

Media Studios

semester 1 2015

The Art of Persuasion: poetics & politics in documentary

Liam Ward



Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry, Alison Klayman, 2012

How do we make documentary that is both political and poetic?

‘The first thing to remember is that there is, or rather should be, no cinema other than agit-cinema’ (Sergei Eisenstein, ‘The Montage of Film Attractions’, 1924).

description

‘[P]ersuasion, far from being opposed to aesthetics, depends on expressivity for its instantiation. I may choose to show the work of a Brakhage or a James Benning in a documentary context, in part because they push at non-fiction’s discursive boundaries, but far more canonical texts such as *Tongues untied* or *79 springtimes of Ho Chi Minh* will also suffice to demonstrate that documentary is, after all, the creative treatment of actuality, and that aesthetic innovation can induce heightened audience response.’ (Michael Renov, *Teaching documentary*, 2011.)

Grierson’s famous call that documentary is ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ contains many contradictions, and in recent decades many documentary theorists have subjected it to sustained critique – particularly in regard to the concept of ‘actuality’.

But one element that perhaps constitutes an elephant in the room for practitioners is that the most ‘Griersonian’ of films are sometimes notably underwhelming in terms of ‘creativity’. Some might call them dull. Unfortunately such films are sometimes considered as typifying the ‘political’ documentary. By their trail of expository voice-over and b-roll footage intercut with talking heads shall you know them.

There is a tendency to view poetics and persuasion as somehow mutually exclusive, or at least as two opposite poles on a spectrum. Bill Nichols, for example, implies such a tension in defining the ‘poetic mode’ among his documentary taxonomy:

‘The poetic mode is particularly adept at opening up the possibility of alternative forms of knowledge to the straightforward transfer of information, the prosecution of a particular argument or point of view, or the presentation of reasoned propositions about problems in need of solution. This mode stresses mood, tone, and affect much more than displays of knowledge or acts of persuasion. The rhetorical element remains underdeveloped.’ (*Introduction to Documentary*, 2001)

In this studio, you will be producing documentary pieces, fragments, sketches playing within formal constraints and exploring this apparent tension between rhetoric and aesthetics, between poetics and politics.

aims

- To reconsider traditional and contemporary debates around documentary form
- To explore persuasive and rhetorical techniques in media production
- To produce documentary material that references the historical world and posits truth claims in complex and multifaceted ways

What happens when things in the world, not us, is made a cause and the centre of telling stories?

‘Like a medieval bestiary, ontography can take the form of a compendium, a record of things juxtaposed to demonstrate their overlap and imply interaction through collocation. The simplest approach to such recording is the list, a group of items loosely joined not by logic or power or use but by the gentle knot of the comma’ (Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology or What It’s Like to be a Thing*, 2012)

description

There is a wave of new ideas in media and cinema studies loosely known as media materialism, speculative realism, or post digital media. This work is changing how we understand what the media is and our relation to it. These theories criticise media and cultural studies for placing us (the social, human, even language) at the centre of our understanding of what the world is. These theories also provide different ways for us to think about the role of narrative in what we do.

These new ideas are relevant when the internet and social media, combined with global environmental and cultural problems, change what making media is. These theories can provide us with a different vocabulary for how and what we make as media professionals. One way to do this is to make creative nonfiction because it addresses the world. A second is to learn how these ideas let us understand and work in digital media in more sophisticated ways.

These 'materialist' theories describe the way that things form relations that are more complex than we give them credit for, and how we are part of these relations too. They regard an object, person, even an idea as, equally, a thing. When this is understood our relationship to media, making, content, tools, stories, and ourselves changes.

This studio is relevant for anyone wanting to understand and play with network media, video, media theory, digital media, documentary, cultural studies, and philosophy. We will do theoretical readings that will be understood by making a variety of media artefacts, including online media and interactive documentary.

aims

Students will be required to purchase required software (OS X or PC) for US\$20 for this studio.

- to get an introduction to recent radical media theory
- learn how to make sophisticated online work that demonstrates complex ideas creatively
- learn and initiate ways of making media that are about our world and that are relevant across different media and stories

Ghosts and Space: Mediating Place

Rachel Wilson



Using a diverse range of media forms in what ways can the history and uniqueness of specific places and spaces be most affectively represented?

‘Sense of place refers to the more nebulous meanings associated with a place: the feelings and emotions a place evokes. These meanings can be individual and based on personal biography or they can be shared. Shared senses of place are based on mediation and representation. When we write ‘Calcutta’ or ‘Rio’ or ‘Manchester’ for instance, even those of us who have not been to these places have some sense of them – sets of meanings produced in films, literature, advertising, and other forms of mediation’ (Tim Cresswell, ‘Place’ in *The International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 2009)

description

Our experience of space and place is increasingly mediated. From the near ubiquitous use of google maps to wayfind through space, to the complex and highly imaginative game worlds we experience entirely via our computer screens, we use many media and multiple platforms to interact with and represent the space and place we inhabit.

Museums and galleries also regularly utilise notions of place as a formal device to help audiences access, understand and interpret their collections. Each place we inhabit has a rich and mysterious history requiring diverse interpretations and a range of forms to bring these to our attention.

In this studio we will examine how place is conceptualized and represented in many forms across a range of media and how these are applied in a variety of contexts such as galleries, museums, archives and augmented maps. We will do this by selecting two unique buildings located on the RMIT City Campus from which we will source our inspiration to produce a series of site-specific media artefacts. These may include photo essays, documentaries, narrative short films, soundscapes, performances, games, interactive stories etc.

The studio will also work collaboratively to develop the database/web interface/app that can best house and showcase all the variety of content produced. Throughout the semester we will work with architects, historians, archivists, museum experts, curators and expert media makers as we explore the everyday ‘ghost’ stories surrounding us.

aims

- to test, experiment, and play with a diverse set of media forms and platforms in order to represent place
- to work with a range of professionals across many disciplines as we search for, and create, stories about locations and environments
- to develop an understanding of how different theoretical concepts of place and space might be used to help audiences interpret their experiences of the world

It's Alive

Leo Berkeley



Gary Lund, 'Modern Living' — CC Licence: Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC 2.0)

What does live media offer as an experience that sets it apart from other media content and, from a production point of view, what are the creative possibilities and challenges involved with live media production?

‘The moment, inevitably, is what we remember and retain, what we possess of the screen and incorporate into ourselves and our worlds’

(Murray Pomerance, *The Horse Who Drank the Sky: Film Experience Beyond Narrative and Theory*, 2008)

description

Live production has been a central part of the media from its beginnings. All radio and television began this way. In the 21st century, live programs are making a comeback, seen as a point of difference for a medium like television as competition from emerging media increases. From sport, news, events and disaster coverage to a range of variety, reality and talk programs, a significant proportion of all media content can be defined as live, yet it can be argued that the specific features of this form are both neglected and misunderstood. ‘Live’ itself is a contested term, with the values of immediacy and authenticity it evokes contributing to its overuse and abuse. Through reading, viewing, discussion and practical experimentation, the studio will develop a working definition of live media that will then be applied to the more professionally-focused project work produced. Live media production often involves careful planning, considered risk-taking and particular forms of teamwork that will all be part of the studio. Both successful and unsuccessful live media examples will be analysed.

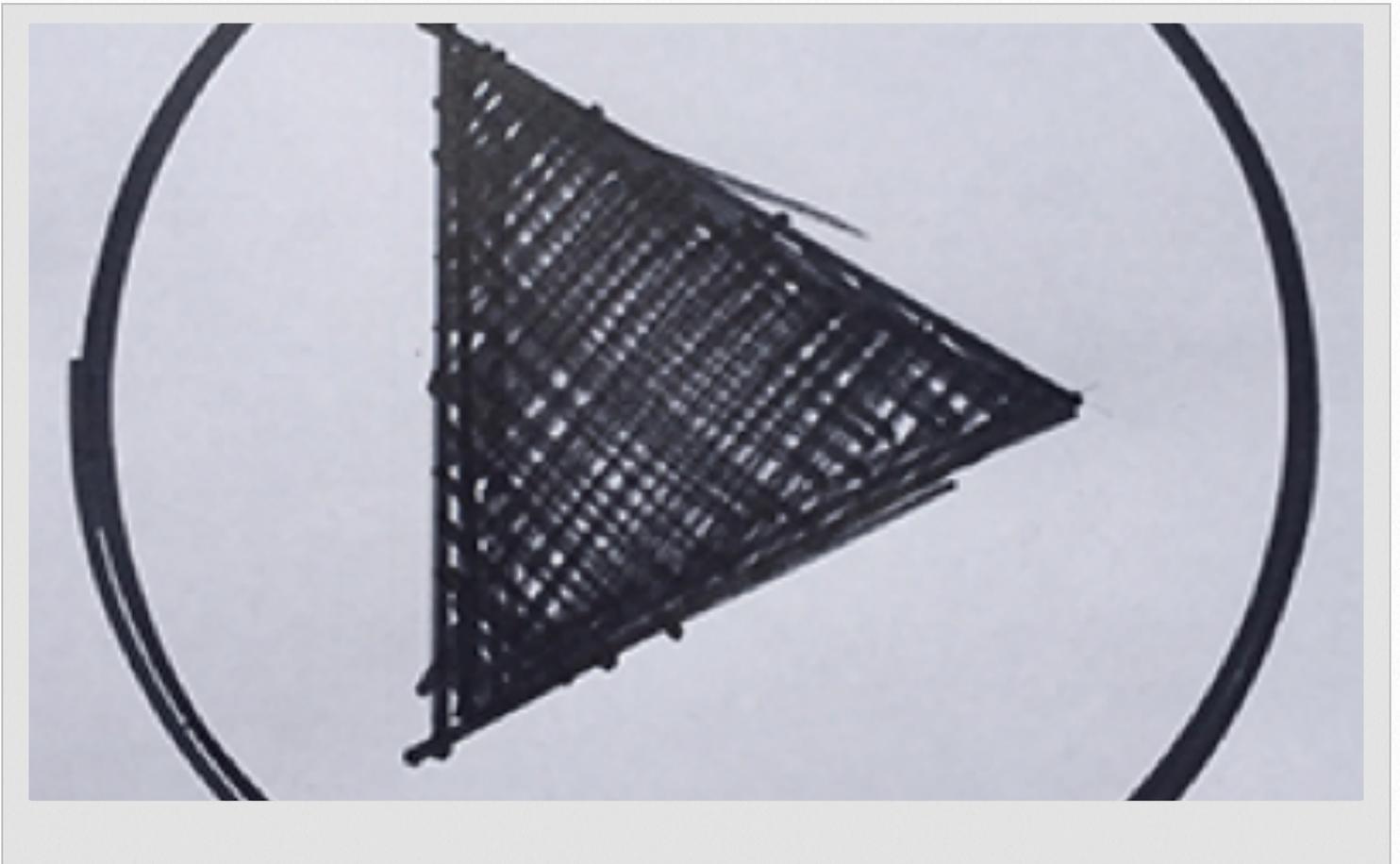
Liveness will mainly be explored in this studio through television but a range of other media will be considered, including radio, music and games. Theoretical perspectives on liveness will be examined and the knowledge gained from this will inform your practical work. Concepts such as the indeterminate, the performative and the unexpected will be considered as aspects of the live experience. There will be a range of projects produced through the studio that explore different aspects of live media and different forms of live production, culminating in a large scale live media event. You will be introduced to a range of established and emerging live media production approaches, with the multi-camera television studio being a principal focus. You will also make use of an online platform called Livestream for many of these projects.

aims

- To investigate the appeal of ‘liveness’ as a media experience
- To experiment with both established and new ways of making live media
- To design and execute a successful live media production

Online Video Experiments

Seth Keen



How can video, computers and the network be used to redefine online video practices?

‘Video is a bastard medium, however narrowly defined’ (Sean Cubitt, *Videography: Video Media as Art and Culture*, 1993)

description

Online video has gone through significant growth since the advent of videoblogging (2000) and the conception of YouTube (2005). Evidence of the changes that have occurred in online video practice is demonstrated in the success of the short-form video sharing service Vine (2013), which works with six-second loops. The current forecast is for online video to play an increasingly dominant role on the Web in varying forms.

The fast-paced development of online video emphasizes a requirement to learn the skills and knowledge required to work with online video now and in the future. One aspect that can be explored is new narrative and non-narrative forms. The way that material is constructed and collated together will have an effect on the distribution and viewing of online video.

In this experimental studio participants will be encouraged to take an innovative approach towards how a topic is represented to an audience. Design methodologies will be used to develop an understanding of how video, computers and the network can be utilised in online video production. A hands-on iterative design process of sketching, prototyping and reflection will be used to make discoveries.

The aim is to invent hybrid forms of narrative and non-narrative online video. Video works of differing scale and complexity will be produced individually and collaboratively.

Additional resources will include the use of personal mobile phones and apps.

aims

- to design and produce online video content.
- to work with the affordances of video, computers and the network.
- to learn how design methodologies can be utilised to adapt to changing media practices.

Room With a View: multi-platform radio as a site for collaborative production & distribution

Bruce Berryman

The screenshot displays a radio production interface. At the top, a blue waveform represents the audio signal. Below it is a timeline with a play button and time markers at 00:01:10.455 and 01:00:00.823. A 'Deselect marker' button is visible on the timeline. On the left, there is a list of members with an 'Add' button. The central 'Notes' panel shows a marker for 'Introduction' (69.524 - 212.707) posted by Zoe Annabel on Sun Oct 28 2012. The note text reads: 'Cassie and Bianca did a great job of the introduction as they identify the station, show and how long it will run for. This is simple 'housekeeping' that gives the listener some context and is also just a really good professional habit to get into when your presenting a show live on air. Consistently recapping may seem repedative, but as radio broadcasters, we need to keep in mind that listeners can tune in at any point in time and keeping them informed about who they are listening to is a priority.' Below the note are 'Edit Marker' and 'Delete Marker' options. On the right, a 'My Groups' sidebar lists filter categories: Presentation, Production / Panelling, Music, Interview, Transitions, Pre Recorded Segments, and Live Segments. A 'Markers' list includes: The good introduction theme, Faulty Towers, Faulty towers, Panelling, Fawltly Towers Intro, Introduction Theme, presenter Intros, and Faulty Towers tidbit.

How does radio change across multiple platforms in a period of media divergence?

‘Radio can be said to have certain characteristics, but the evidence suggests that radio is what history says it is: it has no essence since it has already taken, and continues to take, different forms. Radio is what it is at a given time, in a given context of use and meaningfulness’ (Tacchi, ‘The Need for Radio Theory in the Digital Age’, 2000)

description

The shift to digital modes of production and distribution and the emergence of hybrid sound-based forms has presented challenges that many believed radio would not survive. To do so, it has been forced to integrate a variety of changes from the relationship between audiences and producers, to the way radio practitioners collaborate to co-create content for multiple platforms.

Collaborative radio production or co-creation is not in itself a new concept. For ABC radio producer John Jacobs ‘the creation of media that involves a group has always had the potential to be a co-creative process’. Jacobs compares film and TV productions with their ‘higher budgets, larger editorial quality expectations and associated constraints and hierarchies of creative control’ with the ‘small teams, low budgets and fast turnaround of radio, leaving more room for flat structures and co-creative ways of working’. For Jacobs, collaborative or co-creative radio production is simply ‘good practice’.

In this studio you will produce a) live radio, the medium’s most visceral form, though the program Room With A View with our project partner 3RRR; b) content for online distribution across multiple platforms; and c) interviews and features.

Through these activities you will use technologies that enable co-located and distributed production to gain industry relevant skills in research, interviewing and narrative. Working with others on these projects will provide opportunities to develop understandings of the individual within the group and enablers in collaborative production.

You will be producing content for broadcast and online distribution, with the group having responsibility for a live to air program until July 2015. This requires a commitment of involvement by members of the studio to participate through face-to-face and distributed production processes for this period. This may influence your decision to participate in the studio.

aims

- Collaborate effectively in the production of radio content across multiple platforms
- Experience live-to-air radio production
- Create ancillary online content to extend the narrative

The Scene in Cinema

Paul Ritchard



Thomas (David Hemmings) and Jane (Vanessa Redgrave) in the park. *Blow-Up* (Antonioni, M. 1966)

This studio will investigate through research and practice the planning and production of a scene. The scope of the outcomes will be minimised to allow for the concentration of time and energy on refinement rather than the dissipation of one's work making a whole film.

Beyond the budget required to produce the scene/s each student will be required to have a laptop with Adobe CC and a hard-drive (at least a 100GB).

'When we see a film of 500 shots, we also see 500 films' (Raul Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema 2*, 2007).

description

This is not a studio where you make a film - it is a theoretical and reflective study of one aspect of filmmaking.

The construction of a scene, in terms of audio, the staging and fragmentation of action and performance in relation to camera position, camera angle, choice of focal length, image size, camera movement, and the planned assembly of each individual shot is the subject of minimal informed academic investigation.

The term "coverage" has, at the very least, two distinct meanings, with significantly divergent qualitative connotations. The first, quite simply, is precisely how a dramatic scene is covered by the camera. The other is closer to an overall notion of capturing a scene as scripted: "Is the scene covered?"; "Do we have sufficient coverage?" This second meaning has a purely functional connotation (closely associated with the notion of the supremacy of a script - or text - as blueprint) and explains why it is sometimes thought, in academic circles, to be less important than the term "decoupage". This studio's investigation will operate using the word's broadest possible meaning in relation to the cinema: the planned spatial and/or temporal fragmentation of a cinematic action or event (a scene) in relation to camera position, camera angle, choice of focal length, image size and camera movement, with a view to its (re) construction in post production. This, together with its implications for performance, lighting, production design and audio in general; and these elements' potential influence upon it. We would acknowledge also, that the process of decoupage conceivably begins with the overall structuring of a script or working text, as well as being planned and executed by a director and cinematographer, in concert with all on-set personnel. There can also be an (independent) decoupage of sound.

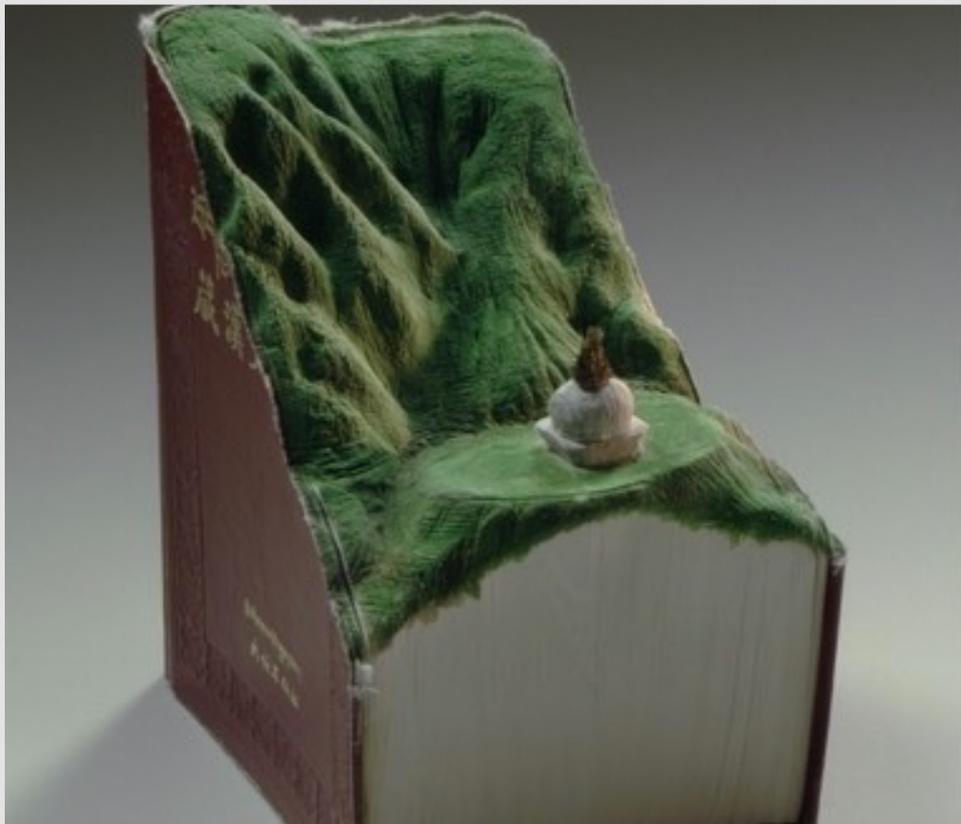
This studio will investigate "coverage", or "scene construction", from both an academic, theoretical perspective and a practical one. The outcome might contribute to a specific dimension in film appreciation, and to a better-informed approach to the "problems" of practical filmmaking. The students' findings would be neither predetermined, nor easily predicted. The fully documented and linked theoretical and practical research occurring in this studio has the potential to positively inform individual filmmaking practice and/or future academic research.

aims

- For students engaged in practical work to engage in original research in order to develop an appreciation of film craft in cinema history, and develop an informed theoretical perspective.
- For theory and aspiration to be tempered and informed by practical experience.
- For film craft itself to provide the tools for further theoretical and practical investigation and development.

The Story Lab: no limits narrative

Daniel Binns



Guy Laramée, Stupa (Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary). Altered book, inks. 2012. 14 x 15,5 x 18 cm (5.5 x 6 x 7 inches).

Story is no longer a single-platform, linear phenomenon. Does a change within a medium – or a switch to multiple media – necessitate a change in the story itself?

‘Stories twist and turn and grow and meet and give birth to other stories. Here and there, one story touches another, and a familiar character, sometimes the hero, walks over the bridge from one story into another’ Marcus Sedgwick, *Blood Red, Snow White* (2007).

description

Storytelling isn't what it used to be. In fact, stories themselves aren't what they used to be. The stories we tell seem to have similar characteristics: a list of main characters, conflict, enemies, a beginning, middle, and end, but the way we tell those stories has changed significantly. But does a change within a *platform* – or a switch to *multiple platforms* – necessitate a change in the narrative itself? What makes a story work? What makes it fail? These are some of the questions we'll be exploring – and trying to answer – in The Story Lab. Stories old and new will be examined and analysed, and the practice of storytelling, and methodologies of transmedia production, will be uncovered and evaluated. Students will create their own media objects, playing within a medium, or moving across multiple digital and non-digital platforms. The Story Lab is a place to try out new storytelling methods, and work together to push the limits of what narrative is, and to explore what it might be.

The key question of the studio is: **What is story now?**

aims

- Learn methods of storytelling and models of transmedia narrative.
- Put this learning into practice by working in teams to develop their own experimental and/or transmedia narratives across semester.
- Write about the changing nature of storytelling, through analysis of existing narratives, and through reflecting on the process of creating.