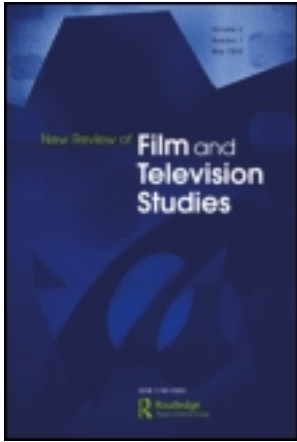


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The ethics of documentary filmmaking: an empirical turn

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EDITORIAL

The ethics of documentary filmmaking: an empirical turn

Documentary films have, over the past decades, not only become a more popular genre on television, in theatres, and at festivals; the genre has also ventured into newer areas, adapting to new formats, technologies, and aesthetics. Moreover, it keeps doing so, fully using the possibilities of modern dissemination platforms. Documentary film is characterized by the inherently contradictory idea of representing, in whatever way, something about the real and tangible world we live in, through the fabrication and construction of stories and narratives. As Kate Nash observes in this issue, stories and morals often go together. However, when it comes to documentary film, scholars have often stopped at the morals of the film itself. There are abundant examples of scholarly considerations of the ethics of the films by Frederick Wiseman (Anderson and Benson 1988, 1991), Michael Moore (Borden 2008; Marshall 2004), and Kim Longinotto (Smaill 2009), to name but a few better-known documentary filmmakers.¹ Going back to the late 1970s, scholars such as Brian Winston and Bill Nichols discussed ethics on a more theoretical level, focusing on questions concerning informed consent, justice, care, autonomy, and freedom of speech. These debates are generally part of a more general documentary discourse.

Over the past few years, however, a number of initiatives have been taken to broaden the scope of academic research on documentary film by incorporating scholarly examinations of the practice of making documentary films: in diverse corners of the world, researchers have turned to empirical investigations of documentary ethics. It is this empirical turn that features in the present special issue of the *New Review of Film and Television Studies*.

Acknowledging that the ethics of the filmic text, discernible in, for example, its axiographics (see Nichols 1991), differs from the ethics of the production process, these scholars have researched their own (Thomas, Donovan) and others' (Nash, Aufderheide, Sanders) practices using both qualitative (Nash, Thomas, Donovan, Aufderheide) and quantitative methods (Sanders). This special issue presents five research articles that report on various empirical findings.

In her research, Nash shifted the focus away from the filmmaker and instead focused on the experiences of documentary participants. In 'Telling Stories: The Narrative Study of Documentary Ethics' she discusses the accounts of two participants. Her research mirrors the documentary effort in the sense that Nash used narrative analysis to understand the accounts these participants related in response to open-ended questions. She specifically addresses questions of how

power and trust relate to the cooperation between filmmaker and participant and concludes that power and trust are complex, dynamic, and multi-faceted issues.

Thomas and Donovan both courageously took their own practice as documentary filmmakers as a starting point for their experimental case studies. Thomas decided that the opportunity to make a completely independent film equally provided an opportunity to hold on to his own ethics. He used the opportunity to embark on a collaborative project with his main participant, a survivor of the 2001 SIEVX disaster, resulting in the film *Hope*. In his contribution, 'Collaboration and Ethics in Documentary Filmmaking – A Case Study', he reports on the many challenges they both faced and he concludes that embarking on such an endeavor, although promoted by some scholars as a morally sound way of filmmaking, does not necessarily result in a smoother project with less moral challenges.

Donovan contemplated her ethical stance as a filmmaker before starting the documentary project discussed here. Her documentary *Tagged* focused on a group of individuals in a notorious suburban area in Sydney, Australia. The residents of this area are often treated in a prejudicial, stereotypical manner. Donovan's motive to give young residents a voice of their own entailed specific moral and aesthetic consequences. 'The Ethical Stance and its Representation in the Expressive Techniques of Documentary Filming: A Case Study of *Tagged*' discusses both Donovan's struggle with ethical issues in the film's production and how her ethical stance is visible in the film.

Observing that ethical issues are part and parcel of making documentary films, and that documentary filmmakers have no institutional guidelines to help them navigate such issues, Aufderheide and her colleagues embarked on an empirical research project investigating the experiences of American filmmakers with ethical issues in their work. They used open-ended interviews and had filmmakers talk about their experiences, probing their reasoning for the decisions they had taken in ethically challenging situations. This study, of which 'Perceived Ethical Conflict in US Documentary Filmmaking: A Field Report' only covers the main points, indicates that filmmakers experienced diverse issues within conflicting commitments and obligations.

A similar result is visible in the quantitative research executed by Sanders, reported on in 'The Aggie will Come First Indeed. A Survey on Documentary Filmmakers Dealing with Participants'. Using data from an international sample of documentary filmmakers, Sanders investigated how various moral issues and ways to deal with them might be related. Her findings suggest that filmmakers primarily focus on collaboration with the participant with the interests of the film in mind.

These five research efforts, all characterized by their empirical approach and their efforts to do justice to the everyday practice of documentary filmmaking, provide valuable new insights into and reflection on the practice they investigate. They point to the complexity of sometimes taken for granted situations such as the power imbalance between filmmaker and participant; they provide a deeper

understanding of the pros, cons, and consequences of making decisions in documentary filmmaking; and they make visible the various relationships filmmakers engage in and the possibly conflicting obligations these entail, including a professional obligation to make a compelling film, which in the end is what draws us all to the screen.

Note

1. See, for example, a recent special issue of *Journal of Information Ethics*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2010.

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