



Documentary Film

by Richard C. Bartone

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The queer community has aggressively used documentary film to resurrect historical memory and to permit the marginalized to bear witness, as well as to build an image base that reflects our diversity and counters distorted and misleading representations.

The availability of relatively inexpensive, lightweight, and high-quality video equipment has contributed to these efforts as queer documentarians have challenged the conventional forms and aesthetic principles of a long documentary tradition. Documentary entries at the major United States lesbian and gay film festivals have increased at a phenomenal pace over the last ten years.

The number and quality of documentaries being produced spawned the yearly QueerDOC Festival, which began in 1998 in England. Documentary film is an indispensable media for glbtq people to re-evaluate and reposition themselves in different contexts.

Direct Cinema and the Birth of Gay Documentaries

Lesbian and gay documentaries were unheard of until the release of Ken Robinson's *Some of Our Best Friends* in 1971. Robinson, a student at the University of Southern California, found activists willing to speak and, in most cases, be seen on camera (albeit sometime in shadow), including gay protesters at a psychiatric convention, a man entrapped by vice squad ploys, and representatives of a New York homophile group.

But it was not until 1977 that two documentaries, Arthur Bressan's *Gay U.S.A.* and Peter Adair's *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*, received wide attention and broad distribution. Both documentaries have been praised as excellent examples of "direct cinema," a term used by documentarians since the early 1960s to indicate minimal intrusion by filmmakers in the interview process and on the narratives that unfold.

Word Is Out took six people--who constituted the Mariposa Film Group--three years to make. The filmmakers chose 26 people as subjects after "pre-interviewing" 200 people across America. With one stationary camera directed at the interviewees, who never shifted their positions, the film records narratives of self discovery, of discrimination, of ways to cope in a homophobic society, and of living an open life. It is a startling document of national gay identity.

Gay USA forged an even stronger sense of a national civil rights movement. Bressan sent film crews to six cities to capture gay pride marches and activities over one weekend. It is the first queer documentary to see politics as an integral part of queer celebration, and a more far-reaching film than *Word Is Out* in terms of the number of people interviewed and the range of questions posed to them.

In the 1990s documentaries such as Karen Kiss and Paris Poirier's *The Pride Divide* (1997) and Lucy Winer and Karen Eaton's *Golden Threads* (1999) also communicated a collective sense of lesbian and gay identity,



Director of cinematography Robert Shepard (left) and filmmaker Arthur Dong on location for the documentary *Licensed to Kill* at Robertson Correctional Unit, Abilene, Texas. 1996. Photograph by Angie Rosca. Courtesy Arthur Dong.

but with a more complicated visual style and dramatic structure. *The Pride Divide* contrasts the differences and conflicts between gay men and lesbians in their movement toward civil rights. Lesbians in *Golden Threads* celebrate their commonality at a retreat as the film reveals the difficulties they had defining their identity in the 1940s and 1950s.

Producing and Distributing Queer Documentaries

Most queer documentaries are independent productions. In the 1970s and 1980s many documentarians undertook the time consuming and arduous task of funding their own films. As queer documentaries started achieving visibility and acclaim, however, funding opportunities appeared from non-commercial outlets.

The Public Telecommunications Act of 1988 mandated that Congress allocate funds to PBS "for programming that involves creative risks and addresses the needs of under served audiences." With these monies PBS set up the Independent Television Service, which funded in whole or part such important documentaries as Arthur Dong's *Coming Out under Fire* (1995), Meema Spadola's *Our House: A Very Real Documentary about Kids of Gay and Lesbian Families* (1999), Debra Chasnoff's *It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School* (1996), *The Pride Divide* (1997), Tom Shepard's *Scout's Honor* (2000), *Golden Threads* (1999), Eric Slade's *Hope Along the Wind: The Life of Harry Hay* (2001), and two four-part series, *Positive: Life with HIV* (1995) and *The Question of Equality: Gay and Lesbian Struggle Since Stonewall* (1995).

ITS funded films are usually shown first at film festivals and sometimes move to brief runs at art film houses before airing on PBS nationwide. Although ITS funds are vital to the continuing production of queer documentaries, they impose some restrictions. For example, most films produced by ITS must fit a sixty minute time slot. This has not deterred filmmakers happy to advance beyond festival venues and reach a different and larger audience, but it has to some extent shaped the form of their work.

In Canada the National Film Board has funded such important works as David Adkin's *Out: Stories of Lesbian and Gay Youth* (1994) and Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie's *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives* (1992). Unlike with PBS, a sixty minute time limit is rarely a prerequisite. The NFB also has a tough skin in deflecting attacks by politicians. They have been accused of making queer films that "attack the traditional family," but have never backed down in funding documentaries or supporting their distribution on CBC.

PBS is much more susceptible to the outcries of politicians. The network frequently refuses to air documentaries and sometimes individual affiliates refuse to broadcast films approved by the national network. For example, PBS executives refused to air Kelly Anderson and Tami Gold's *Out at Work* (1997), a documentary about workforce discrimination, ostensibly because the filmmakers received funds from labor unions, even though many PBS programs receive funds from corporations. Many PBS stations refused to air Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1989), on homosexuality in the black community.

The Historical Compilation Documentary

One of the largest documentary genres, the historical compilation film, has permitted queer filmmakers to take control of how they are represented by resurrecting and reconfiguring history. Films such as Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg's *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community* (1986) and John Scagliotti, Janet Baus, and Dan Hunt's *After Stonewall* (1999) vitally document the strength of the queer community. These films permit glbtq people to make initial connections with their past or to re-think their relationship to past events and places.

Historical compilation documentaries comb numerous sources for actuality footage, sometimes referred to as archival footage, to reconstruct history. Actuality footage is film and video shot for another purpose and collected by researchers, as opposed to "originally shot" footage filmed by a documentary unit specifically for that project.

Actuality footage comes from individuals, local and national television news archives, newsreel archives, photographic still archives, public and private organizations, medical research institutions, glbtq community centers, and educational films. The unique characteristic of a compilation documentary is that it selects and assimilates footage from disparate sources to construct a vision of the past.

Most compilation documentaries rely to varying degrees on eyewitnesses to past events. Their testimony becomes a dialogue with and from the past. Eyewitnesses serve a pivotal role in making actuality footage come alive through historical memory. When directors Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman located eyewitnesses for *Paragraph 175* (2000), an investigation of homosexuality in Hitler's Germany, the actuality footage, some never before seen and some familiar, took on new levels of meaning as a result of eyewitness testimony.

The content of compilation documentaries varies, including sweeping historical chronicles, biographical profiles, representations of one historical event, and portraits of places central to queer life. Documentarians mine the past to expand historical memory. Paris Poirier's *Last Call at Maud's* (1993) and Peter L. Stein's *The Castro* (1997) both cover decades but they configure the world from the perspective of a specific place and the people who populated those environments, providing history with a more personal narrative.

Queer compilations continue to find creative ways to express history. In Jeff Dupre's *Out of the Past* (1998), a seventeen-year-old student starting a Gay-Straight Alliance goes in search of queer history, only to discover that oppressive forces prevent student access to historical knowledge. In this film, a student unearthing knowledge of the past becomes the catalyst for sequences constructed with actuality footage.

The Biographical Compilation Documentary

In 1984 Robert Epstein and Richard Schmiechen's *The Times of Harvey Milk* won an Academy Award for Best Feature Length Documentary, thus signaling a broader acceptance of queer narratives by the film community. This outstanding documentary also set a very high standard for biographical compilation films.

The Times of Harvey Milk made extensive use of actuality footage from news organizations to reconstruct Milk's life and his tragic death and the events that followed. But the film is most impressive in the way it strategically employs the testimony of five eyewitnesses, with different backgrounds and from different sections of society, to convince audiences that Harvey Milk was a leader of all the people of San Francisco.

Biographical compilations vary in their structure and the amount of actuality footage utilized, but all serve the crucial function of placing an individual in the historical record.

Other notable biographical compilations include Richard Schmiechen's *Our Minds: The Story of Dr. Evelyn Hooker* (1992), Jerry Aronson's *The Life and Times of Allen Ginsberg* (1993), Monte Bramer's *Paul Monette: The Brink of Summer's End* (1994), Ada Gay Griffin and Michelle Parkerson's *A Litany for Survival: The Life of Audre Lorde* (1996), and Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir's *The Brandon Teena Story* (1997). Slade's *Hope Along the Wind: The Life of Harry Hay* (2001), makes extensive use of actuality footage from disparate sources.

Interrogating the Image

Queer documentaries have rigorously interrogated fictional film images of mainstream British and American movies that claim to represent our lives and behavior. Interrogation reveals the nature and pattern of negative representations of glbtq people and documents any shift toward positive portrayals.

The best known of this kind of documentary is Robert Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's *The Celluloid Closet*

(1995), based on the book of the same title by Vito Russo. The film is an historical overview of Hollywood's negative construction of homosexuality and the homosexual.

Andrea Weiss takes the same approach with mainstream British films in *A Bit of Scarlet* (1996). In *Dry Kisses Only* (1990) filmmakers Jane Cottis and Kaucyila Brooke add comedy to the deconstruction of classical Hollywood films by re-editing scenes to bring out a lesbian subtext and satirizing the seriousness gay studies brings to interrogating the film image.

Homo Promo (1991), curated by Jenni Olson, investigates the ways Hollywood sold queer people to the general public in the period from 1956 to 1976. By editing together film trailers and promotional material that dealt with homosexuality and deviant sexual behavior, the film documents how Hollywood depicted the homosexual as self hating, disturbed, and dangerous.

Documentarians have also dissected mainstream fictional films to steer viewers to queer subtexts and queer expressions in the behavior and speech of "straight" characters. These documentaries analyze for the queer community images that some lesbians and gay men had already appreciated and appropriated.

Mark Rappaport pioneered this approach in *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (1994) and *The Silver Screen: Color Me Lavender* (1997). In the former film Rappaport meticulously isolates and juxtaposes the words, phrases, and glances of Hudson that suggest some of the characters he plays are queer and that Hudson himself is leading an illusionary life. One extensive section of *The Silver Screen* argues for a homosexual subtext in Walter Brennan's relationships with John Wayne and Gary Cooper in several Westerns.

Documenting AIDS

Documentaries played a central role in demystifying HIV/AIDS by presenting the faces and bodies of people with AIDS and letting them speak in their own voices. Peter Adair's *Absolutely Positive* (1991), Kermit Cole's *Living Proof: HIV and the Pursuit of Happiness* (1993), and Ellen Spiro and Marina Alvarez's *(In)visible Women* (1991), employ the techniques of direct cinema, letting narratives unfold with nominal editing and minimizing questions by the interviewer.

The camera in Juan Botas and Lucas Platt's *One Foot on a Banana Peel, the Other Foot in the Grave* (1993) simply records a group of men in an intravenous medication room as they talk about surviving.

These AIDS documentaries present diverse voices, as people with AIDS discuss symptoms, medical treatments, and the ways they cope with the disease and a homophobic society. Another type of AIDS documentary, the memorial film, also tells individual stories. Robert Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt* (1990) is the best known of the memorial documentaries.

Documentaries such as Jay Corcoran's *Life and Death on the A-List* (1996) and Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman's *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* (1993) graphically depict HIV ravaging the body. In *Silverlake Life*, Tom Joslin and Mark Massi--both HIV positive--carry a video camera everywhere they go, unflinchingly chronicling each other's activities as AIDS racks their bodies. *Silverlake Life* is gut-wrenching as we watch intimate moments of suffering and the horrible conditions of death.

The unrelenting exposure of the victim speaking and the body displayed in AIDS documentaries led Derek Jarman to alter radically the representation of AIDS in his film *Blue* (1993). Blind during the production of *Blue*, Jarman mounts an auditory assault on the audience over one solid blue image for 75 minutes, privileging the vision of the mind's eye over sight. Jarman believed representational images distracted viewers from identifying on an experiential level with the conditions of living with AIDS.

Jarman's aural images condemn a homophobic British government and society, memorialize friends who have died, and depict a battle to save his sight. But the primary "content" of *Blue* is the series of poetic

images that let Jarman's imagination, and the viewer's, transcend the limitations imposed by the representational visual image. With Jarman, the viewer also has lost sight, but not the vision of the mind.

Documentaries as the Battleground for Social and Political Change

Individuals representing national and local glbtq organizations are at the forefront of the fight against discrimination in all parts of society, but increasingly documentaries are taking center stage in clarifying and examining that struggle and in participating in the advancement of glbtq rights. These documentaries attempt to control and direct debate over civil rights and to respond to the discourses of heterosexism generated by homophobic groups.

Late in 1992, right-wing fundamentalist groups produced *The Gay Agenda: The Report*, which generalizes "the ills of gay life" that would infect a city or state with legislation giving "special rights" to glbtq people. In 1993 the Southern Baptist Convention produced *Gay Rights-Special Rights: Inside the Homosexual Agenda*.

Both films circulated in Oregon, where the Oregon Citizens Alliance was pushing for passage of anti-gay Ballot Measure 9, and in Colorado, where conservative groups were campaigning for Amendment 2, which would have prohibited discrimination claims based on sexual orientation.

Deborah Fort and Ann Skinner Jones made *The Great Divide* in 1993 in response to these films, and Heather McDonald produced *Ballot Measure 9* in 1994 partly in response to *The Gay Agenda* but also to expose the tactics of hate and violence by conservative forces in Oregon. With these two films, these documentarians became activists resisting anti-gay initiatives.

The battle among documentaries occurred again in 1999 after Debra Chasnoff's *It's Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in School* (1996) aired on many PBS stations and Meema Spadola's *Our House: A Very Real Documentary about Kids of Gay and Lesbian Parents* (1999) began to circulate in schools.

In direct response to PBS's airing of *It's Elementary*, the American Family Association quickly made *Suffer the Children: Answering the Homosexual Agenda in Public Schools* (1999), which even lifted scenes from *It's Elementary* to argue that children were being indoctrinated by homosexuals. The AFA succeeded in getting some PBS stations to air the film, but Fort, Skinner, and McDonald responded with efforts to screen their films in schools.

The recent release of Tom Shepard's *Scout's Honor* (2000), chronicling 13-year-old scout Steven Cozza's nationwide campaign against discrimination by the Boy Scouts, is evidence that documentarians will continue to participate in the national debates on glbtq rights.

Activist Organizations and Activism

Although the label "activism" can apply to the function of many glbtq documentaries, a distinct sub-genre of films depict activist organizations. Janet Baus and Su Friedrich's *The Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire Too* (1993) chronicles the first year of the Lesbian Avengers; Rosa von Praunheim's *The Transsexual Menace* (1996) depicts the activism of the organization of the same name; and Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt, and David Meieran's *Voices from the Front* (1991), and Rosa von Praunheim's *Positive* (1990) and *Silence=Death* (1990) examine strategies of AIDS activists and ACT-UP.

Portraits of activists and activist organizations have the potential to galvanize glbtq people, increase participation in organizations, and make a lasting impression in the fight for a specific cause.

Robert Hilferty's *Stop the Church* (1990), a documentary showing members of ACT-UP demonstrating against New York's Cardinal O'Connor by entering St Patrick's Cathedral and lying down until removed by the police,

is a disturbing film about the disruptive power of activism. Perhaps not surprisingly, PBS refused to air the documentary.

Documentaries can also be tools for individual activism, as Tim Kirkman proves in *Dear Jesse* (1997), a long letter to Senator Jesse Helms interspersed with images that depict his hatred and interviews with people on the street about their attitudes toward Helms.

Lyrical Form in Autobiographical Documentaries

Sadie Benning, Barbara Hammer, and Su Friedrich, three of the most successful and popular experimental filmmakers, have sought innovative ways of seeing themselves as lesbians. They create images that reflect their visions of the world. Their work has expanded the notion of what constitutes a documentary. All three filmmakers claim the right to define lesbianism as an individual construction.

Most of Sadie Benning's short and personal documentaries were filmed in her bedroom, and incorporate numerous television images. In *Me and Rubyfruit* (1989), *Jollies* (1990), and *Girlpower* (1992), Benning constantly seeks to define her sexual identity within a fiercely homophobic society that has produced narrow and negative images of women and lesbians.

Barbara Hammer's experimental documentaries, *Women I Love* (1979), *Multiple Orgasm* (1976), and *Double Strength* (1976) are highly autobiographical, employing abstract images to investigate the filmmaker's sexuality and relationships with other women.

In the hour-long *Tender Fictions* (1995), Hammer sketches a complex personal and cultural autobiography from the events surrounding her life, including footage from Shirley Temple movies, the AFL/CIO faculty strike at San Francisco State College, the San Diego Women's Music Festival, and the "Take Back the Night March" in San Francisco.

Su Friedrich's film *Rules of the Road* (1993) is both oblique and engaging. Featuring images of Friedrich's car traveling roads, with minimal narration, the film traces the growth and deterioration of a long-term relationship.

The Documentarian as Auteur

Several queer filmmakers working in the documentary form have produced distinctive and unified bodies of work that sets them apart from other documentarians. Three such filmmakers include Marlon Riggs, Stuart Marshall, and Arthur Dong.

The six films directed by Marlon Riggs--*Ethnic Notions* (1987), *Tongues Untied* (1989), *Affirmation* (1990), *Anthem* (1990), *Color Adjustments* (1992), *No Regrets* (1992), and *Black is...Black Ain't* (1994)--center around issues of representation. They explore the ways in which mass media institutions control images of African Americans and investigate the complexities of black gay identity.

Stuart Marshall's four films--*Bright Eyes* (1986), *Desire: Sexuality in Germany 1910-1945* (1989), *Comrades in Arms* (1990), and *Over Our Dead Bodies* (1991)--are unique in their broad conceptualization of issues. They are also remarkable for their ability to connect different perspectives within a single film. Marshall's *Bright Eyes* was the first feature length documentary on AIDS.

Critics praise Arthur Dong for his extensive and shrewd historical and cultural analysis, and for the intensity that he brings to such subjects as men murdering gays (*Licensed to Kill*, 1997), gays and lesbians in the army during World War II (*Coming Out Under Fire*, 1994) queer rights (*The Question of Equality: Out Rage '69*, 1995), and gender-bending entertainment in a Chinese nightclub of the 1930s and 1940s (*Forbidden City*, 1989).

Boundless Paths of Inquiry

Queer documentarians have also rigorously pursued difficult, hidden, and taboo topics that would have been inconceivable a decade ago. For example, Alexandra Shiva, Sean MacDonald, and Michelle Gucovsky's *Bombay Eunuch* (2001) looks at the *hijras* of India, transvestites and transgendered people who are both revered and feared for their power. Kate Davis's *Southern Comfort* tells the story of Robert Eads, a male-to-female transsexual hillbilly in conservative rural America who, after a diagnosis of uterine cancer, is shunned by medical communities.

Over a period of five years, filmmaker Sandi DuBowski earned the trust of gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews in order to tell their story in *Before G-D* (2001). The film presents an intricate narrative of fear and self-hatred in the quest to reconcile religion and sexual identity.

Greta Schiller's *The Man Who Drove With Mandela* (1999) traces the life of Cecil Williams, a gay theater director and activist against the racist government of South Africa, who through a startling series of events was in the car with Nelson Mandela as Mandela returned to South Africa.

By pursuing such unusual yet fascinating narratives documentarians are revising history and changing public perceptions of the queer community.

Recent Trends in Queer Documentary

All of the documentary forms noted above have been used recently by filmmakers grappling with contemporary topics and debates. The very diversity of the topics and debates addressed by queer documentarians is evidence of the diverse interests of the glbtq community and of the centrality of our issues in the national dialogue about civil rights and equality.

For example, recent biographical documentaries have focused a lens on a wide range of queer issues by exploring the lives of both well known and relatively unknown people. Examining the accomplishments and heritages of individuals has facilitated the exploration of issues ranging from the intolerance of organized religion to the unconventional expression of gay painters and fashion designers.

These documentaries include Charles Atlas's *The Legend of Leigh Bowery* (2003); Carole Bonstein's *A Swiss Rebel: Annemarie Schwarzenbach 1908-1942*, produced in 2000 but receiving new exposure at recent film festivals; Matt Sneddon's *The Truth or Consequences of Delmas Howe* (2004); and Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato's *Hidden Führer: Debating the Enigma of Hitler's Sexuality* (2004).

Two biographical documentaries, Nancy D. Kates and Bennett Singer's *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin* (2002) and Joan Elizabeth Biren's *No Secret Anymore: The Times of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon* (2003), contribute to queer history by illuminating the individual's role in sweeping historical change.

Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin (2002) relies on archival footage to trace the civil rights movement in the 1960s, and racism and homophobia in the United States. Rustin, the organizing figure behind the 1963 March on Washington, lived with the possibility that exposure of his homosexuality could harm the momentum of the movement. When the homophobia of his allies and enemies generated public scrutiny, Rustin detached himself from the central figures of the movement but remained an outspoken activist on many civil rights issues. A wealth of archival footage of Rustin provides an insightful personal profile within the sweep of history.

No Secret Anymore: The Times of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon (2003) covers 50 years in the history of lesbian and gay civil rights. Filmmaker Joan Biren started making the film in 1999, and it premiered on the 50th anniversary of the partnership of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, activists who were at the forefront of the

struggle for glbtq equality. Through documenting their lives, Biren assembles a dynamic history of lesbian rights in the United States and the growth of the glbtq community.

Established documentary filmmakers have also contributed to the recent national debate on topics central to lesbian and gay rights. Arthur Dong's *Fundamentals* (2002) poses the question "What happens when parents believe that their own kids represent the very element that will lead to the destruction of the human race." Dong attempts to understand the vehement reactions of religious families to their college age-children's homosexuality.

Since 2001 more than 25 documentaries have examined gay marriage from different perspectives. Jim de Sève's *Tying the Knot* (2003) ambitiously depicts the political and social forces arrayed against gay marriage, as well as the struggles of lesbian and gay couples in different states with different laws and differing public opinion. It reveals the complexity of a national battle often simplified by other documentaries. Abigail Honor's *Saints and Sinners* (2004) depicts the struggle of a gay male couple to receive the "Holy Sacrament of Marriage" in the Roman Catholic Church.

Canadian filmmaker Alexis Fosse Mackintosh's *Let No One Put Asunder* (2004) depicts the obstacles to marriage faced by three Canadian same-sex couples in the context of a national political debate in which a major figure from the Conservative Party supported a legislative ban on gay marriage.

Several recent documentaries on AIDS examine its global impact. For example, Rory Kennedy's *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* (2003) chronicles the devastation wrought by AIDS in countries such as Uganda and Thailand. But Louise H. Jogarth shocked the American gay community with *The Gift* (2003), about the efforts of some HIV-negative men to be infected with the disease.

Judy Wilder and Laura Barton's *The Dildo Diaries* (2003) examines the Texas Penal Code (which makes owning six or more dildoes a felony) and its effects on the adult sex toy industry. Through probing and sometimes hilarious interviews with legislators, porn stars, sex shop owners, and others, the film honors the dildo's fight for legitimacy and underscores the danger of anti-sodomy laws, while exposing the absurdity of the actions of the Texas legislature.

Other topics that documentary filmmakers have investigated since 2002 include the history of the women's music movement in Dee Mosbacher's *Radical Harmonies* (2002); the persecution of gay men and lesbians in the less developed world in Janet Baus and Dan Hunt's *Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World* (2003); the impact of the "first all-lesbian" punk band in Tracy Flannigan's *Rise Above: The Tribe 8 Documentary* (2003); and the problems and contentments of rural gay life in Tom Murray's *Farm Family: In Search of Gay Life in Rural America* (2003).

The stakes are high for queer documentary filmmakers: the preservation of our history. They have responded to political change and shifting public opinion in a manner that represents the various positions of the queer community.

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