

Collaborative Practices in the Contemporary Documentary: A Proposed Analysis and Revision of the Participatory Mode in Documentary Theory

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Burgundy Voices (2011) presents everyday life in the community of Burgundy in the Canadian city of Montreal and the struggle of its members against oblivion. Of African-American origin, the English-speaking population of this isolated neighbourhood has lived for decades with the rejection of the rest of the city, which is largely French-speaking and notably wealthier. But this isolation, far from intimidating the residents of Burgundy, has given them a strong sense of collective identity and some solid grassroots movements based on fighting for their rights as a community.

This video could constitute an example of the many films which, making use of the cinematic medium, reveal and declaim injustice with the more or less explicit objective of raising public awareness about social issues. However, what makes *Burgundy Voices* unique is its production method: abandoning the classical structures of film production, this video was made without a director, scriptwriter or producer. Every stage of production, from writing the screenplay and planning the shooting to editing, post-production and distribution, was designed and carried out as a participatory project; that is, every phase was open to any member of the community to participate with his or her ideas or assistance in the conception of a collaborative video with a shared authorship.

In recent years, many film producers have undertaken projects in which user-generated content, shared authorship, public commitment and collective participation constitute the pivotal elements of the production process. The idea behind these projects is to open up all stages of film production to the public, from pre-production to final distribution, and to involve the community in the production decisions (SHAW and ROBERTSON, 1997: 2-23). As Nico Carpentier (2011: 68) suggests, “participation in the media deals with participation in the production of media output (content-related participation) and in media organizational decision-making (structural participation). These forms of media participation allow citizens to be active in one of the many (micro-)spheres relevant to daily life, and to put into practice their right to communicate.”¹

The question of participation in the media, and of how to define and articulate that participation, has acquired considerable importance in the academic world in recent years. In this study I wish to explore the cinematic dimension of these participatory videos and to determine whether, as filmic objects, they can be conceptualised within contemporary documentary theory. In this way, my aim is to introduce to film studies a group of filmic objects that until now have been relegated to fields such as participatory research (MITCHELL and DELANGE, 2011), urban anthropology (CUMMING and NORWOOD, 2012) or health promotion (CHIU, 2009).

The “Fogo Process”

The world’s first participatory audiovisual project took place between 1966 and 1969 on Fogo Island in Canada. The so-called “Fogo Process” arose out of the “Challenge for Change” program launched by the National Film Board of Canada (NFBC) in 1965, the purpose of which was to produce documentaries that reflected the situation in impoverished regions of the country. Fogo Island at that time suffered from a state of extreme isolation.

The population, made up mostly of fishers, was clustered in small communities along the coast, with limited contact with each other and with the administrative and political centres of the Canadian province of Newfoundland. Religious differences and the lack of infrastructure created extreme communication problems for the island’s inhabitants.

The NFBC entrusted director Colin Low with the production of a documentary about Fogo Island. The idea he came up with was to produce a documentary about poverty in which the protagonists could feel represented, based on the fact that at all times the circulation of the images would be authorised by those involved. To do this, he had the support of Fred Earle from Memorial University of Newfoundland, who was working in the Fogo community as a social mediator and who thus acted as liaison between the film crew and the island’s inhabitants.

The first interviews, once recorded, were screened in public in order to obtain the approval of the participants. However, the debate that arose as a result of these screenings led the director to offer the islanders the opportunity to film their own pieces about the issues that Fred Earle had been working on for some time. The idea thus arose of using the video as a participatory project, generating a cycle of feedback whereby the recordings were followed by debates that guided and defined subsequent recordings. Low also recommended the use of a vertical editing approach in order to keep intervention in the editing stage to a minimum, maintaining the sequences and blocks exactly as they had been filmed.

Out of this process 28 parallel documentaries were produced, which initially were only to be shown in each of the participating communities. However, the exchange of films between communities on the island expanded so quickly that, thanks to Fred Earle’s mediation, they ultimately made it all the way to the Canadian capital of Ottawa. The videos were screened at the university, and

Still shots from a video of the *Fogo Process*



in administrative and government offices, and afforded the island's inhabitants the opportunity to express their concerns to the Canadian fisheries minister, the most senior figure responsible for the policies that affected the island. The minister decided to respond to the residents of Fogo with another video, opening up a debate which, finally, led to significant improvements in living conditions on the island (NEWHOOK, 2009; WHITE, 2003: 122-143).

The MacBride Report

The experience of the "Fogo Process" represented a starting point for a wide range of participatory practices that used video as their medium of expression. Men and women all over the planet broke out of their traditional role as passive audiences and reconstructed their self-perception and their social context by becoming filmmakers and producers.

The decade of the 1970s was marked by intense turmoil in the world of international communications. While on the one hand the first major multinational conglomerates appeared and cultural industries began converging into huge corporate groups, on the other the first local and independent media projects began to develop. Similarly, this decade also saw the birth of a form

of ethnographic cinema which, in an effort to move away from the mere description characteristics of the ethnological documentary, "sought to represent a culture in a holistic way, through the exploration of relevant aspects of life in a community or social group, with the explicit intention of having an impact on the field of knowledge of human societies" (ARDEVOL, 1996).

This situation, along with the severe inequalities between Western nations and

the Third World in terms of communications policies,² prompted UNESCO (1980) to initiate what became a long debate over possible solutions to this problem, leading a decade later to the publication of the report *Many Voices, One World*, better known as the MacBride report.

The MacBride report recognised the need to democratise cultural industries and redistribute the power held by those industries. It therefore dedicated part of its analysis to the importance of the participatory processes initiated by the "Fogo Process" in media production. As noted in one of the preliminary documents produced in the

preparation of the final report, "[p]articipation implies a higher level of public involvement in the production process, and also in the management and planning of communication systems" (BERRIGAN, 1979: 19). This will be the definition of participation adopted in this study.

The MacBride report encouraged thousands of filmmakers around the world to become involved in participatory video production processes. Although there are participatory video projects that have attracted large audiences, such as the recent *One Day on Earth* or *#18DaysInEgypt*, most are associated with alternative and community media groups in the so-called "Third Audiovisual Sector" also known as "citizen media" (RODRIGUEZ, 2001: 25-63). The possibilities afforded by technology have considerably expanded community participation in these kinds of projects. Thanks to the simplicity of the equipment, it is now possible to learn quickly how to operate a camera, to view the material recorded immediately and, above all, to conduct the editing process on a collaborative basis. Along with these advances, many filmmakers have begun developing videos in which user participation is brought to the centre of the video production process. The main objective of these projects is to give the public greater access to all stages of film production, from pre-production to final distribution. In this way, the communities that participate in the creation of these videos are the ones who make all the decisions about their production and development.

The Documentary: Definition

In spite of the fact that the original aim of cinema was to represent reality (this was the objective of the films of the Lumière brothers), the documentary has never been a major focus of analysis in film studies. Since the term "documentary" was coined by the leader of the British Documentary School, John Grierson, in 1926, essays on theoretical aspects of this type of film production have been few and far between. However, this situation has changed drastically since the 1990s, as a wave of new film theorists have begun working almost exclusively on the documentary form. Two of the most important of these theorists have been Bill Nichols and Carl Plantinga.

One of the biggest questions tackled by these and other academics studying documentaries is the question of the definition of "documentary" itself. Due to the versatile nature of the object of study and the fact that the discipline of Documentary Theory is still relatively new, there is no unanimously accepted definition of what can be considered to be a *documentary*. Consequently, any research in the field of documentary theory first requires some in-depth reflection on the definition of the term.

Nichols (1991: 31-54), who bases his work on contemporary film theory drawing from the Derridean revolution, defines the documentary from three perspectives.

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The first perspective relates to the filmmaker: a documentary is defined as a film in which the director possesses very limited control over the story; he or she can control the filming and the camera, but not the performance. The second perspective relates to the text: documentaries are audiovisual texts that depict places and people connected by a thematic and historical logic and, therefore, are structured by external textual elements. Finally, the third perspective relates to the spectator: the documentary generates the expectation that the status of the text bears a direct relationship with the real world and that, consequently, there is a congruence between the image shown and the historical fact to which it refers; thus, the documentary generates a desire for knowledge and the spectator views it with little expectation of identifying with characters or plot twists.

On the other hand, Plantinga (1997: 83-115), who adopts a critical approach to postmodern philosophy, defines non-fiction genres on the basis of Nicholas Wolterstorff's theory of projected worlds. This theory posits that humans act in the world through language, not only generating meaning, but also developing linguistic actions. Thus, words are projected together with different stances on reality. Thus, when the stance of a film is fictitious it belongs to the genres of fiction. On the other hand, when the stance is assertive (i.e. the work elucidates and questions the truth, seeks the truth and desires the truth), the final product falls into the category of non-fiction, of which the documentary is a major component.

The Documentary: Classification

Nichols has proposed one of the most illuminating taxonomies for classifying documentaries in the field of film theory. Based on technical and narrative criteria, he defined four categories in his taxonomy (1991: 65-106), which he subsequently expanded to six (2001: 142-212). These are: expository, observational, interactive, reflexive, poetic and performative.

Expository documentaries follow the line of the British School initiated by John Grierson in response to a disenchantment with the light entertainment of fiction films. In these documentaries there is an omniscient voice that guides the narration of the core argument, the visuals are used to illustrate it, non-synchronous sound predominates, and editing is used to establish and maintain rhetorical more than spatial or temporal continuity. The voice of authority in this category of documentaries is the text itself, not the voices that have been recruited to take part in it.

Observational documentaries, which emerged in reaction against the moralising quality of the expository documentary, are characterised by the absence of filmmaker intervention and, therefore, by a total surrender of control. They rely on continuity editing to give the

impression of authentic temporality, there is no explicit narrator, external music soundtrack, intertitles or reconstructions. Interviews are rare, as it is a mode that is committed to the immediate, the intimate and the personal.

Interactive documentaries³ attempt to expose the perspective of the filmmaker. Thus, it is this type of film that most commonly includes interviews and in which the addition of the narrator's voice is not left for post-production, as the filmmaker intervenes and can be heard on the scene of the events. In contrast to the expository documentary, the voice of authority is not constructed by the text but by the social actors, whose comments shape the logic of the argument.

Reflexive documentaries are the product of a desire to make the conventions of representation more obvious and to question the impression of realism. Thus, the filmmaker speaks less of the historical world and of ethical questions and focuses instead on the device of reality representation and of documentary production itself. Professional actors are often used to represent what the documentary could have been able to communicate.

The poetic documentary, on the other hand, focuses more on stylistic and technical aspects than on the representation of reality itself. It thus sacrifices the conventions of continuity editing and does not attempt to clarify the space and time in which the events occur. Its interest lies in the exploration of associations and patterns related to temporal rhythms and in spatial juxtapositions.

Finally, the performative documentary is characterised by the development of a concrete, corporeal awareness embodied in a subjectivity that is distanced from the logic of objectivity. In this way, the performative documentary actively questions the presence of an omniscient subject capable of dominating all reality and operates with the aim of conveying a subjective experience.

Participatory videos as a documentary form

Burgundy Voices is a clear example of a collaborative video production in which the figure of the director is absent and the decisions are made by all active members of the community depicted in the film. This leap away from the traditional conception of video production, however, does not entail a distancing from the codes and practices operating in the construction of documentary discourse as it has been defined above.

DOCUMENTARIES ARE AUDIOVISUAL TEXTS THAT DEPICT PLACES AND PEOPLE CONNECTED BY A THEMATIC AND HISTORICAL LOGIC AND, THEREFORE, ARE STRUCTURED BY EXTERNAL TEXTUAL ELEMENTS



Still shot from the participatory video *Burgundy Voices*

As I noted earlier, the aim of this study is to elucidate whether these participatory videos adhere to the epistemological precepts necessary to be considered filmic objects within contemporary Documentary Theory. To this end, I have conducted a film analysis in four steps⁴ defined by Marzal Felici and Gómez Tarín (2007: 31-56) to deconstruct six participatory videos from different parts of the world for the purposes of identifying the characteristics typical of documentaries as defined by Bill Nichols (1991, 2001).

On the narrative level, *Burgundy Voices* is characterized by the absence of explicit sub-narrators and the constant intervention of the filmmakers. In other words, the logic of the argument is articulated through multiple conversations with different characters in the community who are interviewed by other residents. The hierarchy of social actors also denotes a certain ideology: while the social workers from more well-to-do neighbourhoods of the city express understanding for the problems faced by the community, the contributions of the more charismatic residents (the musician, the priest or the school teacher) reveal how, in reality, Burgundy does not receive institutional support. This narrative logic is always subordinated to the rhetoric of the video's argument and serves as political support for the social critique made in this film.

A textual analysis of *Burgundy Voices* allows an examination of the role played by editing in the video. Once again, the different syntactic elements are connected by following an argumentative rather than temporal logic. In other words, omissions and juxtapositions abound. This type of editing, which rejects the representation of temporal continuity by subordinating the narrative thread to the development of the argument, is common to most of the videos analysed here.

Los pasillos de la memoria (2010), a Spanish production, is the second of the collectively produced videos

examined. With similar characteristics to *Burgundy Voices*, this film relates, through interviews and without the intervention of the filmmakers, an association's fight to preserve the memory of victims of Franco's regime against the municipal government of Valencia, when the latter seeks to fill in a mass grave in a municipal cemetery with concrete. *Child Labour in Nablus* (2010), shot in Palestine, follows the daily lives of a group of friends in the Palestinian city of Nablus who combine their studies and leisure time with long hours of manual labour. Once again, the absence of the filmmakers in the interviews is a constant. However, the use of intertitles to divide the different parts of the story constitutes a textual sign of the presence of an explicit sub-narrator. The last of the videos analysed here that uses an argumentative mode of editing is *Un futuro de cuidado* (2010), filmed in Spain. While this video reproduces the same narrative strategies as those mentioned above, its rhetorical approach moves away from the exposition of arguments to offer an apparently objective presentation of a fictitious situation through the use of professional actors.

Conversely, the participatory videos *Para Nayita* (2010), from Guatemala, and *Rompiendo muros* (2010), from Bolivia, employ continuity editing rather than an argument-based approach, avoiding temporal gaps. The first of these, which uses a clear and explicit voice-over narrator who avoids interaction with the characters appearing on the screen, presents the homesickness of a Guatemalan emigrant for her hometown. The second, meanwhile, is narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, who is thus a diegetic narrator. Avoiding the use of interviews and direct questioning of the video's participants, *Rompiendo muros* describes everyday life in the Bolivian capital of La Paz.

Discussion and Conclusions

First of all, in this study I have proposed to categorise the videos analysed according to the definitions of documentary posited in the prevailing theories of the non-fiction genre. On the one hand, in correlation with the position of Plantinga (1997: 83-115), the videos examined here all adopt an assertive attitude towards the world insofar as they seek to question, elucidate and reveal the truth. Even in the case of *Un futuro de cuidado*, which recounts a fictitious situation with professional actors, the diegetic concomitance does not stray from objective reality and the argumentative exploration ultimately seeks to present a real situation.

Moreover, all the videos analysed meet the tripartite requirement established by Nichols (1991: 31-54) for an audiovisual text to be considered a documentary. First of all, although the production of the film is collective, the ultimate aim of the communities engaging in participatory video projects is to present the reality of their situa-

tion to the general population. In this respect, they meet the first criterion, related to the filmmaker. Secondly, the people and places appearing in these videos relate to each other through external textual elements; i.e., their correlation is subordinated to the logic of the argument. In this sense, all the videos analysed fulfil the textual criterion. Finally, the videos generate the expectation in the spectator that the world reflected in them corresponds to the real, historical world. As they also fulfil this last, spectator-related criterion, the participatory videos studied here can be included under the definition of documentary posited by Nichols.

Stella Bruzzi is one of the best known critics of the definition of documentary put forward by Bill Nichols. For Bruzzi, Nichols's error lies in the epistemological contradiction entailed in his theory by virtue of its invocation of "the idealised notion, on the one hand, of the pure documentary in which the relationship between the image and the real is straightforward and, on the other, the very impossibility of this aspiration" (BRUZZI, 2006: 12). Bruzzi instead appropriates the concept of *performativity* used by Judith Butler for her theory of gender, to argue that documentaries cannot represent historical reality. At the end of the day, a filmic device is identified as a documentary by a repetition of an unstable term with no known origin. It would therefore be necessary to define the conceptual analysis conducted in this study to take into account this new definition as well.

Having confirmed that participatory videos can be considered documentaries insofar as they match the established definitions, the next step is to classify them according to the taxonomic criteria proposed by Nichols (1991, 2001). In this respect, my analysis has identified two predominant categories. On one side are the documentaries *Para Nayita* and *Rompiendo muros*, which are categorised in the mode of observational representation, both for their use of continuity editing and the absence of interaction on the part of the filmmaker. The other four documentaries are included in the expository mode. However, in two of these, rhetorical components of other documentary modes can be identified. In the case of *Burgundy Voices*, the constant interaction of the filmmakers suggests that it should be placed at the intersection between expository and interactive modes. *Un futuro de cuidado*, on the other hand, could be classified in the reflexive mode because of its use of fictional elements. However, its assertive attitude and its explicatory aim suggest that this documentary is a combination of both expository and reflexive modes of representation.⁵

On this point it should be noted that Nichols abandoned the use of the name *interactive* (1991) in favour of *participatory* (2001) in light of the emergence of digital documentaries or "web documentaries". These films, which are also referred to as interactive documentaries

and are characterised by "disseminated authorship and a surrender of control over the narrative discourse" (GUILFREU CASTELLS, 2013: 124-125; CHOI, 2009), contradicted the epistemological assumptions of Nichols's theory. However, the name *participatory* poses the difficulty of first defining the concept of *participation*.

For Nichols, the *participatory* classification refers to the presence of the filmmaker on the screen and his or her involvement with the social actors. However, taking into account the definition provided by the MacBride report and the citizen media model posited by Rodriguez (2001: 25-63) on which this study is based, *participatory* acquires a political connotation that transcends the subjectivity of the filmmaker. Moreover, it is important to note that there are other forms of participation, such as "remixing", "crowdsourcing" or "crowdfunding" (ROIG TELO, 2012) which, although far from the activist conception of the previous definition, should also be considered in the theoretical debate over participation in the media.

Thus, in view of the confusion provoked by the *participatory* classification, in this study I propose a new label to designate this mode of representation. As Nichols himself acknowledged (1991: 79), in this category of documentaries "[t]he possibilities of serving as mentor, participant, prosecutor or provocateur in relation to the social actors

recruited to the film are far greater." In other words, the film's director has the power to question and even compel the participants in the film to provide explanations for an event related to the development of the argument. In this respect, I propose *interrogatory* as a more suitable descriptor for the category in question as it avoids the semantic incompatibilities arising from both *interactive* and *participatory*. The third category of classification in Bill Nichols's taxonomy would thus, according to this proposal, be designated the "interrogatory documentary".

In the same theoretical direction that this study has taken with *participation*, Jenny Weight (2012: 3-4) defines three different types in relation to the presence of community filmmakers in the final film product. Indigo-participatory documentaries are those which are entirely produced by a community without the need of a professional filmmaker. On the other extreme would be externo-participatory documentaries, for which a professional filmmaker facilitates production and intervenes in decision making. Finally, somewhere between these two models, we find reflex-participatory documentaries, in which a professional filmmaker is a part of the community and participates as a community member who may

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or may not contribute with his or her own ideas. These considerations would benefit greatly from research into the participation moderation methods used by filmmakers to manage the debates that arise in the production of these types of videos.

This study seeks to be a modest point of departure for a new theory of the participatory documentary that would incorporate collectively produced videos into the theoretical tradition of film studies. However, such an ambitious task requires a much larger and better-defined empirical corpus. With this in mind, the analytical strategy used here needs further systematisation, including control groups with documentaries that are emblematic of each of the modes of representation proposed, and expanding the sample of participatory videos analysed. Overcoming these limitations in future research will consolidate the conclusions drawn and expand the theoretical field outlined in this study.⁶ ■

Notes

- 1 It is interesting to note the distinction made by Nico Carpentier (2011: 68-71) between minimalist and maximalist dimensions of citizen participation in the media by relating them to minimalist and maximalist theories of democracy, as well as the articulation of this participation in Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere.
- 2 According to the MacBride report, Europe produced on average 12,000 books per year in the 1970s, while the African nations collectively published less than 350. Furthermore, the flow of news from the First World to the Third World is one hundred times greater than the flow in the opposite direction, and while Europe sends more than 850 hours of television programming to Africa each year, only 70 hours of African television reach European countries (UNESCO, 1980).
- 3 While Bill Nichols uses the term *interactive* to refer to this type of documentary in his book *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (1991: 78-93), he changes this name to *participatory* in his subsequent work *Introduction to Documentary* (2001: 179-194). Because this new name may not be compatible with the propositions of this study, in the last section I propose a new classification for this epistemological category.
- 4 The four-step film analysis is a methodology that entails the deconstruction of the films by means of three super-categories (contextual, textual and narrative analysis), followed by a fourth step involving the interpretation of each of these elements individually and the inference of a final classification of the film according to a previously defined taxonomy. It may initially seem surprising that this study should include a narrative analysis for documentary films. However, as has been demonstrated by Vallejo Vallejo (2008, 2013) using Gaudreault and Jost's (1990) theory of film narrative construction, classical narratological codes such as the presence of a narrator and sub-narrators, the use of the active voice and the construction of archetypal characters are also present in *cinéma vérité*. Therefore, a narratological analysis of documentary films is legitimate and can contribute a wealth of information relevant to its classification.
- 5 Nichols himself acknowledges in *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* that his classification is not set in stone and that there may be multiple examples of documentaries that contain features of several modes of representation and thus constitute mixed modes.
- 6 This article forms part of the R&D&I project *Análisis del desarrollo y evaluación de las competencias básicas en Educación Secundaria desde la enseñanza de las Ciencias Sociales* (EDU 2012 37909 CO302) financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. This work also would not have been possible without the assistance of the associations ACSUR-Las Segovias and ZaLab.

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