

What's at stake for the documentary enterprise? Conversation with Michael Renov

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São Paulo, April 2nd and 8th 2008.²

Contemporary production & new media:

Autobiography, performance and confession

André Bonotto: I'd like to know if you're familiar with Brazilian documentary film production - the contemporary production, the tendency of autobiographical film: films that conform the filmmaking experience to a very personal project, projects that expose the filmmaker, projects that

¹We are very grateful to Michael Renov for his solicitude and patience on answering all of our questions.

²We had the conversation for this interview on two occasions: first at the 8th International Documentary Conference, after Renov's presentation at the table shared with Arlindo Machado and coordinated by Marcio Freire; and the other later, on Universidade de São Paulo (USP), after Renov's presentation: "Animation: Documentary's Imaginary Signifier". The order of some questions has been edited for the text to be more fluent, according to the themes.

merge the filmmaker into the film's character, projects that deal a lot with chance, also. We could mention here Kiko Goifman's "33" or Sandra Kogut's "Hungarian Passport", I don't know if you know these films. . .

Michael Renov: I know Sandra Kogut very well...

AB: Could you talk of this theme, relate it with your recent studies on autobiographical film or "domestic ethnography": this relevant turn toward the *subject* of documentary?

MR: Well, I think that Sandra Kogut's film, *Hungarian Passport*, is a really subtle example of the domestic ethnography. It's a piece that I think depends so much on the fact that she *puts* herself in it and she *doesn't* put herself in it. She's almost not visible. There's only one shot in the entire film when you see her in profile for a brief moment, you see her hand reaching in to dial the phone, you hear her voice a lot. . . but she withholds herself, her body. It's almost as though she sentences the need to not make it just an autobiography. That's what I think is really notable about this kind of recent turn toward the autobiographical: it's not straight autobiography, it's not just my story, but it becomes a historical search, to go back to the past. . .

AB: . . . And merges memory and history.

MR: . . . Yes, and to find out. . . what the laws were when her grandparents arrived at Recife, why it might be that these people had a hard time even being lad off the boat because they were hebreo. . . She goes back to the archaic and she uncovers it. The list, you know, when she sees names that were penciled through, that were refused entry into the country. So she comes to grips with this story that isn't just her story. This is the story of Brazil. This is the story not only of Jews trying to enter in a certain moment, but of the policy towards emigration, in a kind of racism that most Brazilians are not very aware of. There's this idea that many Brazilians have. . . that because of this multiracial composition of the country, that it has always been a very wide open, and very welcoming place, but this says it's not always been true. So I think that she tells a story that's not just her story, and not just her grandmother's or grandfather's story but it tells. . . these other relatives, Hungarians in Paris. . . it tells a story that is really. . . a slice of History that isn't very well known or very well understood, or maybe it's been chopped aside. And also I love the fact that it crosses the national lines so much, that it's about France, it's about Hungary, and it's about Brazil. And then she

goes to all these places, and shows the differences on the bureaucracy of when she's treated in one place and the others. . . that the rules are not absolute. . . and that at the end of this long bureaucratic process, all that trouble is only for one year. But I just think my interest has often been about the self and the other and how many forms of this new autobiography really are able to look at personal history and more public histories, and weaves then together in a way so that they're not one or the other, they're both, and I think she really is very successful in relating that, weaving them, public and private.

AB: The personal and the social merges into the film experience. . .

MR: Yeah. . . private discourse, private sphere, and the public domain.

Gabriel de Barcelos Sotomaior: In your book "The Subject of Documentary", you questioned about the autobiography future: the end or a new beginning. Today how would you think about this?

MR: I wrote that last chapter really just around the year 2000 when that was really before blogging had got to be very large, and it was really personal web pages that were at high at late 1990's . . . And so, I look back that chapter and I think that was cut off way too soon. Just like the conversation that occurred here.³, it seems to me that there's this proliferation that has happened, and they kind of lower the bar for access. So what I discovered even when I was just looking at the personal web pages of the late 90's is that you didn't have to go to the works of great artists, people whose names are known, or people who are getting funding for institutions and showing work in museums. . . but that in fact, after I looked at, I don't know, hundreds. . . I stumble along to one, starting with the "A" - because there are hundreds of thousands, just on yahoo. . . and so I saw one that just blew my mind because it was really very sophisticated. . .

AB: . . . Formally sophisticated?

MR: . . . Formally sophisticated, intellectually sophisticated, for me it was very reminiscent of the work of some of my favorite artists . . . and I never met this woman. But it made me open my eyes to the realization that culture gets produced in all kinds of unexpected places. And so that

³ He refers to the content of the tables occurred on the first day of the conference. For information on it, see the program: <http://www.itsalltrue.com.br/2008/conferencia/programa.asp?lng=I>

I think that you know, the death of autobiography? No, just the same way that Elizabeth Bruss had written that film was the end of literally autobiography? She was wrong, because the impulse was only strengthened, and similarly, I think these new possibilities of production and distribution and sharing are really only kind of adding fire to the impulse to tell one's story. To me it seems pretty clear cut, whether it's written memories, literally memories - which by the way are within the United States on the best-seller list consistently, over a lot of fiction writing. So people's story, whether it's famous people, semi-famous people... People are telling their stories whether they're using print or they're using film cameras, or they're using... these little tiny devices⁴ that we all use.

GBS: ... And the autobiography or performatic films in youtube... with webcams... Do you think it's a new form of performance... ?

AB: ... Do these things bring new issues?

MR: It brings new issues in terms of where you look, and how it challenges whatever esthetic standards that you may have, because I think - Arlindo said something about this - it's really not about preciousness, it doesn't have to be. Standards don't have to be based on some sort of professional pre-ordained standards. At my university there was a conference that I attended at least part of: the "DIY Culture Conference" - Do It Yourself Culture Conference. Most of everybody invited were young people, people in high school, some of them have been organized, and some of them have been helped along by video artists who were doing this thing - organizing work with young people, working in communities. But really, some of the work was just absolutely compelling, just as compelling as anything that you might see. So the DIY notion that *you can do it yourself*, I think it's just incredibly strong and felt that online access... I think I wrote about this in that chapter which is: "it's not just who *sees* it, but it's who *could see* it".

GBS: What do you think about the recent forms of video activism, is there something new in the action's organization, in the qualities and circulation of contents, and what are the differences in comparison with the 60's experience - Argentina, France... Dziga Vertov, Third World Newsreel?

MR: I go back to the same thing I often say about this. It's in a way the vehicle, the form of the expression, doesn't really matter. It's an

⁴ While asserting this, Renov shows us a mobile cell phone.

outlet, it's a possibility, it's a mode. So, has much changed in terms of activism? Maybe there's broader possibility. But like I said, in 1965 when Sony *Portapak* was made available as the kind of consumer-grade video apparatus... Think of the difference between 16mm cameras making home movies where - at least in the first half of the 20th century - you had to be relatively wealthy to have a movie camera. And so that stance gets lowered, and some people could have video cameras that you could buy for, in the United States, four or five hundred dollars. And now, it's cheaper and cheaper so that if you have a silly little phone you can also make moving images. That doesn't really change anything, that just makes, that broadens the possibilities I suppose, but I think that the *impulse* is pretty much the same. Gaykeepers... Right now there's a whole question about how to police the web, for example in China, a way to make it so that people who access, can't really see anything that's available on the web outside China. And that's always gonna be a struggle as to sort of figure out how to *avoid* the gaykeepers, how to *not* be policed, because the impulse remains the same: "I wanna tell you about my struggle, I wanna share that, I wanna find other people who are like me, I wanna work together and somehow we can make a change". I think there's a really strong continuity with that impulse, it takes different forms and... internet I think has really made certain things way more possible, in the United States it certainly has. But when I look at what people were doing in the 1968 context with 16mm, and what I see people were doing with video - this so called "guerilla television" movement of the early to mid 70's - and what people are doing now with their cameras... I think it's all of the piece. It's all about what's in your gut, what is your politics, your commitment, your passion towards it. I happen to work in a place that's a film school... there are people who wanna be famous Hollywood directors... none of that stuff really matters, it's really about "do you have something you're compelled to say?" And do you have a politics, do you have a commitment, and are you committed also to sharing that vision...? So I think it's kind of the history repeats itself, and the formats and the delivery systems will continue to transform, but I don't think any that matters, except that you wanna be nimble in that to understand and work with it, and try to make it available, that's it.

GBS: I don't know if you saw the film made by Cho Seung-Hui⁵ for the *Virginia Tech* mass murder. . . and in your book, you talk about confession, some kinds of film where we can watch this. . . how about this in web, how do we may think about new forms of confession?

MR: Confession is a kind of a condition. . . *conditions* that make confession possible are some feeling of guilty, some feeling of a burden, wearing a burden, and the possibility that there is someone more powerful to whom I can open myself, and doing so can be absolved my sin, can be absolved what I have to carry. And so, confession is a very powerful instrument for a "lightening" of "heaviness" that people feel. The web is a great opportunity for confession, it's a great confessional vehicle. . . and this is what I try to argument on the book - that confession used to be about priests, or policemen, or psychoanalysts. . . they were the ones who could "absolve me of my sins". They could say "you're innocent", or they could say "say a hundred Hail Maries and you're ok", or they could say "talking cure: come to me for a year. . . (as a psychoanalyst) . . . and somehow we'll work through your neurosis or your psychosis". In the new media age it's just *the possibility of an audience*. . . you don't have to have a real cop, you don't have to have a real priest, you don't have a real shrink. . . you just have to have a potential audience that has more power than you because it's an un-ended, an infinite possibility. And so it's just the idea of the power of that media form and of its access. . . to explore the accessibility is enough to provide that kind of power condition that makes confession at least plausible, you know. If I confess to my web camera, even if I don't have any idea who's watching, there's a great power, there's a great unloading of the burden possible. Because any and everybody could see it I've made myself vulnerable. I'm not sure that it works this well as going to a priest. . . but when at the priest, you weren't really supposed to be looking at him also; when at the shrink you weren't supposed to be looking at him: the shrink is looking that way and you're supposed to look that other way. So it was never about face to face content, it was always about the idea of the encounter. So now with the idea of this media as a possible way, as a confessional vehicle, I think it's really diffuse but it's also really powerful, and you see it everywhere.

⁵ The South-Korean student, responsible for the *Virginia Tech* mass murder on April 2007.

GBS: And what about this body exposition... like pornography, or Obama Girl⁶... how may we think about this?

MR: Well, whenever there's a new cultural opening... and when the possibilities of entering the game are so broadly available, you can have thousands, you can have millions rushing to participate. And that's exactly what it should be, because we're inundated with this culture that wants to separate *us* from *them*: *they're* the ones whose lives are important; *they're* the ones who define what beauty is, who define what lifestyles ought to be. And yet, all this reality TV is starting to kind of say: "you could be part of this conversation, you could cross over that invisible line and be the one who everyone is looking at" and saying "you're setting this game"...

AB: ... But don't you consider, on reality shows, that this "you-could-be-part-of-it" has some bad consequences... ?

MR: ... Of course. What I'm saying is that is trading on that desire, it is profiting on that desire, the desire which in other arenas is possible, that people... young people in high school... people living in *favela*, others... are making work that is in small ways entering into public discourse. But for everyone of those there's also somebody else, usually in a corporate setting, who's gonna take advantage, and do something that satisfies the kind of lowest common denominator. I mean, the word "pornographic" was uttered earlier today... but the pornography is - like in one of the clips that Arlindo showed⁷ - where poverty is exploited, where people's vulnerability is exploited *for someone else's* game, which is what I was saying: our challenge is to remain connected with this notion of the ethical, that the relationship always is about the I and the thou, myself and the person on the other side of the camera - whether sometimes it's me and me, or me and my best friend, or me and my mother, or me and someone totally unknown to me... But that's always the challenge: to really negotiate that relationship in a way that remain true to an encounter, a reciprocity, that is *I* and *you* on somehow an equal ground.

⁶ Character of a series of videos circulating on the web: a young lady exposing her body on parody music/ comic videos, supporting the American candidate Barack Obama. The videos may be found at youtube.

⁷ *Agarrando Pueblo* (1977), directed by Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo.

New poetics of documentary: Ethics emerges

AB: You wrote in your book, “The Subject of Documentary”’s introduction, of recognizing in your study, a sort of “poetics of visual autobiography”. We could connect it here with a previous study, your text “Toward a Poetics of Documentary”⁸. As we saw at your presentation during the conference, you have recently expanded this 1993’s study to embrace a fifth “fundamental tendency, or rhetoric/aesthetic function” of documentary film, that would be the *ethical* issue. Do you think this new item’s irruption is caused by the “subjective turn”? Or is it related to which other facts - this focus on the ethical questions that has been seen. . .

MR: . . . Well I think that the ethical always bears a relationship to subjectivity. Why? Because ethics is always about the one on one side, and the one on the other side, so that if documentary was not interested in subjectivity, I don’t think it could really get to ethics, because it would only be about the subject, it would only be about the one which is on the other side of the camera lens, and not about this engagement, this dialogue that happens between the one on this side and the one on that side. And ethics also introduces the third dimension, which is the audience.

AB: Yeah, a triadic relationship. . .

MR: . . . A triadic relationship. And there are subjectivities in each of the sides. We think of the subjectivity being the one which is on this side of the camera lens looking out, but in fact it’s an engagement of subjectivities here, there, and the unknown third party that could be watching in a hundred years from now. But yet, there will still be those ethical relations that we’ll obtain amongst all of the sides. They’re all about subjectivity, they all engage with issues of subjectivity, and if documentary studies doesn’t really take of subjectivity truly, it can’t possibly have a deep, grasper understanding of what the ethical issues are, because objectivity won’t get you there.

AB: Could you talk a little bit about the four fundamental tendencies, on which you recently added this fifth one – the *ethical* function -, and how do they imbricate with each other?

⁸ Published on “Theorizing Documentary”.

MR: Well that's a long question, it would be a long answer, but I hope that the presentation I gave is the beginning of that, only the beginning of that. I just felt that when I wrote that essay fifteen... no, it's more than that, but it was *published* fifteen years ago... I thought that the expressive should be the fourth and the last because that's where they needed to be pressured, pushed...

AB: ... Because it was the least explored?

MR: ... The least explored, right. So now I'm thinking, fifteen years later, when you think about people coming from the video and the art world, and more and more experimentalism (although I don't like that word), but more and more interest in formal questions and a lot of a kind "artfulness" in documentary... People who once would not have conceived themselves making documentaries are now making works that look like documentary and passes for documentary. So I feel like, not that that work is done, but that there's been a lot of movement towards *expressivity*, towards the expressive domain for documentary. And then that's why I thought: "So, what's missing?" I thought of it in the way that I formulated in this paper which is: "What do we have in the documentary tradition that differentiates us if we go pushing on the expressive form?" What we have to fall back on this is that the best of the documentary tradition has always valued that relationship between the self and another, that that connection of the encounter, what happens between me on my side of the camera and my subject, - and of course the ethical encounter with the audience. So it's always a tripartite thing: it's the subject behind the camera, the object of the camera's gaze and the audience. So there's always that circulating ethical question about how are we treating one another... what are the relations that exist among us. That's really what documentary has to share to the world, and we can't, no matter how interested we are in the formal, we can't ever give up that connection to the ethical register. It's not the same of politics, it's connected to politics but it's not identical to politics.

AB: How would you differ them both?

MR: Well, for example, in that piece that we saw, the clip which have been called the *metadocumentary*⁹, there's a point in which it does seem it's about politics because when the guy gets mad he's gonna go after

⁹ *Agarrando Pueblo*, called a "metadocumentary" on Arlindo Machado's presentation.

them and beat them up for exploiting them, and invading their territory. At one level you can see there's a political dimension, a political act or defense, but I think there's a more fundamental thing which takes it back to a more philosophical discourse that is really about this relationship that exists, this linkage that exists between the I and the thou. And that comes before. A self isn't constructed without reference to another. And that's where the levying us did comes in which is: you can't talk about the ontology of the self, as though the self is built first and exclusively inside one's own world and then secondly on the encounter of the other. No, it is: I only exist as a self on condition of understanding the separation between the self and another. It's not about in a different way in psychoanalysis but it really came to the same thing: the "I" depends on the "thou", and "I" doesn't exist except in reference to something that is "not I". And that is what I'm saying is an *ethical* relationship, an ethical dimension *before* you get to the political. The political is when you introduce *power*, when you introduce the possibility of exerting something at the other's expense - but even before that, the recognition the other as the founding condition for the construction of the self, that is, I think, even more fundamental.

AB: This approach to the ethics question on documentary seems to have a sort of legacy of psychoanalytical theory. . . do you consider other ways of approaching this. . . ?

MR: . . . Yeah, I don't think it comes to psychoanalysis. I'm just saying that you can see psychoanalysis and ethical philosophy have sort of parallel paths in a way. They're kind of the same generation. And they were coming at things similarly, but through different ways. And I don't pretend to be a total expert on ethical philosophy by any means, but I'm inspired by what I understand on that, and I think that that is a very fundamental ground for understanding the appeal and the promise of documentary project.

Documentary theory: domain and connections

AB: I saw your study of the documentary poetics and fundamental tendencies as an interesting way to examine, to study better the field. Relating to questions taken here today at the conference, do you think that this kind of exercise proposal helps to expand the borders of documentary or do you think it somehow straighten them?

MR: I hope it's opening. You never want to close because - that's what I tried to argue in the poetics: those were kind of "tracks" that overlapped and reached and supported one another rather than being separated and somehow seal documentary. They don't, they open up and they reinforce one another, on constant times in surprising ways, and so I really hope that the ethical is just another way, to provide another *angle* to understand *what's at stake*, I would say, what's at stake for the documentary enterprise. And it's something that I think can take us forward, something we need to remember as we move forward.

AB: Having us remembered your poetics of documentary, what would you consider to be the principal perspective differences, between this study and another one like Bill Nichols' "six modes of documentary representation of reality"?

MR: I don't think they're very much alike, and when I teach - of course I talk about his study and mine - I try to keep them very separated, because his are modes of documentary exposition, so it's "how does documentary tells us something", and has a very strong, it should has a very strong historical component: in certain moments different ways of exposing, telling or presenting the documentary material occurred . . .

AB: . . . Let me just add something here. You wrote in your text of a common trend on poetics that is "to submit under analysis the art works' composition, functions, and effects". Do you think we could we say that your approach is more turned to the "functions" themselves of documentary film, and Nichols' one tries to evaluate the very heterogeneous "composition"?

MR: Right. Yeah. I think the documentary. . . the functions are really about what desires are met, what motivations are there that push the documentary project forward: the desire to be persuasive, the desire to preserve a moment, the desire to analyze social phenomena in some detail, the desire to express what do I feel about this thing. . . and then this desire also to understand the relationship between the self and another. The desire, the need to have an ethical engagement in the world, and put it up they're product to other people to see, other people to judge, other people to interact with.

AB: And maybe this third part, the *effect* (of the art work), would be related to the ethical, studies. . . ?

MR: Possibly, but I think that the ethical in itself. . . has a sort of functi-

oning dimension, and it is also glued to this notion of a common desire or impulse: an ethical impulse, that one can see as an underlying and consistent theme that cross the history of documentary. How do I... what is my relationship with this other? What do I mean to that person, what does that person mean to me, what's at stake in representing others? But I think there's a limitation in the ethical function, and that it is really focused a lot on people. So there's a whole other... I think it would be interesting to think about the ethical domain in terms of... animals. There are some people who have a very ethical relationship with animals, but if it's like landscape films, that's a whole possibility - the ethics of representation of landscape is not very strong.

AB: It's an unexplored sub-domain of the ethical question.

MR: Yeah.

AB: You have talked about the always "recovering", retaking of History" when you referred to these recent explosion of the autobiographical/activism film practice, comparing these experiences to the ones of the collective groups of the 60's... Do you think that it occurs – this cycling of tendencies, approaches... - on filmmaking as well as on film theory? Could you talk a little about the current panorama of documentary film studies?

MR: The panorama... Well, it seems to be growing, it seems to be pushing in a lot of different directions. The best indication of that is the *Visible Evidence* conferences, the kinds of topics that people are writing about, talking about, presenting on, continues to kind of expand, and so overlaps with so many other disciplines...

AB: ... Like animation¹⁰ for instance.

MR: ... Animation is a good example, and another art practices... like the examples on the speech I gave at the conference. Last time I gave that, it was to a bunch of art historians – which was last month. It was mostly people who were in art museum, museum and art museum, it was composed most by art historians. And yet, they really understood and could find an engagement with it. There's also, certainly, anthropology - we have talked about it here today, the ethnographic dimension of the world. Or History: for a lot of historians, documentary is the thing that they're most interested in, in terms of cinema. So I think it's intrinsically interdisciplinary, even more than cinema, that all of cinema, because of

¹⁰ In reference to Renov's own presentation at USP.

the way that these sober discourses appear. If you look all those other domains, it mingles and fits in with politics, and religion, and economics, and public powers and all this.

AB: As you referred to the many exchanges between related – or not - areas of studies. . . the last two decades “post-modernistic” deconstructive and/or “subjective approaches” of the documentary film, compels the film to his place as an “always meditated construct” incapable of truly re-presenting an ontological reality, and maybe with this, came this massive recognition of documentary’s stance and importance as “art work” or “self expression” (like the expressive tendency and this autobiographical tendency). Parallels with it, there seems to be some perspectives of fiction film analysis that intersects film and History, that tries, through the analysis, to “discover” or “reconstruct” a previously given *status quo* of cultural, geographical or what else identity that would have generated this “filmic text”. If we could sum up this way, it’s as if documentary film analysts (whose domain has heavy legacy of “indexical evidence”) say: “This is only a film”; and fiction film analysts, on this perspective I mention - these fiction films analysts, whose legacy is the “realm of imagination” say: “This reconstructs the World”. Doesn’t it seem to be an ironic inversion? Do you think that there’s an “autonomy” or “gap” on the contact of fiction film theory and documentary’s one, in spite of a strong perspective that claims: “Everything is cinema. Period.”?

MR: Well, the struggle? I fought it when I first started doing this fifteen years ago (or more, twenty). . . It was to get film theory to take documentary seriously. So the first thing was to take all the things that we have said theoretically, that we thought we knew about film and say: “But let’s not leave documentary out”. And this essay is a perfect example, going back to one of the key passages of “The Imaginary Signifier”¹¹ and saying: “Hey, documentary and animation really grew on in this conversation”. Now, one see the established. . . that there’s commonality, and that everything we studied and thought we knew about film or about cinema, applied very strongly to documentary. Then you have to start making distinctions, but only then. This started separating areas and saying: “We’re sub-areas, sub-disciplines”. And so there are things that are specific about documentary that really have to be looked at very ca-

¹¹ Christian Metz’s book, first published in 1977. Renov related documentary and animation at his presentation at USP, through a reading of this essay.

refully. That's when you start to build up your own kind of discursive regime, that is specific to the documentary. I think the Visible Evidence book series attempts to do that, so it has got 21 books that have been published in English since 1997. And there'll continue to be 2 at least, 2 or more per year from here (that are the averages). There'll be coming out things from very different angles: one of the books is about a photographer, another of the books is about the representation of native Americans... in fiction! There, asking questions about the real, the relationship to... a kind of a lived experience for native Americans and how that gets... distorted, in most representations of the native Americans. And there are other examples, like my book "The Subject of Documentary" is also in that series and at least one collection that... look at *Collecting Visible Evidence* which takes papers from a couple of conferences. Anyway, so, the idea was you build your own...

AB: ... Theoretical corpus?

MR: ... Theoretical corpus, yeah, and it has a strong relationship to other theoretical areas, but in film studies. It connects to film studies but it has its own stake, it has its own place, and it develops its own history, and a certain kind of thickness around it. In the beginning we were just trying to, even suggest that it mattered to look at it, because for the longest time it really wasn't something that people were taking very seriously and writing interesting books - they were writing, kinds of historical surveys: "this filmmaker did this, this filmmaker did that" and then...

AB: ... Biographies?

MR: ... Yeah, or just historical narratives, instead of really looking at what are the issues, the underlying issues, and what is that about, why is that important. So I think that that's what documentary studies has been able to really pursue pretty actively in the past. Well, since... I think 1991 represents when it all did come out, it's kind of the beginning of it, so that's now 17 years.