Television, documentary and the category of the aesthetic

JOHN CORNER

The idea of the aesthetic has had a troubled and contradictory history in cultural studies, in ways that have impacted upon the study of television. It has been seen both as a blocking category and a category blocked. The literature has variously positioned it as a source of theoretical displacement and mystification and as an area of neglect and foreclosure. To put it more expansively, detailed attention to the ‘art properties’ of television has been seen to waste investigative time that might more valuably be spent on questions of institution, practice, thematic content and consumption, on the framing of political and cultural economies and processes within which programmes are produced and circulated. At the same time, some have clearly thought that emphasis on precisely such matters has produced accounts too inert to register properly the imaginative densities and energies of the programmes themselves, those little powerhouses of meaning and value arguably holding a degree of creative mystery even in their most banal modes.

This is more than simply the old debate about where to position ‘the text’ in any given piece of study. Textual analysis can take a number of forms, one of which is a tight mix of cognitive and linguistic concerns in which ‘art properties’ are either ignored entirely or appear principally as devices of concealment and manipulation.

The category of aesthetics points us towards the organization of creative works, the experiences they produce (or, to signal a key crux, that audiences derive from them) and the modes of analysis and theory that can be used in investigation. All three interests

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1 Influential examples of the former position include the work of Pierre Bourdieu, for instance Distinction trans Richard Nice (London Routledge, 1986) and Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic (Oxford Blackwell 1990). In both cases the authors are partly opposing themselves to a dominant inflexible and categorical ‘high aesthetic’ that they feel has governed discussion of quality in the areas they survey and has ignored the material conditions of the artistic sphere.

interconnect, clearly, but usage of the term sometimes masks priorities and even exclusions. In this short commentary, I want to explore some arguments concerning the relation of aesthetic issues to television’s documentary programming bearing in mind all three points of reference. Quite what counts as ‘documentary’ nowadays, given the hectic generic mutations that have occurred in television’s factual output, has been an issue of recent dispute, raising interesting questions of programme claim and programme value as well of production practice and form.

To talk of the aesthetic in relation to television documentary opens the far broader question of how ideas of the aesthetic might bear on the medium itself. There has been a tendency to regard television as an aesthetically rather impoverished medium – too extensively dispersed into both industrial routine and everyday life to offer a great deal by way of richness and depth in its own ‘works’. The suggestion is that the medium has compensated for this symbolic deficit by exploiting its realist/relay functions and its potential for real or simulated ‘liveness’, although exceptions to this easy mutuality with the mundane are acknowledged.

Of course, a good deal of nonfictional television is not particularly interested in offering itself as an aesthetic experience anyway. That is, it is not concerned with promoting an appreciative sense of its creative crafting in the audience. Strength of content, including that of onscreen activity, is seen to be enough. Clearly, we would not want to make questions of intention a firm criterion here – programmes can be judged to have aesthetic organization and aesthetic effects without their producers acknowledging this. Indeed, it may be something they explicitly deny, and which audiences seem completely unaware of. But it is helpful to make a differentiation between work that has an overt aesthetic and that in which it is largely implicit, even if this can sometimes only be done with difficulty.

Here, documentary occupies an interesting position in the television spectrum, some of it being extremely self-conscious and aesthetically ambitious (convergent in this respect with ‘high-end drama’), some of it committed to reportorial or observational naturalisms that make it very close to news in discursive character. Across its history both in film and television, work within documentary has displayed varied and sometimes rather contradictory attitudes towards what degree of freedom and prominence its aesthetic dimension should enjoy. At times deploying a foregrounded aesthetics (as in classic 1930s texts such as Coalface, Song of Ceylon and Listen to Britain), in which the imaginative appeal of the formal design is part of the ‘offer’, it has also worked with a marginalized, or even suppressed and denied, aesthetics in an attempt to make its referentiality, its scopic and aural documentation, more direct. The classic reportage of Housing Problems (1935) is an early example.
Several of the essays in Forsyth Hardy (ed) Gnerson on Documentary (London Faber 1979) show the varying emphases, sometimes in the same piece.

A number of scholars use this category to indicate documentaries that place a primary emphasis on their artefactual qualities and the appreciation of this by the audience. See, for instance, the discussion in Carl Plantinga Rhetoric and Representation in Non-Fiction Film (Cambridge Cambridge University Press 1997), especially ch 9.

Recently reviewed in Niklas Luhmann Art as a Social System (Stanford CA Standard University Press 2000).

Gnerson himself can be seen to veer around a good deal on the balance and priorities to be struck, being alert both to the excitement and appeal of cinematic art but also to the requirement to perform a ‘sociological’ task.

A gap opens up here between producers, audiences and critics, reflecting in part the three points of reference that I suggest configure the very idea of aesthetics. Those involved in documentary production may routinely watch all documentary material, including that in which the topic itself is of personal interest, with a framing concern for artefactual qualities – for how imaginative, well-crafted or ‘beautiful’ the documentary work itself is. Audiences, in a way that contrasts with their response to drama, are likely to find these concerns a secondary matter at best, possibly ones of which they are only conscious when something is going wrong (such as an editing rhythm that irritates, problems with the use of music, traits of presenter address). Critics and scholars replicate in part the preoccupations of producers, involving a concern for patterns and conventions, albeit within different frames of reference and for their own professional purposes. In tracing any specific medium or generic aesthetics, however, the kind of experience routinely had by intended audiences must not be neglected or displaced (painting, cinema, theatre, music and literature variously pose this awkward issue, of the ‘viewer’, ‘reader’ or ‘listener’ as well as ‘the critic’, to their respective bodies of criticism).

I think we can broadly distinguish between what could be called ‘thick text’ and ‘thin text’ documentaries in terms of the density and transformative scale of their mediations. It is not surprising that film and television studies has found it easier to develop critical accounts of the former broad category. Works here follow more closely the narrative, scopic and aural protocols of fiction and of ‘art film’, various stylings of the world are offered for the viewer to experience as kinds of imaginative performance, however much the world is also referenced through them. Moreover, their manifest attractions are often accompanied by the deeper pressures and appeals they apply to the unconscious and to desiring fantasy. They may generate lively critical disagreement, since their values and arguments may often be implicit and sometimes show inconsistency or tension. They may reward repeat viewings in a way that ultimately has little to do with the extractable knowledge they convey. The documentary format that comes closest to fiction, drama-documentary (although one might regard it as a fiction format coming close to documentary), generates this aesthetic-critical response in a most obvious manner, as do works whose symbolic emphasis places them, for some critics, in the category of ‘poetic documentary’. Among other things, this might be to confirm the general idea that ‘art values’ will be most pronounced in communications that are able to mark off a degree of separateness from the mundane and directly worldly, that are able both to exercise...


Aesthetics make contact with the ethics and politics of viewing here. Depending on the subject, repeat viewing of a documentary primarily to gain satisfaction from its depictive styling raises questions about the cultural appropriation of portrayal and the evasion of reference.

Documentary aesthetics: a typology

I have already noted that to talk of aesthetics requires reference to three key planes — that of artefactual organization (including its nature as a product of practice), that of audience experience and that of theoretical and analytical inquiry. It is the interplay of artefactual design and subjectivity that generates the aesthetic experience and it is important to stop this being collapsed simply into ‘form’ on one side or ‘pleasure’ on the other. Pleasurable feeling is certainly a part...
These approximating terms are generally suggestive about the conditions of documentary organization and viewing. Vivian Sobchack brings them into her thoughtful essay, 'Towards a phenomenology of nonfictional film experience', in Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (eds) Collecting Visible Evidence (Minneapolis, MN University of Minnesota Press 1999) pp 241-54. Sobchack draws on the relatively neglected ideas about film experience of the Belgian psychologist Jean Pierre Meunier concerning the different kinds of consciousness engaged in acts of viewing.

The experience of looking at documentary images often combines an aesthetic registration of the qualities of the depiction itself with that of certain, visual properties of the things depicted (their shapes, colours, proportions and spatial relations - as in landscapes, buildings, objects). It may also involve indirect engagement with the subject through the use of metaphor, which usually requires to be read as a discourse about the world rather than a depiction of it.

‘Looking at’ can be seen as one kind of what Niklas Luhmann terms ‘second order observations’. These are ‘observations of observations’ and their effect is to frame parts of the world in such a way as to transform them into ‘imaginary space’ without necessarily thereby losing an engagement with ‘world’. Luhmann’s full account is complex and certainly not neatly transferable to the documentary instance, but I use it here suggestively and will return to it below.

The pictorial qualities of the documentary image, with its organization of screen space into a plane both of reference and of formal design, are in powerful combination with its kinetic properties. In many respects these are in line with those of cinematic fiction, where a considerable body of scholarship has explored how kinetics can derive from the movement of things within the shot, the...
movement of the camera during the shot or, more broadly, the
temporal organization of continuity and change introduced by editing.
In documentary, the first two of these produce different kinds of
scopic satisfaction, respectively referential and pictorial in their
grounding. The second – the shifting perception brought about by
camera movement (its glides, its drifts, its swoops, its trackings, its
movements across documented space, its shiftings of the relationships
of distance and proximity) – is one of the most familiar of aesthetic
tropes in documentary practice. Its fusing of the reality of world with
the motivation of imaginative design is often stimulating in its
bringing together of recognition with kinds of ‘making strange’ or,
less radically, what we might just call ‘re-seeing’ Here, the
connections made between our apprehension of the physical realities
shown and the subjective (affective, conceptual or propositional)
world that also forms the documentary topic are significant Feeling
and ideas condense upon objects, bodies and places, modified by the
physical at the same time as the physical itself is perceived within
the developing thematics Such a dialectics, at once sensual and
intellectual, referentially committed yet often possessed of a
dreamlike potential for the indirectly suggestive and associative, is
central to documentary as an aesthetic project. It is often a factor in
producing what Vivian Sobchack has called ‘the charge of the real’
as it appears on the screen. Whatever core this has in the
naturalistic co-ordinates of documentarism, it can also be extensively
theatricalized too (a ‘charged real’ so to speak) It can work through
a pictorial authorship comparable with that which carries the denser,
latent and more volatile significances of fiction (an imagined
example an aerial shot shows a car following a deserted coast road
as dawn begins to break; it turns off to enter a silent village The
musical soundtrack is bleak and brooding. Is this the start of a
thriller? No, it’s the opening to a programme on GM agriculture just
before the commentary starts).

The third level of kinetics, the much-discussed practices of editing,
introduces through its modes of linkage and disjunction the broad
range of possibilities for organizing time, theme, space and style in
relation to overall documentary design. In doing so, it necessarily
enhances and strengthens aesthetic elements at the local level in the
management of seeing, knowing and feeling

I think it is worth noting here how many documentaries attempt to
retain referential integrity and yet generate aesthetic value by what
we can call an intermittent aesthetics. Such a mode engages a
viewing subjectivity of ‘looking through’ for extensive sequences,
projecting a relative transparency in the depiction (and bringing about
what Luhmann would see as a kind of ‘first-order observation’).
Interview, commentary voiceover and archive film, for instance, are
likely to establish and sustain this At other points, however, a shift
towards a more opaque representation is made, the aesthetic codings
becoming thicker and perhaps more obvious, temporarily transferring viewers into a deeper imaginative space (and perhaps also further into themselves) without breaking engagement with theme. More attention to some of the precise techniques and patterns involved across different kinds of production would be rewarding. John Caldwell’s remarks about the viewing subjectivities appropriate to the newer ‘videographic’ ways of working upon screen space are relevant here. Moreover, it is quite likely that viewers will shift between primary orientations towards ‘looking through’ and ‘looking at’ independently of the ‘intermittent aesthetics’ of production design, although one would expect the latter to exert some cueing functions on the basic viewing frames deployed. It is worth remarking again that it is in the combination of these frames, within different recipes and proportions, that the most interesting questions are posed. Any pure sense of ‘looking through’ reproduces the fallacy of transparent access, against which documentary studies has directed most of its critical energy, although a temporary sense of unmediated encounter continues to be a powerful and necessary feature of many documentary sequences. A pure commitment to ‘looking at’ blocks documentarist engagement, unless it occurs only as one element or moment in a larger referential design.

Aural

The aesthetic (as distinct from the cognitive) possibilities of sound in documentary are in most cases secondary to those of images and in some cases are not significantly mobilized at all. However, that which Barthes called the ‘grain of the voice’ (made distinctive by factors of, for instance, gender, age, class and geographical origin) can be a factor in the satisfaction we obtain from listening to speech, including that of documentary subjects themselves, and also raises questions of speaking style. Different modes of the formal (such as commentaries working essentially as read prose, the speech following literary design) and informal (well-turned anecdotes, colloquial rhythms and diction) can all deliver a style-generated pleasure in listening not reducible to the cognitive. Their impact is, of course, quite often only achieved in combination with specific images and can only be adequately analyzed as such (that phrasing or even word, or pause, across that shot). Here, again, is an aesthetic density that requires more attention, in its local achievement, than documentary analysis has often afforded it to date.

Perhaps the richest and most intriguing aural aesthetic in many documentaries, however, is that provided by music. Its regulation of our sense of place, time and mood as well as its use as punctuation within the documentary narrative system (bridgings, little closures and openings across scenes and episodes) is a regular cue to viewing subjectivity. Its effect is often to provide a (light and unobtrusive) aestheticized framing for scenes working strongly within the
I have tried to take this further in
John Corner Sounds real music
and documentary' Popular Music,
vol 21 no 3 (2002)

Stephen Heath and Gillian
Skirrow Television a world in
action, Screen vol 18 no 2
(1977) pp 7-59

These imaginative possibilities
are fully confirmed in a
remarkable letter to Screen by
the person who actually edited
the material Dai Vaughan
himself subsequently a writer on
documentary topics He notes
among other things that the way
in which a particular sequence
(showing a boy with an air-rifle)
was shot and cut has a great
deal to do with the conventions
within which sequences of
hunting, and in particular of
ambush are traditionally
presented in fictional cinema
See Vaughan Correspondence
Screen vol 18 no 4 (1977) pp
123-5

A number of her papers and
unpublished talks have explored
this theme in original ways Born
inside television incorporates it
within broader terms

Narratological
Most documentary scholarship has acknowledged how narrative
satisfactions are a property of nearly all formats, connecting with a
broader aesthetics of time and of duration (with its vectors of
becoming, of process and transition) that underlies, in different ways,
the forms of television. They are particularly obvious in the fictional
models of drama-documentary and the action-development structures
of observational modes, including docuseries recipes, but they are also
at work to varying degrees in the more repertorial and expositional
programmes. Alongside the function of voiced-over or presenter
commentary (literally, storytelling), it is clearly in the practices of
editing that narrative design is realized. Stephen Heath and Gillian
Skirrow usefully pointed to the ‘little stories’ out of which an
ostensibly expositional documentary on truancy was made. The
excursions into story values and pleasures were sometimes awkwardly
related to the development of the official argument, suggesting a
degree of production tension between the chosen theme for reportage
and the imaginative possibilities to emerge from the case-studies
selected to illustrate it. Story formats in television documentary
have undergone change and intensification in recent years as part of
the requirement to increase viewing enjoyment within circumstances
of stronger competition. Attention to their varieties and to the
particular kinds of viewing experience they offer will need to be
another feature in the development of documentary scholarship

I have suggested that we need to keep in mind the way in which
what is at issue in ‘aesthetics’ interconnects across artefactual
organization, the viewing experience and, at some remove from
these, the categories that an analysis needs to understand both The
aesthetically generative role of practice requires consistent
recognition too, however difficult this might be to document
independently In recent writing, Georgina Born has eloquently made
the case for taking the ‘production aesthetics’ of television seriously,
as part of a more general claim for a non-reductive sociology of
art.
In posing the question of how to engage further with television’s documentary aesthetics, the notion of ‘criticism’ remains central, if not sufficient. Criticism, unlike linguistics, sociology, political economy or psychology, typically takes its initial ground in a declared subjective experiencing. How does the programme work? What engages and satisfies, what does not? Fine art, theatre, literature, dance and cinema all show different models of critical practice in which this subjective experience is then made the basis for a more technical, more general and perhaps more socially diagnostic assessment. The dangers of over-categoric approaches are clear enough, but television scholarship, including that on documentary, needs to foster the practice of criticism alongside its other analytic tools and its more general theoretical concerns. A vigorous documentary criticism would help to keep aesthetic issues contentiously in view when other perspectives and priorities show their tendency to hide, displace or reduce them. By taking its bearings from ‘inside’ the documentary experience, with its distinctive mix of objective and subjective dynamics, criticism’s value for understanding lies not in contesting the more externalist approaches to explanation but in keeping up a reflexive commentary on some of the most important things to be explained.

18 Here I agree with the arguments about the need for renewal and reorientation in the critical project put forward by Alan Durant, What future for interpretative work in film and media studies? Screen, vol 41 no 1 (2000), pp 7–17. Jacobs also makes the case for greater clarity about the distinctive contribution of criticism in Issues of judgement and value.