the film for free by pressing the play icon in the embedded video above or by scanning the QR code (if you are reading the print edition of this book).

Looking for Charlie was a very ambitious project. It took us three years to make and was shot principally in New York, London, Nuremberg, and Hong Kong. It is an in-depth examination of life in the silent era, focusing upon the hidden figures who helped to shape iconic performers like

39 *Looking for Charlie: Life and Death in the Silent Era*. Directed by Darren R. Reid and Brett Sanders. Coventry: Studio Académé, 2018.

Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. But it is also an examination of the role played by mental health in this era; two of the hidden figures in the film took their own lives, whilst Chaplin and Keaton had mental health issues of their own. As the project progressed, we recognized that there was a lot of overlap between our own experiences with mental health and those of our subjects. We thus chose to integrate own experiences a part of the film's larger narrative. In other words, *Looking for Charlie* is a thoroughly personal, idiosyncratic project in which subjective reflections sit next to more intellectual observations and analysis. It is a project that embraced the auteur-ish possibilities of the medium.

Traditional academic writing has few spaces for such deep, subjective engagement.⁴⁰ The documentary medium, however, with its different expectations and rather undefined place within the academy, offered us an opportunity to explore our topic in an open, personal, and constructive manner. You are under no obligation to follow a schema similar to our own. *Looking for Charlie* is not presented here as a blueprint; only as an illustrative example for readers to enjoy, reject, build-upon, react against, or ignore entirely.

Academic documentaries can be an extension of existing scholarship; a conduit through which scholars can reach a broad (non-scholarly) audience; and they can become something else entirely. With *Looking for Charlie* we erred towards the latter, not because we felt that all academic documentaries should engage in personal, subjective reflection, but because such an approach ultimately satisfied the intellectual and emotional goals of this particular project.

Your goals, personality, and intellectual framework will no doubt differ from our own. This may lead you to create radically different works from our own. We embrace that diversity of perspective.

40 For an example of some element of the reflective-self appearing in an academic text, see Christopher Leslie Brown "Foreword" in Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550–1812. Second Edition* (2012; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), pp. vii–xvi.