

This Documentary Moment

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My colleague Peter Galison and I are currently making a documentary about government secrecy. While perhaps an important topic, it is in many ways a terrible idea for a film. Nobody wants to speak with you. There is nothing to see. Unlike other kinds of secrecy, government secrecy in the U.S. carries with it the carapace of an enormous infrastructure designed to keep the uninitiated out. Clearances, the need to know and the fearful imperative of national security align themselves against inquiry. How do we penetrate this world? What is there to film in any case? What kinds of visual invention are permissible? How do we verify what people say? Indeed, how will we know what we don't know?

Increasingly, we live in a world of competing realities. When half the electorate cannot imagine what the other half are thinking and academic institutions struggle with what an educated person ought to study, documentary features are drawing audiences to movie theatres in numbers not seen in North America since the silent era. Some are political, like Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11," or Errol Morris's "Fog of War," others are about bird migrations, dysfunctional childhoods, tobacco farming, sex crimes. While diverse in content, they are marked by the authorial interventions of individuals obsessed with their subjects. We have developed an appetite for the real, and more, a wish to satisfy this appetite by going to the movies. While not making the filmmakers rich, the bottom-line logic of the marketplace means these independent films are making somebody enough money for the phenomenon to exist and, perhaps, continue. It is a heady time for documentary, though one not without risks.

Part of the genius of capitalism is its ability to co-opt innovative and dissenting forms and turn them into corporate profit. Not a new thought, but one that is useful to consider during this privileged documentary moment. Early direct cinema's shaky camera continues to be imitated by cop shows (NYPD Blue) and advertisers (Guess Jeans) to signify a certain funky authenticity. Immediate (marketplace) gratification means that jeans that were once bought new and worn until they turned cool and faded are now purchased pre-aged. By packaging documentary film's ability to have us powerfully identify with "real" people, reality television is making buckets of money by throwing non-actors into grotesque gladiator-like situations where they are motivated to flirt, eat bugs, sing, dance, or win the admiration of a megalomaniac for the weekly enjoyment of millions of viewers. At the very moment populist phenomena appear, corporations initiate strategies for creating and marketing the phenomena as their own.

One fear is that this surge of interest in making and viewing independently made non-fiction will end up purchased and re-packaged for maximum profit. By taking the authorial voice from the filmmaker and turning it into a boardroom agenda item, the originating question changes from, "What am I passionate about making?" to, "What do focus groups tell us people want to see?" Reality television (the fast food of documentary) makes for a seductive blueprint for this

transformation. Not only do these shows cut costs on prime time slots by bypassing the elaborate infrastructure of fiction filmmaking, but they have started to remake the expectations people have of documentary, just as shows like CSI have begun to remake the expectations of juries as to the nature of evidence. Yet, it would be a mistake to think that an authorial filmmaker's voice in itself will mean the work is honest. This documentary moment is also pushing filmmakers to make their films ever more emotional and story driven as they imagine themselves competing for space on theatrical screens. The angry polarization among Americans these days also pushes for a kind of shrill simplicity, especially in films with political content, designed to satisfy a raging demographic. The marketplace calls out to us and we filmmakers have to figure out how to respond.

From the outset, we have tried to initiate our own (filmmaking) strategies to keep our wits about us. To help us learn from our footage, we have been editing as we go, using the film itself as a guide for what it needs. Rather than starting by shooting, say, a dozen interviews, we used our initial research to film just a few, both to see how the arguments played and to see whether our ideas for animation/graphics and sound design/music might work together. Then we would add another idea, and then another...We are just now finishing our third year of work on this project. Our hope is to have the film's perspective emerge from the material rather than be marshaled ahead of time in the service of pre-held conclusions. As one of the critiques in the film is about secrecy's role in the run up to the war in Iraq, we hoped not to fall prey to our own prejudices and pre-judgements by working backwards from an opinion we held before we started filming. We also interviewed practitioners rather than pundits, preferring the film to be about individuals whose lives have been marked by their contact with the secrecy apparatus, rather than having experts hold forth. In the sense that we are interested in the human dimensions of secrecy, we have tried not to avoid ambiguity. But the pressure to make scenes play "better," to condense language, to make "strong" juxtapositions in the editing offers an irresistible logic that inevitably chooses some truths over others. The logic of what "works" exerts an almost gravitational pull on film projects, just as the size and scale of the secrecy system itself exerts an unseen yet consequential influence on our democracy.

Certainly the size of America's secrecy bureaucracy speaks to the strength of its gravitational force. Estimates by the Federation of American Scientists suggest that the classified world houses billions of pages of historical documents, adds millions of pages of new documents each year, and this number includes tens of thousands of newly classified secrets every day of the year. Three years ago, the cost of secrecy rose by a billion dollars, to an unprecedented seven and one half billion dollars for that year alone. "This is the budget of a cabinet level agency," says Steve Aftergood of the FAS, "It is as if we had a Department of Government Secrecy that no one has ever heard of...because we do." Our goal is to make visible secrecy's impact on our democracy. We hope to make a film that is reasoned, researched and marked by such authorial interventions as only individuals obsessed with their subjects can imagine.