PERFORMING DOCUMENTARY

Orientations

Consider these two scenes. They are the first sequences from two recent works and they indicate some of the ways in which the boundaries of documentary and experimental, personal and political, essay and report have blurred considerably.

The first is from Sari Red (Pratibha Parmar, U.K., 1988). Throughout the sequence hard-to-identify, pulsating, perhaps spiritual music plays. A close-up shot of a woman fills the frame as she slowly turns to the right, away from the camera. Indian music accompanies the image as a male voice-over commences, “In his hotel room, the tourist dreams of the native quarter.” In a dark, unidentifiable space, flames leap up from a small wood fire. The voice continues, “In the native quarter, he becomes nostalgic for the vacuousness of the hotel room.” The Indian woman reappears. The camera tracks in slow motion to the right as she turns to the left, facing a European man who approaches her. The voice: “He has come for an entertainment which at every step risks becoming too intrusive, too threatening.” The man brushes her by, but they do not embrace. Instead they gaze at each other, perhaps unsure of each other’s reality. “He is the product of a culture that looks restlessly outside itself for its dream material.”

A radio beeping signal, similar to that used with the RKO logo, begins as the film cuts to the color image of a slowly revolving globe. Over the globe the film’s title appears.

These two scenes suggest something of the texture and tone of what may well be a distinct mode of documentary representation: performative documentary. This essay attempts to explore the distinctive qualities and issues that come associated with this highly suggestive, clearly fabricated, referential but not necessarily reflexive form of documentary filmmaking.

A New Mode in Town

Things change. The four modes of documentary production that presented themselves as an exhaustive survey of the field no longer suffice. The final mode, reflexive documentary, might be expected to return us to a modified version of the first, expository, mode, but this has not proven the case. Instead the reflexive mode as first conceived seems to have been an alternative mode, a mode that does not draw our attention to the formal qualities or political context of the film directly so much as deflect our attention from the referential quality of documentary altogether. Films suggesting this alternative mode may be called performative documentary, include: Sari Red and Khush (Pratibha Parmar, U.K., 1988, 1991), History and Memory (Rea Tajiri, United States, 1991), Unfinished Diary (Marilu Mallet, Canada, 1983), Our Marilyn (Brenda Longfellow, Canada, 1988), Sight Unseen (Jonathan Robinson, India/United States, 1990), Films Are Dreams (Sylvia Sensiper, Tibet/United States, 1989), I’m British But . . . . (Gurinder Chadha, U.K., 1989), Unhidden Voices (Pranja Parasher and Deb Ellis, U.S., 1989), A Song of Ceylon (Laleen Jayamane, Sri Lanka, 1985), Territories (Isaac Julien, Sankefa Film and Video Collective, U.K., 1984), Looking for Langston (Isaac Julien, U.K., 1991), Tongues United (Marlon Riggs, U.S., 1989), Forest of Bliss (Robert Gardner, India/

What such films have in common is a reflection of documentary from what has been its most commonsensical purpose—the development of strategies for persuasive argumentation about the historical world. If we place documentary within the framework proposed by Roman Jacobson's six aspects of any communication (expressive, referential, poetic, rhetorical, phatic, and metacommunicative), performative documentary marks a shift in emphasis from the referential as the dominant feature. This window-like quality of addressing the historical world around us yields to a variable mix of the expressive, poetic, and rhetorical aspects as new dominants. (Ever since Night Mail [Basil Wright and Harry Watt, Great Britain, 1936] and Turksib [Victor Turin, Soviet Union, 1929] documentary has exhibited these qualities; what is distinctive here is their function as an organizing dominant for the text.)

This shift blurs yet more dramatically the already imperfect boundary between documentary and fiction. It also makes the viewer rather than the historical world a primary referent. (These films address us, not with commands or imperatives necessarily, but with a sense of emphatic engagement that overshadows their reference to the historical world.)

One implication of this shift is the possibility of giving figuration to a social subjectivity that joins the abstract to the concrete, the general to the particular, the individual to the collective, and the political to the personal, in a dialectical, transformative mode. One risk, exemplified by the oxymoron "reality television"—meaning those shows like I Witness Video, Cops, and FBI: The Untold Story that are discussed in chapter 3—is the collapse of all questions of magnitude and social subjectivity into spectacle and a reactionary politics of law and order. This essay sets out to explore the consequences and implications of the performative mode of documentary representation in further detail.

A schematic summary of these five modes of documentary representation, suggesting how each attempt to provide redress for a deficiency in the previous mode while eventually presenting limitations of its own, would look like this (see table). Documentary arises, with Grierson and Dziga Vertov, in response to fiction.

### Performative Documentary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Deficiency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hollywood fiction</td>
<td>absence of &quot;reality&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expository documentary</strong> (1930s): directly address the real</td>
<td>overly didactic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observational doc.</strong> (1960s): eschew commentary, observe things as they happen</td>
<td>lack of history, context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactive doc.</strong> (1960s-’70s): interview, retrieve history</td>
<td>excessive faith in witnesses, naive history</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reflective doc.</strong> (1980s—formal and political): question documentary form, defamiliarize the other modes</td>
<td>too abstract, lose sight of actual issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Performative doc.</strong> (1980s—’90s): stress subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse</td>
<td>possible limitations: loss of referential emphasis may relegate such films to the avant-garde; “excessive” use of style</td>
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In relation to performative documentary, the first four modes can be more readily seen to share a common emphasis on the referent. Performative documentaries may make use of these other four modes by inflecting them differently. (None of these modes expels previous modes; instead they overlap and interact. The terms are partly heuristic and actual films usually mix different modes although one mode will normally be dominant.) Expository qualities may speak less about the historical world than serve to evoke or poetically engage this world. Questions of authority may diminish in favor of questions of tone, style, and voice. Reassemblage, for example, effects such a shift through its poetic cadences of image, music, text. Tongues United opens with the mesmerizing call of "brother to brother, brother to brother," accompanied by images of black men at play and in relation to one another, followed by graphic video footage of police brutality against young black men at Howard Beach, and concluding with a slow, balletic dance by Marlon Riggs himself, in which he moves across a darkened, undefined space, his hands above his head, searching and protective, until he ends in the arms of another black man, Essex Hamphill.

Observational techniques no longer give the impression of "capturing" the referential realm itself, the historical world as it is, so much as lend stress to qualities of duration, texture, and experience, often liberated from intimate association with social actors giving virtual performances according to the expressive codes familiar to us from fiction. Forest of Bliss, The Nuer, and Our Marilyn share this characteristic, bringing to the fore a vivid sense of temporal duration and spatial location without establishing
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in brackets, under suspension. Realism finds itself deferred, dispersed, interrupted, and postponed. These films make the proposition that it is possible to know difference differently. Realist epistemology comes into question and under siege. It is this suspension of representation as commonly practiced that authorizes Trinh to write, with breathtaking force against that inevitable turn within the realist imperative when things are meant to add up, gather themselves to a conclusion, come to the point, or penetrate to the heart of the matter:

Seeking to perforate meaning by forcing my entry or breaking it open to dissipate what is thought to be its secrets seems to me as crippled an act as verifying the sex of an unborn child by ripping open the mother's womb.

The disturbance to ethnography is epistemological in magnitude. It is: disturbance as old as art itself but it operates in unexpected and disconcerting ways when located within the heart of the discourses of sobriety among them documentary, and, among documentaries, ethnography more than most. What do we know and how do we know it? What counts as necessary and sufficient knowledge?

Such an epistemological shift poses questions of comprehension as well. To comprehend Tongues Untied, Surname Viet Given Name Nam, A Song of Ceylon, or Territories requires us to attend to the content of the form, to Hayden White’s phrase. This may render them precariously close to incomprehensible within the institutional framework of documentary practice today and the discourses of sobriety it emulates. The sense of incomprehension is not literal—such films can be understood it seems—but categorical: they seem comprehensible more as fictions or formal experiments than as documentaries.

In short, performative documentary takes up the challenge proposed by Teresa de Lauretis but in a more dispersed perspective: de Lauretis argues that the principal challenge for a feminist aesthetics is to construct a feminist viewer position or subjectivity regardless of the actual gender or subjectivity of the viewer. Performative documentary adopts a similar goal in relation to subjectivities that range from black or Pakistani British gay to that of the Spanish-speaking Chilean exile in francophone Montreal and the Afro-Caribbean children of the diaspora dislocated in contemporary Britain.

Performative documentary clearly embodies a paradox: it generates a distinct tension between performance and document, between the personal and the typical, the embodied and disembodied, between, in short, history and science. One draws attention to itself, the other to what it represents. One is poetic and evocative, the other evidential and referential in emphasis. Performative documentary does not hide its signifieds in the guise of a referent it effortlessly pulls from its hat. These films stress their own
tone and expressive qualities while also retaining a referential claim to the historical. They address the challenge of giving meaning to historical events through the evocations they provide for them. Performative documentary eschews the conventional plots adopted by most historians (tragedy, comedy, romance, and irony) and the conventional, realist notions of historicity they sustain as well.

Their structure more closely approximates that call for figurality made by Fredric Jameson in his discussion of Dog Day Afternoon. Figurality, like Raymond Williams's notion of "structures of feeling," is an emergent category, a possibility that takes form in a liminal moment prior to any empirical gesture toward verification: Figurality addresses "the need for social reality and everyday life to have developed to the point at which its underlying class structure becomes representable in tangible form...[T]he relationship between class consciousness and figurality, in other words, demands something more basic than abstract knowledge, and implies a mode of experience that is more visceral and existential than the abstract certainties of economics and marxian social science: the latter merely continue to convince us of the informing presence, behind daily life, of the logic of capitalist production." Jameson calls for a sense of class consciousness in "vivid and experiential ways" that moves us into the domain of culture where representation finds itself suspended among "personal fantasy, collective storytelling, narrative figurality." (These are precisely the modes combined in Marlon Riggs's Tongues United and Pratibha Parmar's Kaush, and, though strongly referential, such works are at a considerable remove from earlier efforts to represent the experiential such as Paul Tomkowicz, Streetcar Man [Roman Kroitor, 1954], or Drifters [John Grierson, 1999], where a far more classic realism holds sway.)

Performative documentaries embody, through their form, an existential situatedness that is a necessary precondition for the type of class consciousness described by Jameson.

But such films remain true to the paradox mentioned a moment ago; the referential aspect of the message that turns us toward the historical world is not abandoned. Such works then, though expressive, stylized, subjective, and evocative, which also constitute a fiction (un)like any other. The indexical bond, which can also prove an indexical bind for the documentary form, remains operative but in a subordinated manner.

In Sari Red, for example, the central "incident" in which three Pakistani women are run down on the sidewalk by a van containing several white males, retains its historical status, as does the murder in The Thin Blue Line, but its meaning is up for grabs. (This struggle over interpretation within the domain of the factual and historical has never been more evident, or fateful, than in the successful defense of the four white police officers who brutally beat Rodney King on the streets of Los Angeles. The first jury's acceptance of the defense's interpretation makes vividly clear how crucial questions of viewer and frame, or context, are.)

Sari Red locates the incident, associatively, within a nexus of class, race, nation, and memory, and the film's poetic/expressive/conative work is less directed at proving what "really happened" than in reframing what has been remembered, contextualizing it within a situated response of memory and collective affirmation. Sari Red seeks to promote a social subjectivity within the viewer that remains unattached to a logical explanation, a way of accounting for this brutal event that reduces the existential and visceral to the abstract and analytic. Sari Red departs from the search for a code, a master narrative, an explanatory principle within which to subsume the particular to the general. Instead it holds to the particular, the historicality of history, while rendering it within a framework that refuses to fetishize the mystery of the unrepeatable, the past and done, leaving it frozen in a timeless moment of mythology. This film, like other performative works, makes its target an ethics of viewer response more than a politics of group action or an analysis of the ideology of the subject. Its very form exemplifies such an ethic in its own responsiveness to what has been, and been done.

Unlike reflexive documentary, performative documentary uses referentiality less as a subject of interrogation than as a component of a message directed elsewhere. Performative work may have a defamiliarizing effect, in the spirit of the Russian formalists' notion of astranenie, or of Brecht's concept of alienation, but less in terms of acknowledging the constructed nature of the referential message and more in prompting us to reconsider the underlying premises of documentary epistemology itself. Performative documentary attempts to reorient us—affectionately, subjectively—toward the historical, poetic world it brings into being.

This shift parallels the notions in Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics that give priority to the experiential quality of an individual's relation to signs. What Peirce calls the "logical interpretant" might correspond to the tendency of performative documentary to dispose us to see our relation to the world anew, in less abstract, overly conceptualized categories. Peirce argued that the final effect of a sign is to dispose us toward action modified as a result of the experience of the sign, or, here, text. This is a level of engagement that serves to "make sense" of the world rather than to impose a pure logic. To defamiliarize a previous relation opens the possibility for a change of habit, a transformation of awareness, a "raised" consciousness in those visceral and existential terms that are part of figuration.

Evocation

The shift of emphasis toward the poetic, expressive, and rhetorical also reconfigures questions of validation. The process of identifying a problem
... the appearance of a people and their surroundings, their technology and physical way of life; their ritual activities and what beliefs these signify; the quality of the interpersonal communication, and what it tells of their relationships; the psychology and personalities of individuals in the society; the relation of people to their environment—their knowledge of it, use of it, and movement within it; the means by which the culture is passed on from one generation to another; the rhythms of the society, and its sense of geography and time; the values of the people; their political and social organization; their contacts with other cultures; and the overall quality of their world view.14

For MacDougall, this evocative potential seemed linked to a potential shift in epistemology, or at least a radical reconceptualization of the terms and conditions of ethnographic film so that it would no longer be seen simply as a colorful adjunct to written ethnography but offer a distinct way of seeing, and knowing, of its own. But MacDougall does not insist on this rupture. There is the lingering sense that the texture of life contributes to an economy and logic that are still fundamentally referential and realist. MacDougall also evokes a generic oneness ("the overall quality of their world view") which leaves the position, affiliation, and affective dimension of the filmmaker's own engagement to the periphery. Performative documentary seeks to evoke not the quality of a people's worldview but the specific qualities that surround particular people, discrete events, social subjectivities, and historically situated encounters between filmmakers and their subjects. The classic anthropological urge to typify on the basis of a cultural identity receives severe modification. (MacDougall's own films exhibit these performative qualities, to a greater extent than this quote, and may attempt to persuade traditional ethnographers to give greater attention to film but in a way that leaves traditional assumptions essentially intact.)

The break with the tradition of referentiality and realism that Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, and Jean Rouch, among others, pioneered receives more forceful articulation in Stephen Tyler's call for a postmodern ethnography. (Unfortunately, Tyler's call addresses written ethnography; he seems unaware of how much his call has already been answered, but largely outside the domain of the ethnographic discipline itself.) Tyler writes, "[Evocation] defamiliarizes commonsense reality in a bracketed context of performance, evokes a fantasy whole abducted from fragments, and then returns participants to the world of commonsense transformed, renewed and sacralized."15

Since "sacralize" does not appear in the Oxford English Dictionary, I can only surmise that it is Tyler's attempt to convey the sense of spiritual renewal that evocation carries for him, more than the sense of altered consciousness and social transformation it holds for me. What does stand out in Tyler's call is the move away from empiricism, realism, and narrative;

and proposing a solution no longer has operative force. Our assessment and engagement, then, is "less in terms of [the message's] clarity or its truth value with respect to its referent than in terms of its performative force—
a purely pragmatic consideration."12 Questions of pragmatics shift the
dominant from the work's referential relation, its indexical binding to frag-
ments of the historical world, to its relation to its viewers. We are what such
films refer to.

Stress falls on the evocative quality of the text rather than on its repre-
sentationalism. Realism, of course, is quite capable of drawing upon expressive
qualities. Subjective camera movement, impressionist montage, dramatic
lighting, compelling music: such elements fit comfortably within a realist
style but, in documentary, they are traditionally subordinated to a docu-
mental logic, which is governed, in turn, by the protocols of the discourses
of sobriety.13 Expressive qualities color, inflect, flavor, but seldom determine
the overall organization of the text or the viewer's overall response to it.

Performative documentary, on the other hand, frees these expressive
elements from their subordination to a logic. Such documentaries can
therefore be more iconic than indexical, being less heavily dependent on
an indexical authentication of what is seen and heard. (The Thin Blue Line
offers vivid examples, perhaps none more so than the slow-motion flight
of the vanilla ice-cream malt that sails through the night air in some of the
re enacted of the crime.) Performative films rely much less heavily on
argument than suggestion; they do not explain or summarize so much as
imply or intimate. In Reassembling, for example, Trinh insists that she will
not speak about but only "speak nearby." She is good to her word when we
see, for example, an elderly man weavine in a village. No comment
occurs to anchor this "ethnographic detail": instead images of weaving are
themselves woven into a montage that evokes a sense of rhythm and quality
of life without attempting to penetrate, isolate, or conceptualize what we
see. In films like Reassembling or A Song of Ceylon, we observe social actors
who do not coalesce into characters (that fusion of actor and role that gains
stability and psychological depth over the course of the [realist] narrative).
In others works like Films Are Dreams or Tongues United, social actors take
on the narrative coherence of a character; they approximate once more
those forms of virtual performance that are documentary's answer to pro-
fessional acting. But in either case, the stress is on the referential turn
ward, not a historical domain, expressively enriched, but an experiential
domain, expressively substantiated. It is the difference between description
and evocation.

Some time ago David MacDougall offered eloquent testimony to the
capacity of ethnographic film to describe everyday life and lived experience
in a way distinct from written texts. This quality seemed well worth cultivating
in MacDougall since it made use of film to render the texture of experience
with such compelling detail. As he put it, film can render
his is a call for a defamiliarizing mode of expression that embodies a sense of a world brought into being between text and viewer that is remarkably close to the pioneering theories of Sergei Eisenstein.16

Genealogy

Performative documentary, like reflexive documentaries, does not propose a primary object of study beyond itself but instead gives priority to the affective dimensions struck up between ourselves and the text. It proposes a way of being-in-the-world as this world is itself brought into being through the very act of comprehension, "abducted from fragments," as Stephen Tyler puts it. Using the "dynamite of a tenth of a second" celebrated by Walter Benjamin, performative documentary bursts the contemporary prison world (of what is and what is deemed appropriate, of realism and its documentary logic) so that we can go traveling within a new world of our own creation.

Films like Tongue Untied step beyond thick interpretation, beyond problems and their "solution," beyond explanation or spectacle. Handsworth Song, History and Memory, Sari Red, Of Great Events and Ordinary People, Unhidden Voices and Sights Unseen all find forms of historical horror that the text then surpasses by giving form to memory and social subjectivity, to remembrance and transformation. Such works offer figuration to alternative forms of social subjectivity and the human self—beyond the individual and his or her conscience, beyond the subject of Althusserian ideology, beyond the manifestations of an unconscious that reenacts its tales of a family romance. Such figuration possesses a dialectical quality. It moves between the particular, with its density and texture, and the general, with its power to name and conceptualize. It circulates between the body, with the knowledge resident within it, and history, where knowledge and power contend. Location, body, self: these elements of a world we thought we knew turn strange and unfamiliar in the landscape of performative documentary.

Among the genealogical precursors to performative documentary are:

1. Early Soviet cinema, including the work of Dovzhenko, Eisenstein, and Vertov, which developed a remarkable array of techniques to defamiliarize everyday perception and yet retain a vivid sense of historical consciousness.

2. Those early expository documentaries that were as much poetic as argumentative, such as Night Mail (Basil Wright and Harry Watt, Great Britain, 1936), Turksib (Vicor Turin, Soviet Union, 1929), Song of Ceylon (Basil Wright, Ceylon/Great Britain, 1934), The Bridge (Joris Ivens, The Netherlands, 1928), Listen to Britain (Humphrey Jennings, Great Britain, 1942), Louisiana Story (Robert Flaherty, United States, 1948), or The River (Pare Lorentz, United States, 1937). Such films gave the impression of discovering mystery and wonder in the world around us and resorted to poetic rhythm, montage, visual rhyme, and musical incantation to awaken such wonder in the viewer.

3. The avant-garde tradition that mediated between the "two materialisms" (of the cinematic apparatus itself and historical materialism), including the work of Godard, Jan Jost, and David Rimmer.17

4. The avant-garde tradition of autobiography that coincides in many aspects with the confessional quality of a number of performative documentaries, including Jonas Mekas, Kenneth Anger, Maya Deren, and, above all, Stan Brakhage.18

5. The ethnopoetics of Jean Rouch, who has consistently argued for, and embodied, a style of filmmaking that does not so much combine the subjective and objective poles of traditional ethnography as sublate them into a distinct form.19

6. The tradition of magical realism, specifically in the form discussed by Fredric Jameson, where it serves as an alternative to the postmodern nostalgia film. Magical realism, in this perspective, eschews the representation of the past by images and simulacra for a "different kind of past that has (along with active visions of the future) been a necessary component for groups of people in other situations in the projection of their praxis and the energizing of their collective project."20

7. Recent interactive and reflexive documentary (Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, Cane Toads, Roses in December, and The Thin Blue Line), where moments of performativity nest within the domain of a different dominant.21 Performative documentary could be considered a reversal of priorities, or dominant, in this case, from a referential emphasis to a more expressive one.

8. Those recent works discussed in chapter 4 (The Body Beautiful, Measures of Distance, History and Memory, and so on) which combine elements of autobiography and the poetic in a documentary form to which a situated, embodied sense of political testimonial has been added. (What these films suggest is the significant degree to which certain avant-garde and documentary traditions have become blurred into a more singular enterprise, affording a perspective from which much of what we have called documentary might be reconsidered as experimental and much of what we have called experimental or avant-garde might be reconsidered as documentary.)

In addition to this cinematic genealogy, both a historiographic and a linguistic model provide suggestive affinities. Performative documentary moves toward those forms of historical explanation described by Hayden White as formist and contextualist but in a far more vividly dialectical fashion.22

Formist explanations favor the unique characteristic of situations and events; stress falls to "variety, color and vividness" (White, 14). The ten-
dency is toward dispersal rather than integration, with lower regard for conceptual precision than other alternatives. "But such historians usually make up for the vacuity of their generalizations by the vividness of their reconstructions of particular agents, agencies, and acts represented in their narratives" (15). (And, I would add for performative documentary, the vividness of their evocation of the subjectivities that accompany these agents, agencies, and acts.)

Contextualist explanations also give low priority to generalization. They set events within a context but stop short of deriving laws, governing principles, or prevailing ideas as the mechanistic and organicist forms do. Contextualist historiography straddles the terrain between "the radically dispersive tendency of Formist and the abstractive tendencies of Organicism and Mechanism." (18). It settles for a relative integration of trends or general characteristics of a period or epoch. As White puts it, contextualism favors tacit rules for linking specific historical occurrences to a more inclusive domain: "these rules are not construed as equivalent to the universal laws of cause and effect posulated by the Organicist. Rather, they are construed as actual relationships that are presumed to have existed at specific times and places, the first, final, and material causes of which can never be known." (18).

Though sharing the preference for the local, the concrete, and the evocative, performative documentary also generally insists on the dialectical relationship between precisely this kind of richly and fully evoked specificity and overarching conceptual categories such as exile, racism, sexism, or homophobia. These latter are seldom named and never described or explained in any detail. They are tacitly evoked through juxtaposition and montage (Howard Beach footage in Tongues United, Chinese military occupation of Tibet in Films Are Dreams, police "riot control" in Handsworth Songs, for example), but the texts do not insist on specific linkages or explanations. This they leave, to a significant degree, to the viewer. (It is we who must discover that the specific instances we see share a family resemblance characterized as racism, sexism, and so on.)

Performative texts thus avoid both the reductionism inherent to theory and the vacuous obsession with detail inherent to formism and contextualism. They are more properly, and fully, dialectical than a more abstract, theoretical account of dialectics could be. And as a dialectical representation, performative documentary addresses the fundamental question of social subjectivity, of those linkages between self and other that are affective as fully as they are conceptual.

A useful genealogical model here might be the ancient Greek use of the middle voice. What seems most suggestive is the way in which the middle voice was originally positioned in relation to the active voice, with the passive voice serving a subordinate function. Middle voice addressed those situations in which an action took place within a subject or effect the nature of the subject, situations where the action envelopes the subject and

the subject is immersed in the action. In active voice a subject, already constituted anterior to an action, acts (she persuades her friend). In middle voice the subject and her subjectivity is itself constituted in the process of acting (she obeyed her friend; in Greek, "persuade" and "obey" are the same verb used in the active and middle voices respectively).

The middle voice cuts through the dilemma constructed by the ancient debate of whether we are fully developed mortals responsible for our actions or the passive objects of divine activity. Middle voice is something of a linguistic response to the sense we may have that we are "immersed in the action in such a way that, at least at times, 'doer' and 'done to' become inadequate categories, drawing a sharp line, legislating a boundary, where none is felt. . . ."

Social subjectivity would link not only the doer and the done to, in self-constituting action, but the state of "doer/done to" experienced by one and that experienced by others. Social subjectivity, like the social imaginary that it transcends, is a category of collective consciousness. It exceeds or surpasses the monadic desire by a preconstituted subject underpinning the dynamics of self/other, us/their dichotomies. Social subjectivity evokes a discourse of visceral, existential affinity. Social subjectivity transforms desire into popular memory, political community, shared orientation, and utopian yearning for what has not yet come to be. Like Marlon Riggs's dance upon a darkened stage in Tongues United, or the latent, both homoerotic and political energy of the sleeping, hammock-held sailors of Battle Ship Potemkin, this form of subjectivity gives physical embodiment to the power of collective, self-transformative action.

A Shift in Praxis: From Unity to Affinity

Performative documentary takes up those strategic locations called for by the shifting terms of identity politics and a postmodern disposition for cyborg affinities. By relying on a dispersed, associative, contextualizing, but also social and dialectical mode of evocation, performative documentary is a particularly apt choice in a time when master narratives, like master plans, are in disrepute. They invoke an epistemology of the moment, of memory and place, more than of history and epoch. An altered emphasis, an alternative epistemology, but one that remains open, teleonomic and social. What Fredric Jameson describes as the "power and positive value of situation-specific thinking and speaking" could have been written with performative documentary itself in mind:

... dialectical thinking and language—or a properly dialectical code as such—projects a synthesis of both, that is to say a thinking which is abstract and situation-specific all at once (or which, to use Marx's far more satisfactory formulation, is capable of "rising from the abstract to the concrete").

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But reality-transforming, affinity-building qualities remain at a premium. Without those aspects of performative documentary that evoke questions of magnitude, of a felt tension between representation and represented, evocation will collapse back into the solipsistic terms of a privatized consciousness. Social subjectivity will remain beyond the horizon of a text that affirms the personal vision and subjective experience of individual, poetic consciousness but little more. This question of magnitude as a domain of social subjectivity and historical engagement is what distinguishes performative documentary from a large portion of the traditional film avant-garde with which it otherwise shares so much.

And yet the passage from a transcendental but individual consciousness to a dialectical and social one is further compounded by the absence of a specifically political frame within which performative documentary might be received. The formalists' claim that there is no "there" there becomes joined to the Marxists' lament that there is no Left left. This is not quite true, though. It would be more accurate to say that the Left has taken a dispersed, decentered form, and that its absence is only perceptible when what we seek is the traditional Left of vanguard parties, united front politics, and a correct line. Political affinities are already dispersed across a wide field of organizations and issues; they overlap and coalesce in unpredictable and unstable ways. There is great cause for optimism in this movement toward a new magnitude of political organization and process, to which performative documentary contributes significantly, but an aura of nostalgic loss and misrecognition may also loom. This is, after all, a time of multinational if not global capitalism, of a new world order of command and control, of interactive but hierarchically organized communications, of a "late" capitalism that continues to discover ways to transform and perpetuate itself.

As this economic lion, or perhaps paper tiger, grows larger and larger, more globally interconnected and less locally responsible, the contrast between its power and scope and the apparent power of identity politics, makeshift alliances, and cyborg affinities may seem dwarfed out of all proportion. This is a perception that performative documentary sets out to revise. By restoring a sense of the local, specific, and embodied as a vital locus for social subjectivity, performative documentary gives figuration to and evokes dimensions of the political unconscious that remain suspended between an immediate here and now and a utopian alternative.

When, in Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), Adelaide Norris asks Zella Wylie about the political efficacy of united-front politics, Wylie offers a hypothetical choice: Which would you rather see, one big, powerful lion or five hundred mice pounce through the door? Wylie opts for the mice: "Five hundred mice can do a lot of damage." Performative documentary is on the side of the mice.