DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital Humanists

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18. Post-Mortem
Collaborating with Students to Make a Documentary about the Election of Donald Trump

Project: If He Wins (Working Title)/Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided (Final Title)

Anticipated Running Time: Approximately 5–8 Minutes.

"Rationale: The 2016 presidential election is proving to be a particularly divisive affair, with the success of Donald Trump suggesting a change in the political dynamics in the United States. The result is a historic electoral process in which the candidates (and their personalities) are threatening to overshadow the

electorate. As a result, this film will aim to capture a snapshot of how ordinary citizens in New York, an important city to both candidates, are responding to the changing political landscape. This film will present the views of its respondents in an honest and transparent way, whatever they are."

In May 2016, we travelled with ten of our students to New York in order to create a short documentary about the unfolding presidential election. As outsiders, we wanted to capture a snapshot of the city's mood, a portrait of how people were feeling about the divisive election and, in particular, Donald Trump's spectacular rise to prominence. Our core concept was simple: ask the residents of the city what would happen if he won. We wanted to create a short film that reflected the mood we discovered. We saw ourselves as observers, not provocateurs.

This election seemed to demand particular attention. Having filmed in New York previously it made sense to revisit that location, although, as a democratic stronghold, it was a potentially problematic choice. Still, we anticipated being able to capture a multiplicity of perspectives. Ideally, we would have travelled to several locations, in different parts of the country, and spoken to a wide cross-section of people. Our resources, however, put a strict limit on our ambition. We would make New York our case study and attempt to correct for its Democratic bias. New York may have been a blue state but, we reasoned, supporters of Trump would nonetheless be present.

From the outset there were three major factors that would help to shape our thinking throughout the filmmaking process. Firstly, the film would be released on platforms such as YouTube; it would likely be consumed as part of our audience's regular diet of bite-sized content. Secondly, we did not want to appear in the finished film; this should be a story by and about the people of New York. Thirdly, we wanted to reflect the uncertainty of the moment by having our subjects speculate about what the future under a (then) theoretical Trump presidency might look like; uncertainty mirrored by speculation about the unknowability of the future.

The desire to release the final piece via online video streaming services meant that we had to pay attention to the ways in which media

was consumed on such platforms. To that end, we aimed to create a film that would fit easily into YouTube viewing patterns. It had to be long enough to interest people, but not so long that it would impose upon someone's day — a five-to-eight-minute burst of concentrated discourse. As we did not deem it appropriate to appear in the film, to include a commentary track would, we felt, likewise pull attention away from our subjects, as well as adding undue length and complexity to a project that did not require either. Problematically, however, remaining off-camera would also serve to obscure our biases from the audience. By choosing to remain off-camera, we knew our film might present the illusion of greater objectivity. The filmmaker always crafts the truth that appears in their work and, whatever problems are introduced when they choose to appear on screen, their presence at least reminds the audience that they are watching a subjective piece loaded with authorial bias. Still, it was important to us that we make a film that would be built exclusively around the views, ideas, and perspectives of the people of New York. Reality was the real director of this project and so it was real life, rather than ourselves, that needed to appear on screen.

Of course, reality has to be framed. Asking our interviewees to simply give us their impressions of the election would be unlikely to lead to a particularly coherent, or deep, set of discussions. As a result, we constructed an interview questionnaire which was designed to encourage our subjects to reflect upon the nature of the country, and where it might be going in the future.[1] The 2016 election was nothing if not an event filled with speculation about the type of country the United States was, and the type of country it wanted to be. To capitalise upon that existential dimension, our questionnaire culminated with a simple question: 'What happens if Trump wins?' This question became our central organising principle during the early planning stages of the film and, consequently, *If He Wins* became the project's working title.

Once our core concept and questionnaire were written, we set about the task of planning our shoot. As we could not predict how our interview subjects would respond to our questions, or even who

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1   For discussions on the process of designing oral history projects, see Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History. Third Edition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 222–308; Ivan Jaksic, 'Oral History in the Americas', *The Journal of American History* 92 (1992), 590–600; Alistair Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', *The Oral History Review* 34 (2007), 49–70.

they would be, it was difficult to imagine what our final film would look like. We could, however, plan how we would go about gathering a range of different perspectives by identifying locations within the city where we might expect to encounter different demographics. Brooklyn, Wall Street, Coney Island, and Harlem were selected and a production schedule was built around visiting those locations.

Pre-Production

To ensure an orderly production we carefully planned our week-long schedule, accounting for where we would shoot, when we would be on location, how long travel between locations would take, and so on. Learning from our last trip to New York, we were careful not to overstuff our schedule. Aside from planning the shoot, pre-production was also the period during which we reviewed and assessed the equipment available to us:

1. A Nikon D5500 and three lenses: 18–55mm, 50mm, and 55–200mm. The 18–50mm lens had proven to be a capable workhorse in the past and would prove, once again, to be ideal for capturing a wide range of environmental footage. Its variable aperture size would help to provide a broad depth of field, which would keep moving subjects in focus. The fixed 50mm lens was an ideal lens for shooting interviews, with a maximum f-stop of 1.8 creating shallow-focus shots which fixed the viewer's attention on the interviewee. The 55–200mm lens would allow us to compress spaces in our shots, or capture moments that would otherwise be out of range for our other lenses.

2. A Nikon D3100 with an 18–55mm lens. Broadly comparable to the D5500 in daylight conditions, the D3100 is an early-model DSLR which struggled in low-light. Being very familiar with this device, we understood its limitations and quirks, allowing us to circumvent its limitations in order to put it to the best possible use. Despite it being significantly inferior to the D5500, it provided the crew with a solid second camera, particularly in situations where high-quality natural light was available.

3. Acquiring a third camera proved to be more problematic. Beyond funds for our trip to New York, *If He Wins* did not have a budget upon which we could draw to purchase (or even rent) additional equipment. Our solution was to use an iPad, recognising and compensating for its limitations as much as possible. Whilst dedicated camera equipment is almost always the preferred option, the video-capturing ability of devices such as the iPad has improved significantly in the past few years. Smartphones and tablets are nowhere near as versatile as a high-quality DSLR, but that does not mean that they are not capable of capturing high-quality footage in the correct circumstances. Our online streaming model, which anticipated people viewing the film on smartphones and similar small-screened devices, further justified the use of such equipment.

4. Tripods were sourced for each camera. For the iPad this required a tablet-to-tripod mount. A guerrilla tripod, a small device with posable legs that allows camera equipment to be mounted in a variety of unusual locations, was also sourced for the project. To record audio, two lavaliere microphones were acquired. A microphone that could be mounted to our lead camera (costing approximately $80) was also included in our manifest. The lavaliere microphones were connected to smartphones to record interview audio.

5. Release forms, to allow us to use the footage that we captured, were created, along with multiple hard copies of our production schedule.

6. A 360° camera. A colleague at our institution had recently held a session designed to inspire the creation of 360° and virtual reality films. Intrigued by the concept, we borrowed a 360° camera in order to experiment with it on our shoot. Our inexperience with the camera meant that we had no expectation that we would be able to capture anything worthwhile using this equipment. Whilst we believe we were correct not to shower undue (and unearned) attention on this new device (making a 360° film was, at best, a secondary concern for us) the decision to use the camera provided us

with an opportunity to successfully assemble our first virtual-reality film following our return.

To maximise the quality of the footage we would capture on the iPad, we utilised an app called FiLMIC PRO, which allowed for the device to record video at a range of frame rates, including the cinematically desirable 24fps. The app also allowed us to adjust exposure and focus separately, a pair of functions that are normally combined in the device's standard camera app. Despite the additional functionality we were able to eke out of the device, its dynamic (colour) range could not match that produced by our DSLRs and, as a result, particular attention had to be paid to the iPad footage during the post-production process. Still, the iPad proved to be a competent third camera. The footage captured by it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify in the final production; as a result, we were able to divide our crew into two separate units, each able to carry out different tasks simultaneously. Whilst cameras one and two (the Nikon D5500 and D3100) would be used primarily to shoot interviews, a second unit could use the iPad to capture environmental footage, allowing us to maximise our time at each of our chosen locations.

Production

Day One: Our first day of production was spent familiarising the crew with their roles. To that end, we spent the first day shooting in Central Park, engaging in a pop-up seminar where we talked through our own feelings about the election and took part in other team-building activities. Several games of Frisbee, some work on a promotional video for our institution, familiarising ourselves with the equipment; none of this led to the creation of any substantive footage, but it did help our crew come to grips with the larger task at hand and to settle into the process.

Day Two: Following our first day in Central Park, we travelled to Brooklyn where we scouted a suitable location to capture our first set of interviews. Setting up our equipment, we approached passers-by, telling them about our project, and inviting them to participate. Convincing people to appear on camera was not easy, however. Many potential subjects seemed interested in our project but were, understandably, reluctant to

speak to a group of strangers (on camera, no less) about their political beliefs. Despite having found a suitable location with reasonable foot traffic, it was not always easy interrupting peoples' days. Many were simply not willing to engage with us. This, we completely respected. Many invitations were offered and turned down but, over the course of the day, we were able gradually to acquire a bank of interviews. This included one brief on-camera discussion with a Trump supporter — the only one we were ultimately able to capture on film.

Day Three: Our second shoot took place at Coney Island, a quirky, eccentric, and anachronistic beachfront arcade. Again, we encountered some difficulty in acquiring interviews but a more noteworthy pattern was starting to emerge in the material that we were able to collect. Though we encountered Trump supporters who were interested in talking to us about their political beliefs, they had little interest in appearing on camera. One individual in particular spent a considerable amount of time watching us shoot, engaging us in discussions about the reasons he would vote for Trump, but he was unwilling to speak on camera. Despite capturing a number of quality interviews with Trump critics at Coney Island, we had failed to capture a single Trump supporter on film.

Day Four: Rest Day.

Day Five: By the time we began shooting at our third location, Wall Street, the growing imbalance in our material was becoming evident. Wall Street was, we assumed, one of the locations where we were most likely to find Trump supporters. As it turned out, it was extremely difficult to convince *anyone*, pro or anti Trump, to appear on camera at this location. In one notable exchange, a crew member asked a passer-by if they supported Trump. 'Yes,' they answered. 'Would you say that on camera?' the crew member followed up as the passer-by brushed past them. 'Nope,' he shouted back at us.

In another instance, we fell into a conversation with a group of workmen who were happy to talk about the election but unwilling to speak on camera. Of the three, two were openly critical of Trump. The third, however, after a good degree of preamble, expressed support for some of Trump's policies. The discussion was convivial and constructive

but they ultimately declined to share their views on camera. By this point it was becoming clear that Trump's New-York-based supporters were reluctant to openly share their sympathies for the candidate or his policies.

By the end of our time on Wall Street we had succeeded in capturing only two interviews. An exhaustive amount of work had gone into acquiring those interviews but they did not reflect the more diverse political views our off-camera conversations had exposed us to. In retrospect, something more should have been done about this; not to force interviews from reluctant subjects, but to somehow represent, on-screen, the reluctance of Trump supporters to speak about their support for him.

Day Six: Our final shoot took place in Harlem and, unlike our recent experience on Wall Street, a wide variety of subjects were willing to share detailed reflections on camera. Whilst our time on Wall Street had been difficult, our time in Harlem was a joy. That is not to say that it was without incident. At one point a young musician approached our group and accused us of treating Harlem like a 'zoo', informing us that we should be spending money, so that we might support local businesses and Harlemites like himself. He then called us all racists and left. It was an instructive moment, which spoke to deeper tensions in the area related to gentrification and identity politics. Later that day, he returned to apologise, explaining that he had been trying to convince us to buy his new CD. We then bought a copy.

With only minimal effort, we were able to attract a range of subjects to our camera in Harlem, each of whom delivered a charismatic and enthusiastic series of responses to our questions. In one instance, we were able to convince the owner of a local business to speak on camera, if we agreed to shoot a short video about their establishment. Despite a pressing schedule, we obliged, happy to pay something back to a community that had been so generous and welcoming. Despite rounding off our shoot with a series of quality interviews, the material we captured in New York reflected only one side of the discourse to which we had been exposed. Balance was an issue that we had become increasingly conscious of, but our principal aim was to allow New York to speak for itself, allowing the material we captured to direct the film that we would ultimately produce. By the time we left New York,

however, it was evident that our film would primarily present the views of those who were critical of Trump.

Post-Production

We did not enter post-production immediately. Instead, we chose to wait until the election reached a point when our material could contribute constructively to the emerging discourse. Problematically, Trump seemed, according to our own instincts, to be an unlikely victor throughout much of the election and the footage we captured seemed to reinforce that narrative. As a result, it was unclear what our film would add to the discussion. Following Clinton's post-convention bounce, the chances of Trump winning seemed remote.[2] Provisionally, we decided to return to the material in late September following the first presidential debate.[3]

Events in the 2016 presidential race were prone to sudden and unexpected changes. Following the first debate, Trump's attacks on Alicia Machado, the former Miss Universe winner whose looks he had publicly disparaged, set off a maelstrom of criticism which seemed to signal the start of an unstoppable downward spiral for the candidate.[4]

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2   Edward Helmore, 'Hillary Clinton Sees Post-Convention Boost over Trump, But Will it Last?', *The Guardian*, 30 July 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/30/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-post-convention-poll; Alan Rappeport, 'New Poll Reflects a Post-Convention Bounce for Hillary Clinton', *The New York Times*, 1 August 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/02/us/politics/clinton-convention-poll.html; Steven Shepard, 'How Big is Hillary Clinton's Convention Bounce', *Politico*, 2 August 2016, https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/how-big-is-hillary-clintons-convention-bounce-226545

3   The apparent weakness of the Trump campaign was exacerbated further following the debates, which failed to offer any further clarity regarding the place of our film: see Maxwell Tani, 'Hillary Clinton's Debate Surge is Now Clear', *Business Insider*, 4 October 2016, https://www.businessinsider.com/hillary-clintons-polls-debate-winning-2016-10?r=UK&IR=T

4   See Lucia Graves, 'Alicia Machado, Miss Universe Weight-Shamed by Trump, Speaks Out', *The Guardian*, 28 September 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/27/alicia-machado-miss-universe-weight-shame-trump-speaks-out-clinton; Michael Barbaro and Megan Twohey, 'Shamed and Angry: Alicia Machado, a Miss Universe Mocked by Donald Trump', *New York Times*, 27 September 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/28/us/politics/alicia-machado-donald-trump.html; Jannell Ross, 'Alicia Machado, the Woman Trump Called Miss Housekeeping, is Ready to Vote Against Donald Trump', *The Washington Post*, 27 September 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/

Our original question ('what happens if he wins?') could not have felt less relevant.

That was ultimately a good thing. The original framing question was not particularly inspired, and our footage showed that, underneath many carefully considered answers was a deep sense of unease. As a result, we began to rethink how the film would frame the interviews we had collected — as ever, the absence of substantial material from any Trump supporters weighed heavily upon us. The release of the 'grab them by the p---y' tape weighed even more heavily: laughable though it seems now, as we were editing our film we had to consider the possibility that Trump would pull out of the race entirely.[5] Indeed, he might, we reasoned, pull out of the race before we had an opportunity to release our work to the public.[6] So we became reactive.
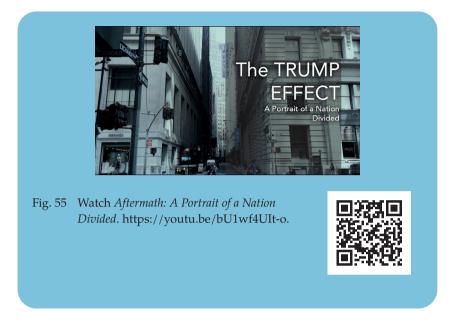
The original title, *If He Wins*, was thrown out in favour of something more abstract: *Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided*. Even that title did not feel entirely appropriate. We could not precisely define the aftermath to which we were referring: the aftermath of Trump's divisive language; his candidacy; or maybe his failure to prove himself even vaguely capable of winning? The change in title was a reflection of the confusion of the moment and our own misreading of the political temperature in America. Unexpectedly, it was the silence of Trump's supporters in our piece that ultimately gave it meaning. Like so many pundits and commentators, we had come to labour under the impression that Trump could not win. What we did not realise, and what our film reflected, was the weight of the silent voice in American politics at that moment. This was something that would only become clear in the aftermath of the process.

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wp/2016/09/27/alicia-machado-the-woman-trump-called-miss-housekeeping-is-ready-to-vote-against-donald-trump/; Peter W. Stevenson, 'The Clinton Campaign Had Been Getting Ready to Drop Alicia Machado on Trump for a Long Time', *The Washington Post*, 27 October 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/27/inside-the-clinton-campaigns-anti-trump-surrogate-rollout-plans/

5   For context on the 'grab them by the p---y' tape see "Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments about Women' *The New York Times*, October 8th, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html .

6   Lauren Gamino, 'What Happens if Donald Trump Pulls Out of the U.S. Election?', *The Guardian*, 9 October 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/08/what-happens-if-donald-trump-quits-presidential-race-election-experts

Aftermath

Fig. 55   Watch *Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided*. https://youtu.be/bU1wf4UIt-o.

Overall, we are proud of *Aftermath*.[7] We had wanted to create a filmic portrait, allowing the people of New York to create a collective narrative about a specific moment in time. We had wanted to represent the people we met, not manipulate them. Following its release, *Aftermath* generated the type of discussions we hoped to see — we had not set out to be provocateurs, but every documentarian ultimately becomes one. At screenings and online, the film helped to generate discussion, debates and, in some cases, partisan fury. Despite our inability to convince Trump supporters to appear on camera, we acknowledged this at the end of the film and, in that way, gave their silence some degree of weight. The film did not argue that Trump lacked support, only that many of Trump's supporters in places such as New York were reluctant to share their views in an open or transparent way.

We had met Trump supporters but, with only one exception, heard in the film's opening, none agreed to appear on camera — and even that subject said little more about the candidate than is presented in the

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7   *Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided*. Digital Stream. Directed by Brett Sanders and Darren R. Reid. Coventry: Red Something Media, 2016.

film. As a result, the lack of balance we had achieved felt appropriate, particularly as Trump's chances of victory appeared to approach zero.[8] We kept the tone of our final comment as neutral as possible: 'Although we met supporters of Donald Trump, they refused to speak to us on camera'. This acknowledgment was an honest reflection of our attempt to attain balance, giving the preceding interviews an additional level of meaning. Beyond the highly motivated and outspoken Trump partisans, *Aftermath* helped to illustrate that support for the candidate was not always boisterously or openly expressed.

To our mind, the silence of Trump's supporters gave them a unique voice in our film. The silence said something, though we did not know what at the time. In retrospect, it echoes loudly. At our first post-election screening, the audience laughed aloud as our final subject, in her charismatic manner, decried Trump and his policies. The expletive thrown in by a passer-by ('F--- Donald Trump!') amplified their laughter. But as our acknowledgement of the silence of Trump's supporters appeared, some members of the audience gasped audibly. There was a sense of palpable shock at the screening. *Aftermath* had not drawn this type of reaction prior to Trump's victory in the election.

Audience members had laughed, but before this they had never recoiled or shown visible signs of shock at this final reveal. After the election, however, that final piece of text seemed to completely reframe everything that preceded it. Before the election, the film had been a comfort to audience members critical of the candidate's policies and rhetoric. After the election, the echo chamber was broken. A new truth (not to be confused with reality) had emerged in the film. Or rather, the weight of interpretation had shifted. The film itself has not changed, but its meaning had. An imbalance that seemed to annoy some audiences prior to the election now appeared to be telling, foreboding even. The hint of an electoral sleeping giant had transformed into a rebuke.[9]

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8   Chris Cillizza and Aaron Blake, 'Donald Trump's Chances of Winning are Approaching Zero', *The Washington Post*, 24 October 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/24/donald-trumps-chances-of-winning-are-approaching-zero/ and Dan Roberts, 'Donald Trump Lends Name to New Hotel so Near — and so far from — White House', *The Guardian*, 26 October 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/26/donald-trump-opens-international-hotel-campaign-trail-brand

9   See the Comment Section on Brett Sanders and Darren R. Reid 'Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided', *YouTube*, 11 October 2016, https://youtu.be/bU1wf4UIt-o.

There are certainly lessons to be learned. Context changes the meaning, and perhaps even the worth of a film. Prior to the election, the film was fairly criticised for not offering balance. In a post-election world, that imbalance (which had been forced on us by the silence of Trump's New York supporters) now appears to be the most important thing we could have captured. So much for the role of the filmmaker.

But if our authorial voice was challenged or altered by the electoral process, our role as lecturers was enhanced. Traditionally, the teaching of history, and more broadly that of the humanities, has involved the inculcation of critical thinking through the production, and criticism, of written texts. The assessment and dissemination of knowledge, and the demonstration of newly acquired skills of cognition, were primarily undertaken in a written form: essays, monographs, reviews, and so on.[10] However, with the democratisation of filmmaking technologies and the advent of smartphones with their increasingly capable cameras and powers of recording, historians, humanist scholars, and their students have been confronted with new challenges and opportunities. The usability of technology, its wider availability and mobility, allow new voices to be seen and heard in previously inaccessible spaces. The open-access nature of the online environment has destroyed previous barriers to distribution and dissemination.[11] The possibilities, and implications, for scholars are startling.[12]

Aftermath: A Portrait of a Nation Divided was an experiment in the pedagogic practices of humanists. It allowed us to involve our students in the creation of oral histories and the construction of the narrative that those sources informed. Our students were not the traditional

10   For a discussion of this issue, see David Theo Goldberg, *The Afterlife of the Humanities* (Irvine: University of California Humanities Research Institute, 2014), https://humafterlife.uchri.org/

11   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

12   For a sample of the ways in which humanist scholars are utilising emerging technologies to challenge the traditional thesis, see Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (eds), *A New Companion to the Digital Humanities* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016); Eileen Gardner and Ronald G. Musto, *The Digital Humanities* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); David M. Berry (ed.), *Understanding Digital Humanities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

synthesisers of content, but the producers of it — employing a trans-disciplinary method in the disruption of a traditional subject.

As technologies evolve and change the way we live and communicate, it is imperative that post-digital-era graduates embrace new skills, and are capable of producing content across multiple platforms. On location in New York, our students were immersed in the making of history, learning to take the pulse of the city's electorate, collaborate with their lecturers, and shape the voices that informed the public debate. Understanding the language of film, and the rules that govern the interests and aesthetic preferences of the human eye were new avenues of discovery for our crew. Experiencing film production in Harlem, for instance, and engaging with its diverse community allowed our students to grow. They engaged with (and documented) the rich tapestry of that society; new technology was married with older methodologies. This was a digital humanist process in the sense that it was facilitated by new technologies, and it was post-digital in the sense that such technology serviced the pursuit of familiar intellectual and narrative goals.

In a post-truth world, humanities graduates must increasingly understand the construction of narrative, the 'truth' that permeates political and social cultures, and which defined the campaign of Donald Trump. In a year when opinion polls were found to be left wanting, failing to take account of a simmering nationwide desire for change, our film has become more relevant in the aftermath of Trump's unexpected victory. Instead of being a reassuring snapshot of a nation (un)divided, as it perhaps seemed to be when it was released, the film's inadvertent and renewed relevance stems from our failing to offer a voice to one side of the debate. Whilst the lack of balance initially drew criticism about our portrayal of New York's voters, in retrospect the silence of Trump's supporters in our film has become its most powerful feature — a deafening silence that changed the political landscape of the western world.