

***The Act of Documenting: Documentary Film in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, by Brian Winston, Gail Vanstone, and Wang Chi. Bloomsbury, 2017 (217 pages).**

Raluca Iacob

John Grierson first used the term “documentary” in writing about Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* (1926), noting that the film, “being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth, has documentary value” (qtd. in Rosenbaum). This definition allowed for a vast application and, two decades later, Grierson suggested some criteria for narrowing the scope and definition of documentary films to distinguish between actualities or newsreels, and the artistic and creative observation and representation of real places and characters. Since then, documentary studies have developed into a prominent strand of film scholarship. *The Act of Documenting* by Brian Winston, Gail Vanstone and Wang Chi aims to offer further understanding of documentary film within the context of contemporary cinema. One of the key points that this book pursues systematically is the focus on the digital, and the ways in which technological advances have influenced documentary filmmaking. Starting from the premise of an update to documentary cinema, or as the three authors suggest, of analysing documentary cinema in the twenty-first century, this book addresses both a practitioner and a theoretical audience. Well researched and strongly argued, the book systematically addresses the core ideas and specificities of contemporary documentary film in as comprehensive a manner as possible. Rather than tackling the subject exhaustively, the authors acknowledge the book’s “unfinished” status and regard it as a foundational piece in the scholarship on contemporary documentary. In effect, Winston, Vanstone and Chi cover a lot of ground in their exegesis by addressing issues of form, subject, authorship and spectatorship.

The book is divided into eight chapters, structured in two parts. The first part focuses mostly on the theoretical framework of the subject, delving deeper into the distinctive features and evolution of contemporary documentary, whereas, in the second part, the authors address the digital potential of documentary films in a more systematic manner, particularly the observed changes which can be understood to have affected the filmmaker, the subject or the spectator. Such a clear structure makes the book easily readable, aided as well by the additional materials included in the appendix, which facilitate ease of access and comprehensibility for the reader. First of all, the extensive bibliography can offer a reader the opportunity to further explore the subject and topics contained in the book through additional references. Secondly, the authors provide a summary of their findings and arguments in the section titled “Minutes”. These minutes, which, in essence, are conclusions and key points drawn from each chapter, facilitate the reader’s memorisation of crucial material. However, the authors run the risk of oversimplifying the more pertinent and strongly argued content of the book through their choice to present information in such concentrated form.

Starting from a premise of innovation in documentary cinema, the book focuses extensively on the changes brought about by technological developments, especially in terms of the transition and implementation of digital forms of making, distributing and consuming documentary. In fact, while engaging with the canonical theories and histories of documentary film, Winston, Vanstone and Chi consistently revert to the condition of documentary film in the twenty-first century. The authors argue that the changes brought about by the proliferation of digital technologies can be easily noted in the global spread of such materials that facilitate the accessibility of competent technologies for amateur filmmakers. This creates a democratisation of expression through audiovisual means for virtually anyone who owns a camcorder or even a smartphone. Thus, the facilitation of access to relatively cheap and easily obtainable equipment has empowered filmmakers, breaking down barriers that dominated the mainly patriarchal cinema of the twentieth century. This has led to an increase in subjective documentaries, or as the authors call it the “web-/i-doc”. The transition from primarily analogue to digital results, Winston, Vanstone and Chi seem to suggest, in a significant transformation of documentary cinema, one which calls for its outright reconsideration on all levels of production, distribution and reception. A prominent area that has been affected by this move towards digital technologies is the change of narrative, from the traditional chronological structure of what the authors call “*homo narrans*”, based on the idea of an authoritarian voice that guides the spectator through a linear narrative structure of the documentary, imposing on the viewer the author’s view, to the interactivity of the “*scriptrix narrans*”, in which the viewer becomes a creator by making sense of the different elements of the narrative in the structure of web-/i-docs. This assertion echoes the argument of Roland Barthes and other structuralist theoreticians, who concluded that the meaning of a literary work is created by the reader, rather than by the author. Similarly, Winston, Vanstone and Chi suggest that in the condition of documentary film the identification of relevant information and the construction of the story rest on the spectator and not on the filmmaker. While this claim is certainly relevant for interactive works (web-/i-docs), the majority of documentary films produced worldwide, in my experience, continue to use a traditional narration format; therefore, the authors’ argument might be geared more towards a possible future. Their contribution to this point results in the suggestion that we should apply gender theory to the relationship between the linearity of traditional documentaries and the readerly interactivity of subjective documentaries: associating the concept of patriarchal to the traditional format of linear narrativity and feminist concepts to interactive narratives.

The second part of the book dwells on the ways in which the developments and transformations in documentary filmmaking and viewing over the last decades have influenced or affected the filmmaker, the subject and the spectator. Each category is addressed separately, yet the authors stress the interdependence between all three. The empowered, vocal subject becomes—with the cooperation of the filmmaker—an agent able to effect change, thus furthering documentary’s capacity to reach focused audiences. The subject (or “the filmed”) is tackled first, and the main point of emphasis is that of performativity and agency/subjectivity. Dealing with questions of authenticity and representation of the real, performativity in documentary film is differentiated from performance, for while the former is the result of staging, thus being “inauthentic”, the latter is the result of being and reacting, and thus closer to being “authentic”.

The focus on authenticity and the real has always been central in documentary studies. However, as Bill Nichols notes, we must be aware of differences of what realism represents and means in documentary, as opposed to fiction. Nichols highlights Hollywood or European modernist cinema, as “documentary realism joins together objective representations of the historical world and rhetorical overttness to convey an argument about the world” (166). That is, we should not consider documentaries as pure representations of the real world, without the interference of a subjective point of view, but rather as the result of an attitude presented

through the perspective of the filmmaker's voice. Questions and arguments relating to the representation of the real, and the general focus on realism in cinema—especially documentary—have produced numerous publications, including Elizabeth Cowie's compelling study *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*, and has been addressed by filmmakers aiming to capture the reality of life as closely as possible, as well as by those filmmakers who toy with the idea of the real, factual and actuality. Therefore, the use of the term “authentic”, which Winston, Vanstone and Chi appear to prefer over “real”, seems more appropriate when discussing documentary film.

This argument for the “authenticity” of the performance of the subject is echoed in the chapters that discuss the role of the filmmaker, as well that of the spectator. In both instances, the authors stress an ethical dimension. For the filmmaker, that ethical dimension comes from the allegiance towards both the audience and the filmed subjects and the commitment towards maintaining a balance between intervention and the observation of the filmed subject. Meanwhile, the spectator is—or should be, as noted by the authors—in charge of making the final determination of the truth. Rather than placing the complete burden of truth and authenticity on the filmmaker, this approach involves the spectator as an active participant to the exchange of information. However, despite the active involvement of spectators in the meaning-making of documentary films, the authors also caution against following the causality of watching documentaries towards a possible reaction, which, they argue, can only be assessed in the case of external impact and not in the engagement of individual ethos. Rather than focusing solely on discussing digital practices, the authors stress the importance of understanding how subjectivities (of the filmmaker, character and spectator) are intertwined in the documentary meaning-making process.

Covering a wide range of topics, the book also discusses multiple films, from Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's ethnographic classic *Chronicle of a Summer* (*Chronique d'un été*, 1961) or Sarah Polley's personal family investigation in *Stories We Tell* (2012), to Agnès Varda's essay *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, 2000) or Joshua Oppenheimer's potent study of the perpetrators of the Indonesian genocide in *The Act of Killing* (2012). Given the vast scope and the ambitious approach of the book, it covers a great variety of styles and subjects, as well as geographical and temporal perspectives. While the effects of technological changes and the “new” forms of documentary are analysed in detail, the book engages with both historical and theoretical frameworks of documentary cinema, resulting in a volume from which film students can explore informative, clearly structured, and detailed content, while practitioners and scholars can appreciate its thought-provoking and challenging nature.

## References

- The Act of Killing*. Directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, Final Cut for Real, 2012.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z: An Essay*. Translated by Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, 1974.
- Chronicle of a Summer* [*Chronique d'un été*]. Directed by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin. Argos Films, 1961.
- Cowie, Elizabeth. *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*. U of Minnesota P, 2011.
- The Gleaners and I* [*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*]. Directed by Agnes Varda, Cine Tamaris, 2000.

Grierson, John. "First Principles of Documentary." *Grierson on Documentary*, edited by Forsyth Hardy, U of California P, 1966, pp. 145–56.

*Moana*. Directed by Robert Flaherty, Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, 1926.

Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Indiana UP, 1991.

Rosenbaum, Jonathan. "Moana (1975 Review)." *jonathanrosenbaum.net*, 15 Dec. 1975, [www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/1975/12/moana](http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/1975/12/moana).

*Stories We Tell*. Directed by Sarah Polley, National Film Board Canada, 2012.

### Suggested Citation

Iacob, Raluca. "The Act of Documenting: Documentary Film in the 21st Century," by Brian Winston, Gail Vanstone, and Wang Chi." Book Review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 16, Winter 2018, pp. 118–121. [www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue16/ReviewIacob.pdf](http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue16/ReviewIacob.pdf).

**Raluca Iacob** is an independent researcher and works for the Astra Documentary Film Festival. She obtained a PhD from the University of St. Andrews, with a thesis on postcommunist Romanian cinema. Her work has been featured in *Film Criticism*, *Frames*, and *Cinema Journal*, and is forthcoming in *New Romanian Cinema*.