

Undisclosed Recipients: documentary in an era of digital convergence

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Abstract

As part of 'two essays in dialogue' with a piece written by Dale Hudson, this article advances critical discussions of the documentary film given the context of, and challenges posed by, digitality. Specifically, it analyses 'the digital' in Michael Takeo Magruder's {transcription} and [FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004] and Christina McPhee's La Conchita mon amour as a means to advance discussion of documentary beyond claims to realism and documentary truth towards what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls 'boundary events'. Tay argues that digital video, editing and compositing expose the limitations of visual evidence to represent trauma.

Keywords

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Undisclosed Recipients: database documentaries and the Internet

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Abstract

This article argues that new media disrupt the linear structures conventionally ascribed to documentary, emphasizing spatiality and relationality. On the Internet, 'database documentaries' facilitate selection and recombination of 'documents' (audio-visual evidence) through user acts, hypertext, algorithms and random access memory. Specifically, the article examines two pieces that address the controversial subjects of globalization and war. As database documentaries, Eduardo Navas's Goobalization and the collaborative Permanent Transit: net.remix by Mariam Ghani, Zohra Saed, Qasim Naqvi and Edward Potter destabilize quests for 'totalizing meaning' by emphasizing interactivity, contestation and multiplicities of meanings. The database evokes endless recombinations, so that meaning, Hudson argues in relation to these works, is explicitly polyvocal, unstable and contested.

Keywords

Internet
globalization
database
documentary
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Preamble

Curated by Dale Hudson and Sharon Lin Tay for the 2007 Finger Lakes Environmental Film Festival (FLEFF), the online exhibit 'Undisclosed Recipients' situates documentary praxes in relation to the festival's potent re-imagination of environmentalism. The festival challenges assumptions that environmentalism concerns itself primarily with ecology and preservation, arguing instead that environmentalism demands to be recognized within a broader framework, a 'complicated nexus of the social, political, aesthetic, technological, economic, physical, and natural'. Sustainability becomes the nodal point at the intersections of nature and culture. 'An ecological way of thinking, then, demands tracing these complex intersections in order to understand them – and then act on them', explain FLEFF co-directors Thomas Shevory and Patricia R. Zimmermann; 'Ecology means understanding how things, people, and ideas are interconnected' (2007: n.p.). Comparably, the online exhibit complicates assumptions about documentary's primary concern with 'truth' and 'evidence', particularly in relation to the theme of sustainability and the environment within a large global conversation that extends across issues of labour, war, health, disease, intellectual property, archives, HIV/AIDS, women's rights and human rights. 'Undisclosed Recipients' brings together artistically innovative, socially engaged and politically urgent work to a larger audience of 'undisclosed recipients', exploring the Internet's potential both as a medium of production and a mode of distribution. The exhibit foregrounds ways that digital video and the Internet can re-imagine and reclaim the documentary praxes that recognize meaning as process, rather than as product. Documentary is reinvigorated as collaborative, interactive and polyvocal – as open to the complexities of debate, rather than closed to the simplicities of certainty.

Adopting these strategies, the following two essays explore related arguments about digital images and digital structures in selected works from the 'Undisclosed Recipients' exhibit. The essays aim to propose ways of rethinking documentary's ostensibly contradictory impulses of a desire for immediacy and the necessity for mediation. Tay focuses on the challenge of 'the digital' to images as documentary evidence in terms of fidelity of representation and mediation. She analyses Michael Takeo Magruder's {*transcription*} and [*FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004*] and Christina McPhee's *La Conchita mon amour* as a means to advance discussion of documentary beyond claims to realism and documentary truth towards what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls 'boundary events'. She argues that digital video, editing and compositing expose the limitations of visual evidence to represent trauma, 'natural' disasters and war. Drawing upon these ideas, Hudson turns his analysis to digital structures for documentary on the Internet. He explores ways that Eduardo Navas's *Goobalization* and the collaborative *Permanent Transit: net.remix* by Mariam Ghani, Zohra Saed, Qasim Naqvi and Edward Potter may be understood as database documentaries that destabilize quests for 'totalizing meaning' by emphasizing interactivity, contestation and multiplicities of meanings in relation to the controversial issues of globalization and war. Meaning, he argues in relation to these works, is explicitly polyvocal, unstable and mutable. Together,

these essays trace two possible contours to ways that digital media and the Internet challenge assumptions about documentary in ways much like FLEFF challenges assumptions about environmentalism. Internet documentaries demonstrate ways that digital technologies have applications to documentary practices that extend beyond the faith in the authenticity and immediacy of the audio-visual images that it captures and renders. Acts of witnessing, recording and showing are extended by acts of recombining, filtering and processing.

Undisclosed Recipients: documentary in an era of digital convergence

Sharon Lin Tay

Speaking about her digital documentary, *The Fourth Dimension* (2001), Trinh T. Minh-ha observes that she produces films that she considers to be ‘first and foremost “boundary events”’ through which ‘one can view them as different ways of working with the freedom in experiencing the self and the world’ rather than endorsing categories ‘by which the film world largely abides’ (Trinh 2005: 28). According to Trinh (2005: 28), *The Fourth Dimension*

has less to do with the nonstaged nature of the material shot than with the process of documenting its unfolding; it documents its own time, its creation in megahertz, the different paths and layers of time-light that are involved in the production of images and meanings.

Discursively, the documentary film has had a rich and complex historical trajectory that effectively gave rise to its particular rhetoric and theoretical orientation. The post-war rise of Italian neo-realism that strives towards truth in the uncontrolled event, the technological innovations of the 1950s that provided film-makers with the portable equipment with which to make documentaries that appear to further eliminate artifice, the rise of various film movements such as Direct Cinema in the United States and Canada, Free Cinema in Britain, and *cinéma-vérité* in France all contribute to the alignment of the documentary film with ideas of realism and truth. The emergence of new media, with the consequent loosening of the indexical relationship between signifier and signified, resulting in doubts about the fidelity of representation to its referent that digital media casts, has significant implications for documentary practice in the digital age. Using Trinh’s point about freedom from the constraints of conventional documentary practice, I would like to explore in this essay the extent to which digital and Internet technologies can enable the move beyond certain limitations that continue to affect conventional documentary practices. As the companion piece to Dale Hudson’s discussion about database aesthetics and the processes of online documentaries, this essay will open up some ideas about the image and representation in documentary film within the context of digital convergence.

The documentary tradition’s discursive currency has traded upon several fundamental theoretical premises, of which access to unmediated reality is often simultaneously contentious and prized. The discrepancy between the necessity of mediation and a desire for immediacy is that which pervades much of documentary studies; in another conversation, it is also a central concern in thinking about mediation and the convergence to digital. This seeming conundrum in documentary, however, may be theoretically resolved by seeking recourse to various strategies that circumvent

the rhetoric of, and discursive construction around, the documentary film. Laura Mulvey, for instance, explains the intricacies of weaving together the fictional and the documentary in the last shots of Roberto Rossellini's *Journey to Italy* (1953). As the fictional couple reconcile and kiss on the crowded street, the camera pans away to follow the spectacle of the street procession. For Mulvey,

the [fictional] film simply fades away as the local brass band plays and people drift past. Life goes on. One ending halts, the other flows. One is a concentration focused on the stars' role in producing the fiction and its coherence, and the other is a distraction, the film's tendency to wander off in search of another kind of cinema.

(Mulvey 2006: 121–22)

Mulvey also uses examples from Abbas Kiarostami's films to think through this theoretical conundrum about mediation and access to reality. Kiarostami's tendency to construct the fictional narrative and documentary aspects of his films much in the model of a Möbius strip expresses, for Mulvey (2006: 131), 'the gap in time, the delay, that separates an event and its representation, its process of translation in thought and creativity'. These examples are myriad in Kiarostami's films, for instance, in the last shots of *A Taste of Cherry* (1994) where the fictional story wraps and the character that has apparently committed suicide (or rather, the actor playing the character) is seen smoking and talking with the film crew. The complex construction of *Close-Up* (1989) calls into question, at each narrative turn, the documentary and/or fictional status of what the viewer sees. These ways of advancing critical discussions of the documentary film beyond claims to realism and documentary truth are useful gestures to the need to critically reassess certain assumptions of documentary studies towards more constructive premises, especially given the context of, and challenges posed by, digitality.

Digital transcriptions: remediation and the news media

In *The Powers of Nightmare* (2004), the three-part documentary series made for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Adam Curtis illustrates the argument about the regime of fear instituted by political leaders that then lends legitimacy to their rule. The end of the Cold War and the absence of a definitive enemy left a political vacuum. As Curtis reiterates in the prologue of each episode, 'In an age when all the grand ideas have lost credibility, fear of a phantom enemy is all the politicians have left to maintain their power.' Post-9/11 panic about al-Qaida, terror cells and terrorist attacks establishes psychic and social boundaries between those experiencing panic and paranoia and those generating these feelings. The exploitation of panic serves profit and power, and the role that the media plays in the exploitation of panic and irrational fears for the benefit of the powerful needs consideration. Michael Takeo Magruder, a US-born artist based in the United Kingdom, explores these ethical issues of mediation in his online digital works. Straddling the aesthetics of digital art and the expository impetus of the documentary, Magruder's works raise questions about the relationship between news reportage and live events. Both

{*transcription*} and [*FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004*] examine questionable media coverage of events that confuse real and imagined situations.

As its title suggests, {*transcription*} is a digital project that attempts the creative transcription of 24-hour news coverage, in the process raising questions about the mediation and remediation of real events in our consumption of current affairs. Processed in real time, {*transcription*} samples live BBC news coverage, effectively severing the relationship between news broadcast and the events that are being reported. Familiar images taken from BBC news footage slowly and arbitrarily appear on screen, layered on by a digital skin that obscures the clarity of the image. These images are accompanied initially by the sound of scratching, and then one gradually hears the news being read. Scratching and voices are then layered on with more voices of different newsreaders, which are then continuously repeated and layered. The disjuncture between image, voice and sound that {*transcription*} effects produces an uncanny experience for the user, oscillating between familiarity and strangeness; an effect achieved by the use of an algorithm to disrupt the linearity and veracity of news broadcasts. Rendering the meanings generated by the news broadcast confused and multiple, {*transcription*} becomes a stream-of-consciousness experience, although not an unfamiliar one. In fact, this stream-of-consciousness effect replicates the all too familiar experience of consuming round-the-clock news broadcasts, where the supposed acquisition of information and knowledge through news broadcast instead becomes a form of simulation, alerting us to the often-unquestioning way in which we consume the news. In {*transcription*}, constant 'artefacts' (scratching sounds added to behave like 'video noise', like images added to replicate film grain) and the imposition of a 'digital skin' (another visual layer on top of the remediated news footage) accentuate the mediation of the news. Causing a radical disjuncture between sound and image, the processes of remediation that these scratching electronic noises and digital skins emphasize alert us to the constant deluge of round-the-clock news coverage, and the perpetual sense of panic and paranoia that the news ultimately engenders.

The political implications of such mediation that {*transcription*} engenders are brought home in [*FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004*]. The latter piece ponders on the relationship between ethical filtering and manipulative remixing of the news, the significance of which increases with technological advances that enable the generation of history in 'real time'. Similar to {*transcription*}, [*FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004*] involves the use of digital skins and the disconnection between voice and image to highlight the prevalence and signification of mediation. Made up of two versions, each consisting of several manipulated moving images, [*FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004*] accentuates the extent, and effects, of mediation. In one version, familiar images of the casualties of war such as billowing black smoke, fire, deserted roads, bombed-out cars, and the inevitable clusters of shocked, outraged and/or injured passers-by are at times composited with other similar images. In other instances, large images of the aftermath of an attack, complete with raging fires spewing clouds of black smoke, would be gradually layered on with texts from news reportage, usually filling (and completely obscuring) the image with thick newsprint within a matter

of seconds. The need to evaluate the ethical premises of the digital documentary is especially urgent; such urgency becomes obvious when one considers, for example, the political reasons that may lie behind particular news coverage leading to the massacre in Fallujah, Iraq. That the attack on Fallujah and the US presidential election both took place in the early days of November 2004 is no coincidence for many. As Magruder explains in the notes that accompany the piece, [FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004] is set within the context of the news report that Iraqi insurgents in Fallujah killed four US civilians. The bodies were then dragged, paraded and mutilated by the town's people, footage of which was broadcast around the world. On the basis of these reports, US forces then attacked the city. However, Magruder notes his reservations to the message conveyed by international news coverage: one, the US citizens were not civilians as reported, but mercenaries employed by a private US security firm; two, the entire scene of desecration was filmed by one Associated Press camera crew; three, there was no US or coalition forces intervention in neither the attack nor the subsequent mutilation; and four, coverage was highly censored by international media networks. These reservations question the veracity of the news coverage by raising questions about context. In other words, the media processes involved in representing the events leading up to the US attack on Fallujah, that [FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004] interrogates provided no real comprehension of the event that took place. The notion of documentary truth, premised upon the indexical relationship between the event and its representation, is thus destabilized via the algorithmic processes through which [FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004] operates. The meanings that one may take away from the news about Fallujah are at best contingent and equivocal.

Considered together, {transcription} and [FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004] note the perils of mediation without context, the disassociation of the signified from its signifier, a situation made infinitely more possible by digitization. On a more innocuous level, {transcription} considers the ethical questions implicit in the consumption of network news: whether knowledge or currency is that which has priority, and what does one do with this surfeit of (mostly bad) news from the television set, and increasingly, from the computer? How may ethical spectatorial positions for the consumption of network news be constructed? Much in the way that Edward Navas's *Goobalization* explores the issue of surveillance in digital media, whether for commercial exploitation or political control, as Hudson discusses below, [FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004] reminds us of the political agendas to which such a discrepancy between mediation and actual events may avail itself.

The idea of embedding journalists with soldiers in warfare adds a new implication to reportage, suggesting the ethical issues around representation, perspective and the eventual media decontextualization of events that take place at a distance. The ethics of recording, documenting and reporting are raised in terms of the value of different types of images: if images gleaned from the event are more valuable than archival footage, that would raise the question of whether knowledge or currency has priority in our consumption of current affairs. Does the mediation involved in the reporting of violence and unrest render these events mere electronic

white noise that emanates from the television sets that ultimately depoliticizes current events into byte-sized news packages? Collectively, these works reveal that conventional news media have not only averted their gaze from documentary's historical preoccupation with truth, but also often collaborated in camouflaging truth for political exigencies. The contingency of meaning is thus heightened within the context of digital convergence, given the non-linear, non-representational, evocative and interactive characteristics of digital media, as the discussion below of Christina McPhee's *La Conchita mon amour* furthers.

Documenting unspeakable trauma

Ethical questions around documentation and reportage that {*transcription*} and [FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004] raise are also pertinent to the works of the California-based digital artist, Christina McPhee. In particular, her project *La Conchita mon amour* taps into the states of panic and paranoia that characterize political events post-9/11, albeit in a different way. *La Conchita mon amour* references in its title the trauma of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima that could not be fully articulated in Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1960). Studying the struggles of life in the beach community of La Conchita in California that was inundated by debris flow after a devastating mudslide, the panic that *La Conchita mon amour* highlights refers to the heightened awareness and fear that living with the aftermath of the mudslide, and continuing fears of its recurrence, brings. Caused by increased winter rain that comes as an effect of global warming, this digital video project documents the interface between human response and geological data, when governmental assistance for victims of cyclical recursion of disaster is not forthcoming. As McPhee notes in the statement accompanying the project, the aftermath of this environmental disaster is one from which La Conchita residents cannot escape and are forced to live through, both literally and financially, given that their properties are rendered worthless by the mudslide; it therefore becomes impossible for the residents to re-mortgage their damaged homes and/or move away from the area.

As a performative act of witnessing, *La Conchita* updates the cinematic manifestations of political modernism, as articulated through the documentaries of film-makers such as Resnais, Marguerite Duras, Agnès Varda and Chris Marker; thereby bringing a formal discourse of the expository documentary into the Internet age at the same time that it transcends the expository mode in specific ways. In her search for meaning after the destruction of the landscape, McPhee records the rituals that the community performs to grieve for those who died in the mudslide as well as to survive as a community abandoned by the state. As a digital project, *La Conchita* imbues documentary realism with subjective evocation to such an extent that the project effectively displaces the importance of the documentary image's indexicality. Instead of contemplating the impossibility of representing trauma in, for instance *Night and Fog* (Resnais, 1955) or *Hiroshima mon amour*, *La Conchita* attempts the evocation of trauma via the algorithmic processes of selection and combination. The viewer's experience of *La Conchita* is contingent and interactive, and not unlike the notion of mining for geological information. Still photographs, composited images

and video clips of the landscape, environment and vernacular shrines allow the viewer to piece together the relationship between geological instability and psychological trauma. In this case, the evidentiary is not dependent on the indexical relationship between signifier and signified. Instead, the viewer arrives at 'evidence' of the trauma suffered by the *La Conchita* residents by looking at the mudslide in terms of its geological impact on the psychological subject. As McPhee notes in the essay accompanying the project,

La Conchita stores landscapes of information beyond what the obvious visible evidence discloses. The site is marked by the invisible mathematics of large-scale disturbances from seismicity patterns (there is a major fault, called Red Mountain Fault, running through the sea cliff upon which the village rests), to tidal patterns now altered by rising marine temperatures since the seventies.

(McPhee 2006: n.p.)

In this sense, the work interrogates the relationship between the visible and the evidentiary, and shows the limits of representation in instances of panic and trauma. The instability and contingency of meaning that *La Conchita* conveys differs from the notions of unspeakable trauma or the sublime in which many modernist expository documentaries are often invested. Instead, McPhee gestures towards a non-representational strategy, given the limits of representation, via the database aesthetics of her performative documentary that pivots on the algorithmic processes that Hudson observes as being key in the production of the plurality of meanings.

Images and field recordings of vernacular shrines, graffiti, chain-mail fencing and barricades in the aftermath of the mudslide, alongside images of the physical landscape make up the *La Conchita* project. Geological data and human responses to the disaster quantify the impact of the environmental disaster, in the process broadening an understanding of what the environment means and encompasses. By amplifying the leaps and elisions between observed facts culled from geological readings and the community's trauma as a subjective response to the disaster, evidence is therefore rendered materialist; effectively harnessing the digital and virtual to the material and the political. In some ways similar to how Hudson understands the intersection between various historical legacies and the technologies that they deploy in relation to, for instance, war and race, gender and class oppressions, digitality may be for us the means through which to explore the relationship between the environmental, psychical and political. Whenever visible evidence fails to articulate the situation involved, ethical questions surrounding the act of representation come into play. *La Conchita mon amour* seeks recourse in the poetic rendering of the trauma that environmental destruction brings. McPhee's use of field recordings and a particular operatic soundtrack featuring a mournful female voice adds to the subjective evocation of the natural disaster. Her documentation of the landscape and instances of human response to the loss of lives, the aftermath of the mudslide and its continuing threat refuses the creation of spectacle. As McPhee claims in her project essay, 'disaster images become pornography almost by default'; she also asks 'how to generate narrative about a place of continuing catastrophe in a

way that occludes spectacle? Is there a way to escape the anaesthetic of the daily news, and its remains online?' (McPhee 2006: n.p.).

Conclusions

Conceding that the documentary film often exceeds, and is more intricate and complex, than much of the theoretical enterprise that surrounds its practice thus requires some more enabling and constructive bases from which to speak and think about it. Vivian Sobchack, writing about the representation of death in documentary and non-fiction films, delineates an ethical space from which to discuss the limits to, and impossibility of, representing death. She writes,

the textual vision inscribed in and as documentary space is never seen as a space alternative or transcendental to the viewer's lifeworld and its values. That is, this textual vision and its activity reflexively point to a lived body occupying concrete space and shaping it with others in concrete social relations that describe a moral structure.

(Sobchack 2004: 248)

The ethical space that Sobchack demarcates derives from cultural norms about death; which, for instance, gives rise to the peculiar situation where death is more often portrayed as being violent and unnatural than ordinary and acceptable, because of our culture's increasing unfamiliarity with such a state of being. The ethics around various representations of death in the non-fiction film is thus intimately related to the social and the cultural. Short of death, I would argue that this ethical space that Sobchack distinguishes for the documentary is also political and part of the complex media and cultural ecology in which we inhabit. The works that I discuss above thus explore, interrogate and expand on the different and complex ways in which they articulate their relation to the material beyond the issues of representation. While Magruder employs the creative transcription of television news in the process to seek understanding despite media obfuscation, McPhee's strategy involves delineating the limitations of visible evidence in rendering truth.

Undisclosed Recipients: database documentaries and the Internet

Dale Hudson

As Sharon Lin Tay demonstrates in her analysis of three works from the 'Undisclosed Recipients' exhibit, digital images provide a means to advance discussion of documentary beyond claims to mediation ('realism') and immediacy ('truth') and signal the limitations of audio-visual evidence. In this essay, I turn to an analysis of digital structures, looking at two other works from the exhibit. I suggest ways that principles of new media disrupt the linear structures conventionally ascribed to documentary practices and prompt a rethinking of the concept of documentary, not only in terms of spatiality but also in terms of relationality. Adapting Marsha Kinder's concept of 'database narratives', in which a surplus of information emphasizes a 'dual process of selection and combination' (Kinder 2002: 6), I argue that database documentaries loosen assumptions about documentary from fixed modes (expository, observational, personal) and towards open modes (collaborative, reflexive, interactive). Documentary, then, moves as a concept from object-based 'push' media (celluloid, video, even visual display of a graphical user interface (GUI)) towards act-based 'pull' media (user acts, hyperlinks, algorithms). Indeed, the open-source potentiality of the Internet, fuelled by digitization of audio-visual images into code that can be accessed randomly, labelled and sorted, then distributed (relatively) instantaneously, prompts reflection upon the historical and cultural assumptions that determine and manage meaning for many of the key terms (evidence, witnessing, testimony, etc.) associated with documentary. A defining characteristic of new media is its ability to organize information in databases, so that information may be rendered into a theoretically infinite number of discrete sequences via user acts and algorithmic operations. Meaning is not fixed as it is on celluloid; rather, meaning is malleable, destabilizing the certainties of positivist constructions of knowledge and opening meaning for ongoing debate. Digital structures, then, offer a means to address controversial subjects, such as globalization and the displacements of populations by war, in ways that open meaning to debate rather than attempt to circumscribe the contours of meaning.

From its etymological roots in the word *documentaire*, roughly translating into English as 'travelogue', documentary film foregrounds its ability to present (or transport) audio-visual images ('documents') across time and space. Historically, documentary film constructs meaning through the temporal sequencing of audio-visual images onto reels of celluloid, or onto analogue and magnetic tapes. Since digital images are not recorded as a direct representation of a continuous process, they are produced as a process of encoding information as data that can be searched, selected, combined and converted back into an analogue signal that can be displayed on a screen and played through a speaker (Enticknap 2005: 203). Vivian Sobchack (2005: 132) argues that 'presence' in electronic (new) media is

'absolute presence' or 'being-in-itself'. Rather than a 'presence' confined to the past, as with photographic media, or a 'presence' forever constituting itself as 'presence', as with cinematic media, the absolute presence of new media is centre-less, a network-like structure of instant simulation and desire, rather than in nostalgia for the past or anticipation for the future, so that qualities of the photographic and the cinematic are schematized into discrete pixels and bits of information, 'each bit being-in-itself even as it is part of a system' (Sobchack 2005: 136). Digitality, then, implies an opening to ways of conceiving one's place in the world that is not constrained to the linearity of most analogue formats and has the potential to challenge the historical legacies that have deployed such technologies as they have intersected with colonialism, racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, class oppression, homophobia, religious fundamentalism and war. Content is reconfigured via RAM (random access memory) that permits immediate access to any part of the 'new media object' (Manovich 2001: 20–22, 77). New media emphasizes programmability (Chun 2006: 1–2), so that interactivity operates in ways that exceed the reading strategies offered by reception theory (i.e. interpretation of different meanings from a single text). Users manipulate information, actively exploring hyperlinked web pages and performing other acts. In particular, the database model facilitates selection and recombination of 'documents', thereby offering a mode of documentary that more closely resembles an archive which, in Foucault's terms, 'defines at the onset the system of its enunciability' and 'causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated' (Foucault 1972: 129). More than a system of display and distribution, then, the database becomes a mode for Internet-based documentary where meaning is subjected to endless recombinations, operating within a simultaneously constructive and destructive 'archive fever' that Derrida (1996: 19) has described. Like analogue video archives, online digital archives are open to receive new documents, suggesting that meaning is a constant process of accumulation; unlike their analogue counterparts, however, online digital archives mobilize the random access of digital code and the remote access of computer networks as a means of facilitating user participation in this process. Polyvocal, unstable and contested meanings, rather than fixed ones, become a means of politicizing online and offline environments in Eduardo Navas's *Goobalization* and the collaborative *Permanent Transit: net.remix* by Mariam Ghani, Zohra Saed, Qasim Naqvi and Edward Potter.

Goobalization

Contextualized within the FLEFF exhibit, *Goobalization* documents ubiquitous corporate logos as one of the most visible markers of globalization that define the environment, both online and offline. Like the terms 'Coca-Colaization', 'McDonaldization' and 'Hollywoodization', the title to Eduardo Navas's work takes the brand name of the globally dominant corporation – here, the Internet search engine Google – as a prefix to the name of a dominant process of post-Cold War/World Trade Organization (WTO) interdependence: globalization. Google declares its mission as 'to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful', but it is a publicly traded corporation that specializes in online advertising and generates revenue in the billions of US dollars. In this

sense, the 'world's information' includes the location of the search engine's users – information that Google uses to target users of its search engines with Geo-ID. Advertisements automatically display in local languages (Goldsmith and Wu 2006: 61), prompting reflection about user complicity with the surveillance and mediation embedded in everyday acts, comparable to the complicity with corporate news media that Tay describes in her analysis of {*transcription*}.

Goobalization is an ongoing series of short Flash animations that recombine images retrieved through Google, downloaded from the Web, and labelled by Navas according to their relationship with the project's four key terms: surveillance, difference, resistance and globalization. Navas programs the images to appear on the media-player screen in proximity to his key terms – *surveillance* in the upper left; *difference*, upper right; *resistance*, lower left; and *globalization*, lower right – to prompt contemplation about the algorithms within the Google search engine that appears to execute the task of linking terms with images; that is, the animations question ways that search engines construct meaning. As the images appear on screen, however, their juxtapositions expose the complexities of power struggles and notions of progress at play in the online world. The hierarchy within Google search results is disrupted, so that the production of meaning becomes more apparent. Images fade in and out at different intervals, so that the user experiences the often-uncomfortable proximity between the ostensibly incompatible social, economic, cultural, political and ideological processes of globalization and the mundane and familiar acts of performing a Google search.

Goobalization does not hack or modify the Google search engine; rather, it turns the logic of the search engine and its parent corporation somewhat against itself, interrogating expectations for what the search engine will produce when presented with highly contested key terms concerning globalization. Google boasts that its search engine is trusted by users due to its quality of being 'untainted' by human involvement or paid advertisements. Its patented 'hypertext-matching analysis' and 'page rank' algorithms decrease the calculation time for searches by examining page content and page relationships, rather than simply the frequency of word appearance on a particular page, and by pre-selecting web pages that the search engine determines to be more relevant to the user. Google's image search, however, does rely upon human involvement in the absence of algorithms that can efficiently identify and label visual images, pointing back to the questions posed by Tay in relation to types of mediation that circumscribe the fidelity of visual representation. Google's image search functions somewhat like an open-content model of the Internet that allows copying and modifying of information by any user. The search engine relies on users to provide indexing via tags ('image labels'), encouraging users to strive for detail and accuracy through a system of points based upon the amount of detail within label descriptions. In its own example, an image of a large tropical seabird in flight against a blue sky receives successively higher points for the labels 'sky' (background image), 'bird' (foreground image), 'soaring' (action), and 'frigate bird' (more detailed description of foreground image). The labels link key words to visual images, so that the latter serve as a visual document or illustration of the former.

In terms of critical praxis, *Goobalization* mimics the database logic of Google search engines while adapting the logic of 'web application mashups'. Such mashups extend the sampling principles of music remixes that emerged during the 1970s but are not merely consumed for entertainment because they serve a practical function. Users customize Internet technologies, so that 'the purpose of a typical Web 2.0 mashup', Navas argues, is 'to subvert applications to perform something they could not do otherwise by themselves' (Navas 2007: 3). CrimeChicago.org, for example, overlays data from the Chicago Police Department onto Google maps, so that crimes may be mapped according to date, type and location, as readily as directions between home and a holiday or shopping destination can be mapped. Unlike hacks or mods, mashups mobilize and combine existing technologies, leaving the underlying code intact. Web application mashups materially copy data from various sources and constantly update this data, thereby utilizing the open archives, random access and search filters of the Internet. At first glance *Goobalization* appears to adopt the strategy of a mashup that matches images with words on a separate web site, such as a commercial news organization, based on information in the images' metadata ('tags' such as the equipment and settings used to produce the image, the owner of the equipment, the subject or date).

Rejecting Google's conceits of objectivity and consensus within its text searches and image searches, *Goobalization* defines globalization, surveillance, resistance and difference in political terms. For Navas, *globalization* is an expression of transnational corporate control over international activity that facilitates the increasing global inequalities between haves and have-nots. He identifies *surveillance* as a complementary term that describes a primary mode by which globalization is enacted upon its bodies of the world's populations, as well as upon their online activities. Corporations, governments, and hackers deploy surveillance for purposes that range from commercial exploitation to political control. As a counterbalance to globalization and surveillance, Navas understands *resistance* to suggest critical positions that interrogate structures of power, positions that simultaneously mobilize and are enabled by *difference*. Although the terms would seem to posit simple binaries, Navas's selection and compositing of images complicate initial suppositions.

Goobalization-I, for example, opens with a black-and-white image of 'surveillance', depicting a woman tourist taking a photograph of a man, who poses by swinging from a lamp post, above a colour image as 'resistance' depicting the Zapatista liberation army (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional), known for their mobilization of Internet technologies for cyber-activism and anti-globalization. Differentiations and relations within structures of power come more sharply into focus as the user witnesses the momentary proximity of two very different subject positions under globalization – positions that are intimately connected yet effectively segregated by globalization. As the images fade in and out, composite images are formed momentarily in the overlapping areas between the four key terms. Plants, for example, merge with men holding machine guns. In *Goobalization-III*, 'difference' is represented with a stock advertising image of US multiculturalism (smiling African American, Asian American, European American, Latino/a American – yet, predictably, no Native

American – faces) as ‘globalization’ is represented by an image of a pair of Gap jeans with a label reading ‘made in a sweatshop’. Soon the images shift to a logo for a reforestation movement for ‘difference’ whose text (‘you can make a difference’) is quickly covered by an image of three smiling waitresses wearing the trademark tight singlet for the Hooters chain of fast-food restaurants for ‘globalization’. The animations highlight the imbrications of purportedly oppositional discourses, that is, the works in the series animate ways that anti-globalization discourses are appropriated by agents of globalization, as well as the inverse. The digital structure of the documentary, then, determines meaning more than the actual content of the images, updating the political avant-garde strategies of Soviet montage and Third Cinema for what might be called the post-ideological moment. The overlapping images challenge the conventions of expository documentary where text, whether spoken in voice-over or written as inter-titles or subtitles, reigns over images and causality in argument is paramount (Nichols 1991: 35). By mimicking an actual mashup that selects images based upon Google’s own rankings, the *Goobalization* animations pose questions about ways that information is labelled, tagged, and processed through search engines, ways that documents are interpreted as documentation by search engines, to expose meaning as polyvocal, unstable, and contested around ethically urgent questions concerning corporate control of meaning in the current moment of globalization.

Permanent transit

Created by media artist Mariam Ghani in collaboration with programmer Ed Potter, *Kabul: Reconstructions* was originally launched in 2003 as an interactive documentary and public dialogue project to document reconstruction projects in Kabul at yearly intervals. By adopting both a conventional documentary mode (representing) and a less conventional mode (dialoguing), the Internet documentary seeks to offer multiple perspectives of particular situations, emphasizing movements towards collaborative, open-ended knowledge rather than single perspectives or closed structures of constructing and transmitting knowledge that *Goobalization* complicates. The first two sections of *Kabul: Reconstructions*, which were active from March 2003 to March 2006 and are archived on the website, include data about Kabul’s reconstruction gleaned from the official networks of international media coverage, as well as data about the reconstruction transmitted via Afghani diasporic and exilic networks in response to questions posted on the website by users. The third and fourth sections of the project turn their attention to the constitutional assembly and national election, posing questions about the ‘architectures of democracy proposed and promoted through the reconstruction efforts during that window of possibility which now seems to be closing’. The project deploys Internet communications peer-to-peer (P2P) technologies to disrupt the authority of centralized models of distribution.

As part of *Kabul: Reconstruction*, the collaborative project *Permanent Transit: net.remix* by media artist Mariam Ghani, poet Zohra Saed, composer Qasim Naqvi, and programmer Edward Potter considers the instability of states of being through migration in response to political events. *Permanent Transit* is a database documentary about the anxieties and

recoveries, disorientations and reorientations, associated with the continual migrations of expatriates, exiles, refugees, immigrants and itinerants. Shot on DV through the windows of planes, buildings and vehicles on location in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Turkey, Armenia, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States, looped video and fragmented sounds of the twelve windows of *Permanent Transit* result in 'experimental documentary reconstituted as a documented experiment' (Ghani 2004). Designed to relocate viewers from state-bound lives to the crossroads that are experienced by the 'hybrid generation' of stateless populations that Ghani defines as 'difficult, absurd, productive zone where locations and cultures blur, intersect, overlap and exchange', while political borders reify. Experience, memory and identity are not merely fragmented, as articulated by postcolonial theories and echoed by postmodernist ideas. Instead, experience, memory and identity are distanced, blocked and often mediated in self-alienating ways that find description in views through the glass of windows of moving vehicles and temporary lodgings. In this sense the images share less in common with the ideologically ambiguous images in *Goobalization* than they do with images in *La Conchita mon amour*, which, as Tay argues, are infused with subjective evocations, thereby displacing indexicality as a primary mode of making meaning from visual representation.

To enter *Permanent Transit*, the user opens a browser that is divided into a dozen windows, manipulating the content by clicking on the 'mix' button to download one single-channel video after another from the video subset of the database, as well as the 'play' and 'pause' buttons of the media player in each window. Sound tracks are selected by algorithm from the audio subset of the database. In this way, the documentary enacts functions of the user interface that *Goobalization* represents. In ten of the twelve windows, the short videos loop automatically. The audio track plays only once. The seventh and tenth windows contain text that appears and disappears in sections. The only window that does not automatically loop is the first window, which contains the title in white capital lettering against a black screen. The letters rotate through the alphabet faintly behind the words 'permanent transit' as images appear and disappear in clusters in a visual representation of the transience of memories and sensory impressions. The audio track of the title window generates anticipation of change that is suggested by the rapid beat of percussion instruments, punctuated by the occasional clanking noise of a metal instrument.

Fidelity of visual representation to experience comes into question. Indeed, sound often compensates for the people and places that vision cannot produce. Handshakes and hugs find approximate substitutes in long-distance telephone conversations, so that the sound of voices fills in the gaps left by the absence of faces. The documentary explores substitutions and partial equivalences of being in a state of permanent transit where environments seemingly always shift underfoot. Structured as a database, *Permanent Transit* would seem to question the very assumptions of database search engines to produce meaningful results. Although the videos document travel through eleven states, images of these disparate places are seen only through the windows of vehicles and locations of transit. Cultural and political constructions of 'the East' and 'the West' collapse

upon themselves when the visual markers of familiar and foreign are largely obliterated in partial views. Memories of one flight splinter into memories of a thousand flights. 'What was the order of cities?', asks Saed's text; 'Beirut . . . Baghdad . . . Damascus . . . New York . . . Baghdad again . . . Amman . . . New York. In the ellipses we find only war.' Memories become sites for contestation between generations. Meaning of images for one generation is produced in relation to the meaning of another generation.

As an unreliable structuring narrative for the piece, Rula Ghani recounts her memories of Syrian comedian Doreid Laham's absurdist tale of a man trapped in a no-man's land. The gaps in Ghani's memory of Laham's tale, originally televised in 1981 but only remembered and recorded decades later, are evocative of the work's attempts to document what is lost every day. 'How many windows can we look from? How many rooftops await our return?', asks the text alongside the images. The clicking and chiming of clocks in the waiting rooms of airports, bus depots, railway stations and checkpoints comes to replace the call to prayers once heard from the local mosque. In another segment, sounds of prayers mix with sounds of traffic as a woman eats a meal by a window. 'God and radio hold hands in the eternity of no-man zones', suggests the text at one point. Although 'bells, work, clock – all cut up the day as neatly as a traffic jam', little relives the sense of being in a state of 'permanent waiting', emphasized by looped video across a multiplicity of screens. *Permanent Transit* also explores possibilities for recuperation of identity and grounding: 'There are borders, there are checkpoints, and there are our mother's stories to undo them all with one twist of a tale and a gentle laugh like glass breaking.' To break the glass of the windows that stand as barriers between modes and sites of permanent transit suggests a substitute for home, particularly home for families whose individual members may have strikingly different memories of home due to histories of movement across borders. For the hybrid generation, the sound of the mother's voice is perhaps all that binds identity at times.

Perhaps the most sobering feature of *Permanent Transit's* documentation of the disorientations of expatriates, exiles, refugees, immigrants and itinerants is its remix feature that causes the images in all of the windows except the seventh and tenth, which contain text, to shuffle. New images appear; old images disappear. The same images may appear more than once within the grid structure of the windows. The user's ability to remix the videos and audio, paired at random by the project algorithm, suggests that meaning cannot be contained within linear temporality, rather it spills over into circular loops and is mapped onto multiple screens that suggest spatial and experiential relationships. According to Ghani, there is only a one in four chance that audio and video will align as they were recorded. Ultimately, images are interchangeable due to the transience of what they represent. Memories cannot be anchored to fixed locations of home and homeland, so that identity is diffused and subject to atrophy. The absolute presence of the images guarantees nothing, so that 'we are all in imminent danger of becoming merely ghosts in the machine' in Sobchack's terms (2005: 140). The Internet documentary mobilizes the database structure of the Internet and digital video's ability to loop endlessly to reconfigure documentary via temporal and relational dimensions not possible with analogue technologies that demand a linear structure.

Conclusions

As an interactive documentary, *Permanent Transit* harkens back to documentary's etymological origin in 'travelogue' (*documentaire*). The user's experience mimics the overlapping and easily confused memories of place of the experiences of travel that *Permanent Transit* documents. Comparably, *Goobalization* recognizes that the Internet is a part of the everyday landscape of a global environment that defines the frontier of the digital divide. Although some new media scholars dismiss the notion of interactivity as anything possible beyond user 'reactivity' within a vast network of choices, David Hogarth (2006: 127–29) argues that 'interactive technologies could extend and deepen modes of engagement' and that 'digital documentaries promise to make sense of the world in less restrictive ways', such as online productions that 'may allow new forms of dialogue with documentary form, undermining authoritative (and authoritarian) modes of communication along the way'. In some ways, his ideas extend ones made by Trinh T. Minh-ha before the popularization of digital video through consumer-grade cameras and the Internet through the World Wide Web. Trinh (1993: 90) asserts that there is no such thing as documentary, whether a category of material, a genre, an approach or a set of techniques, and that the old antagonism between names and reality needs to be incessantly restated because truth is produced between regimes of power. She argues that 'the present situation of critical inquiry seems much less one of attacking the illusion of reality as one of displacing and emptying out the establishment of totality' (Trinh 1993: 107). Interactive and database formats for Internet documentaries refigure conventions of collaborative and self-conscious documentary. The 'absolute presence' of new media suggests a potential for emphasis on relationality that differs from relations based on temporal and spatial coordinates to those based upon a database format of potentially endless recombinations. Transcending observational, expository, self-reflexive and interactive modes of documentary, database documentaries like *Goobalization* and *Permanent Transit* reposition audience and events in ways that exceed the discursive spaces that can be contained on a single screen, via conventions of direct sound or voice-over and, more significantly, within the linear progression of projected film or video or within the fixed site of installations. Database documentaries prompt recognition that meaning is always polyvocal, unstable and contested – always in a moment of transition towards movement and contestation.

Appendix: Undisclosed Recipients by festival content stream

Brief descriptions and links to all works can be found online at http://www.ithaca.edu/fleff07/selected_works.html

MAPS AND MEMES

North-South-East-West 1.0 by Graham Thompson (Metis Nation/Canada).

Surreal Scania by Robert Willim and Anders Weberg as Recycled Image Studio (Sweden).

Flag Metamorphoses compiled by Myriam Thyges (Germany).

Entre Deux by Donald Abad and Cyriac Allard (France).

METROPOLI

The Kabul Project by Mariam Ghani (USA).

Entropy and *The Network of No_des* by Jeebesh Bagchi, Mrityunjay Chatterjee, Iram Ghufuran, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta as Sarai Media Lab (India).

The Trustfiles by Nadine Hilbert and Gast Bouschet (Belgium).

Anima by Jim Grafsgaard and P.J. Tracy (USA).

SOUNDSCAPES

theLuteintheworLdtheLuteistheworLd by Henry Gwiazda (USA).

aux2mondes by collaborative of Nicolas Malevé, Pascal Méléandri, Chantal Dumas and Isabelle Massu (USA/France).

SameSameButDifferent v.02 by Thor and Runar Magnusson (Iceland).

Untitled (FLEFF) by Catherine Clover (UK/Australia).

PANIC ATTACKS

La Conchita mon amour by Christina McPhee (USA).

Goobalization by Eduardo Navas (USA).

{*transcription*} and [FALLUJAH. IRAQ. 31/03/2004] by Michael Takeo Magruder (USA/UK).

Pandemic Rooms by Jason Nelson (USA/Australia).

The Samaras Project by Dara Greenwald and Josh MacPhee (USA).

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